

Patrick Chabal, Nuno Vidal, ed.. *Angola: The Weight of History*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008. x + 246 pp. \$50.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-231-70015-3.



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Since the peace accords in 2002, some major political events have taken place in Angola. In September 2008, parliamentary elections were held, marking a victory for the ruling MPLA (Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola) party. Presidential elections were planned for 2010, although it is as yet unclear whether or not these will actually be held. This volume offering an analysis of Angola's political economy is a most welcome contribution to understand these crucial political developments in the country. The authors of the various essays frame their interpretation of Angola's recent past in its historical context. This is rare for Angolan studies: most of the literature takes either a historical perspective or a contemporary focus. Apart from the combination of political history and recent events within Angola itself, some clear attempts are made to arrive at a comparative perspective and frame Angola's political developments in the wider African context.

The introductory chapter by Patrick Chabal is geared toward the comparative approach as it discusses the similarities and dissimilarities of Ango-

la's position in Africa. Chabal argues that an analysis of Angola's political economy is more fruitfully framed in an African rather than a specific Lusophone perspective. The author holds that the particularities of a Creole elite, Portuguese rule, and factors related to Angola's mineral wealth (e.g., the war and foreign intervention) are important historical aspects in the Angolan context, but that the current political transitions may be compared with other African cases of multiparty rule and "democratization." As such, this is a valid assertion, but only few comparative lines of reasoning are actually developed in the chapter.

The second chapter by Malyn Newitt is an informative piece on the history of Angola's political and economic traditions. In a classical descriptive manner, we are offered a sound overview of the various precolonial societies and the process of Portuguese colonization in Angola. This stresses the particularities of the weight of Angola's history on its present condition and, in this sense, ap-

pears to contradict Chabal's assertion in the first chapter.

In the next essay by the late Christine Messiant, it is shown that Angola's political economy is best interpreted from within its own specific dynamics. Messiant analyzes "the conversion of the political system from a single-party dictatorial structure to an authoritarian hegemonic dispensation adapted to multiparty electoral politics" (p. 121). Instead of a facile interpretation of democratization, she proposes to study the ways in which Angola's elites have used the political processes to consolidate their power.

In a subsequent chapter, Nuno Vidal discusses the transition from single-party to multiparty rule in Angola. It is a pity that it is not made clear in what ways the chapters of Messiant and Vidal relate. There are obvious parallels in periodization and characterization of Angola's political development, but these are not spelled out. Both also stress that, despite the changes in the political system, the ruling elite has managed to retain its position. Interestingly, Vidal's chapter implicitly takes Chabal's statement further and at times compares the political developments in Angola with the wider context of the continent.

Tony Hodges explains the economic foundations of the patrimonial state in Angola. The oil sector, as well as other branches in the economy, are shown to be directly related to the political elite, especially to the presidential family. Well endowed with mineral wealth, Angola's position vis-à-vis the International Monetary Fund and other international bodies is particularly strong and the elite is relatively free in opting for less demanding partners, like China.

The final chapter is again written by Vidal; he shows the changing role of civil society organizations in Angola in their connection to the development sector and the ruling elite. Related to a long-standing neglect of public welfare, Angola's civil society organizations generally suffered from

fragmentation, co-optation, and foreign dependency.

This book helps to put the recent political events in Angola in perspective and as such this volume contains informative and interesting chapters. It offers an interpretation of the continuities and changes in Angola's postcolonial political economy and an analysis of the patrimonial state.

It is a pity, however, that the editors do not discuss the relations between the various chapters and refrain from engaging in an explicit discussion about the historical and the comparative perspective in the volume. This creates a problem of cohesion, as some of the authors (notably Newitt and Messiant) interpret Angola's political economy within its own specific historical dynamics, while other chapters (by Vidal and especially Chabal) seem to contradict this by stressing that the political events in Angola are better framed within the wider African context. An overall introduction or concluding chapter would have helped to identify and analyze such contradictions and added to the internal cohesion of the volume. The guiding principle, that Angola's present condition must be put in historical perspective, remains a fruitful one.

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