



**Mimmi Söderberg Kovacs, Jesper Bjarnesen, eds..** *Violence in African Elections: Between Democracy and Big Man Politics*. Africa Now Series. London: Zed Books, 2018. 320 pp. \$95.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-78699-229-1.

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In January 2019, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) reached an elusive milestone: the country witnessed the first peaceful transfer of power between an incumbent leader and an opposition candidate. Despite the historic nature of this election, the process was not without controversy. Indeed, the election was held two years after it was originally due, as a result of incumbent president Joseph Kabila extending the deadline in what many saw as an attempt to cling to power after the expiration of his constitutionally limited tenure. The success of this election was qualified, however, and was hailed as peaceful only inasmuch as the violence it precipitated was on a smaller scale compared to previous transfers of power in the country's history, ones often marked by widespread violence, civil war, and military coups.

That the DRC election is seen as a political milestone reflects a popular global perception that regards the politics of this central African country, and the African continent broadly, as profoundly broken. Indeed, as anthropologist James Ferguson (*Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order* [2006]) and others have noted, in the popular imagination Africa is seen as both a homogenous, undifferentiated whole and, more important, a whole that is character-

ized by chronic social, political, and economic failure. This perception is especially evident in the realm of politics, in which media coverage is dominated by stories of electoral fraud, corruption, failed states, and, especially, violence.

Mimmi Söderberg Kovacs and Jesper Bjarnesen's edited volume *Violence in African Elections: Between Democracy and Big Man Politics*, however, is representative of a body of scholarship that challenges a monolithic and failure-ridden view of African politics by expanding the analytical framework with which electoral politics is studied in African states. While the individual chapters and their authors cover a range of spaces, subjects, and relationships, the volume as a whole revolves around three central interventions in the study of electoral violence in African contexts. First, the volume's contributors use a spatial lens that focuses on smaller scalar units, such as cities and neighborhoods (Willy Nindorera and Bjarnesen, Tariro Mutongwizo, and Daniel E. Agbibo) and districts (Matthew I. Mitchell, Ibrahim Bangura and Söderberg Kovacs, Tarila Marclint Ebiede, and Afra Schmitz) in addition to the national field of electoral politics (Hanne Fjelde and Kristine Höglund, Anders Sjögren, Bjarnesen, and Jacob Rasmussen). This approach diverges from a focus on electoral violence restricted to the level of the

national. Rather, the authors in their various ways show how the “geographies of violence” in national elections are often the end result of a series of back-and-forth negotiations between power brokers operating at local, regional, and national levels (Nindorera and Bjarnesen, p. 87). In so doing, the authors show how the interests of local and regional players are as important or, in some cases, more important to shaping episodes of electoral violence than those operating at the national level. Such an approach is an important intervention in that it humanizes the relatively abstract and impersonal processes of “parliamentary democracy” and “patronage politics” by focusing on the lived realities of electoral violence for African subjects. Indeed, Söderberg Kovacs argues in the introduction that “everyday realities can assist us in better understanding the specific and localized expressions of these theoretical concepts and contribute to a more deep-layered understanding of the phenomenon of electoral violence” (p. 2).

Second, the volume’s approach stands in contrast to earlier scholarship on African political history that highlights the role of so-called big men, referenced in the volume’s title as being the figure of primary importance in electoral politics in African contexts. Instead, the volume’s authors employ a more nuanced approach that allows for a greater degree of agency on the part of African subjects as political actors. This is not to say that “big men” and associated relationships of patronage are absent from the case studies in this volume; indeed, they are consistently invoked throughout the chapters. However, the authors are careful to point to the dialectic nature of these relationships, showing how the demands of subalterns are just as important, if not more important, in shaping these relationships as are the desires of patrons. In other words, while the political “big men” of electoral politics loom large in many of these case studies, the authors do well to show how the power of these political figures is neither absolute nor uncontested and is in many ways

subject to the desires and demands of those they seek to mobilize in order to attain electoral victory, whether through violence or otherwise.

Finally, the volume expands the framework through which electoral violence itself, as both a category of analysis and an action, is identified and analyzed. Specifically, the volume views electoral violence not only as a physical action but also as a discursive formation. This is seen most readily in Schmitz’s chapter on violence as discourse in northern Ghana, in which “an analysis of talking about violence as a strategy ... makes the links between verbal and physical violence approachable” (p. 234). An expansive view of violence as both action and discourse also allows for the authors to similarly expand the temporal framework of their analyses to include violence and its motivations in periods related to, but not directly touching on, elections themselves. In other words, the volume argues that past incidences of violence, both electoral and otherwise, can be as important in motivating cases of electoral violence as contemporary factors. This expansive approach thus allows for a more nuanced understanding of the mechanics of electoral violence by incorporating such factors as memory and discourse in addition to the physical acts themselves.

While the volume is a valuable addition to analytical interventions in the study of African politics, the chapters at times exhibit a common blind spot that detracts somewhat from their overall goals. Specifically, although the authors have done well to expand the spatial framework of electoral violence by focusing on micro-level analysis, there is little to no recognition of the transnational factors that influence the processes in question. For example, cases of electoral violence in post-civil war Liberia and Sierra Leone are treated as discrete occurrences despite the close political, military, and economic links between factions and leaders in the civil wars in both countries. Similarly, case studies on the Niger Delta do not discuss the outsize role that international oil compa-

nies play in both regional and national politics and the impact of this role on the particular ways electoral violence manifests in this space. In other words, the volume's focus on subnational spaces and subjects, while valuable, can at times occlude how transnational dynamics are similarly influential in the unfolding of electoral violence in African states.

Ultimately, however, this volume is an important addition to a body of scholarship that seeks to address political processes in African contexts outside of the framework of chronic failure and perpetual crisis. The analytical lenses this volume provides expand the frameworks through which political processes in Africa are studied and, as a result, will be of interest to scholars and policy-makers alike.

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