

Peer Review

Review of: "Institutions and Democracy in Africa — How the Rules of the Game Shape Political Developments"

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This important edited volume by Nic Cheeseman explores the varying influence of the interaction of formal and informal political institutions on the consolidation of democratic governance in African states. Apart from the introduction and concluding (theoretical) chapters, it is subdivided into four main parts: Institutional Foundations (multiparty politics, land institutions, financial institutions); Law and Order; Elections, Parties and Political Competition; and Countervailing Institutions (legislatures, judiciary, and decentralisation). It consists of thirteen empirical chapters. Specifically, the four main parts contain a maximum of four chapters (political parties, elections, electoral rules, term limits) under the section on "Elections, Parties and Political Competition," with the other three parts containing three chapters each.

Overall, the book has some important features to its credit. The book argues generally that formal political institutions such as constitutions, the legislature, and the judiciary and their associated informal institutions have a strong influence on the actions or behaviour of political actors and citizens in contemporary African politics. On that basis, the book identifies the genesis and evolution of the three main institutional approaches for the study of the dynamics of political institutions and their application to the political development of Africa over the past sixty years. These institutional schools of thought in the study of Political Science and Sociology consist of Rational Choice, Historical, and Sociological Institutionalisms, which constitute methodological tools for understanding and explaining the development and trajectories of institutions in varying regions and contexts.

Helmke and Levitsky's (2006:14) typology for assessing the nature of the relationship between formal and informal institutions on four main parameters ranging from complementing, accommodating, competing to substituting institutional dynamics was also adopted to explain the conditions and

patterns for the sustenance (or erosion) of the effectiveness of democratic institutions in the African context. As much of the focus of the book was on the influence of formal political institutions (such as constitutions, the legislature, and judiciary) as the major driving forces for the deepening of democratic governance, other positive societal elements, particularly the strategic influence of traditional authorities and shared cultural norms and values in complementing or substituting for the (in)effectiveness of these formal institutions, were not considered in the empirical chapters.

As it stands, this edited book has some major theoretical and empirical limitations that have to be addressed in order to fully understand and explain the institutional conditions for the strengthening (or reversal) of democratic governance in African states.

Even though Cheeseman conceded Africa never lacked “shared customs and norms that regulate behaviour in predictable ways” (Cheeseman, 2018: 22) and that certain informal institutions (i.e., centralised traditional authorities and certain shared values such as tolerance, consensus-building, and the need for peaceful co-existence) are well entrenched in African cultures and can at times peacefully co-exist or substitute for the ineffectiveness of formal political institutions (Cheeseman, 2018: 573).

Nevertheless, their persistence and continual positive influence and dynamics on the recent wave of democratisation, since the 1990s, were neglected in their theories and empirical analysis. For instance, most of the empirical chapters focused more on the incompatibility of customary institutions and norms with democratic governance or the negative effects of (corrupt) societal practices (such as patronage, clientelism, and prebendalism) on the effectiveness of democratic governance in African states.

Even though these narrow approaches are legitimate and useful, they are limited in opening the “black box” to measure the specific explanatory mechanisms for complementing (or supporting) and substituting for the (in)effectiveness of the formal political institutions (such as the constitutions, electoral commission, courts) in the African context and beyond.

Other Reviews

- Kotze, J. S. (2019). “Institutions and Democracy in Africa: How the Rules of the Game Shape Political Development,” edited by Nic Cheeseman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. In *South African Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 26, No. 2. pp. 311-314
- Soest, V. C. (2019). “Institutions and Democracy in Africa: How the Rules of the Game Shape Political Development,” edited by Nic Cheeseman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. In

Declarations

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.