

Review – Authoritarian Africa: Repression, resistance, and the power of ideas

Written by Cliff (Ubba) Kodero

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2020/08/30/review-authoritarian-africa-repression-resistance-and-the-power-of-ideas/>

CLIFF (UBBA) KODERO, AUG 30 2020

Authoritarian Africa: Repression, resistance, and the power of ideas

By Nic Cheeseman and Jonathan Fisher

Oxford University Press, 2021

Cheeseman and Fisher's work *Authoritarian Africa* is stylistically lucid and simple, but also encyclopedic in scope. It attempts to explain why authoritarian regimes have persisted and remained a part of African political culture. It offers just enough information to tackle a complex issue that is proving to be a contentious debate. In doing so, Cheeseman and Fisher raise an important question: To what extent ought European colonialists be blamed for Africa's problems? In examining this, they provide a colonial genealogy surrounding the problem of authoritarianism in Africa. They further invite Europeans to reassess their past relative to the present condition of Africa. The book is stimulating not only because of its relevance in the age of Black Lives Matter protests but also due to how it indicts Africa's colonial past as central to the continent's predicament. Cheeseman and Fisher do not excuse Africa's colonial heritage or nuance it, as some writers have done in recent times.

Consider, for example, Crawford Young's *The Post-Colonial State in Africa* (2012). Young, an authority in African studies, argued that the postcolonial democratic episode did not mature soon after independence, partly due to the avalanche of failures by African leaders. The leaders invented the one-party rule along with repressive political regimes. In contrast, Cheeseman and Fisher side with Jeffrey Herbst's *States and Power in Africa* (2000) analysis of Africa. Herbst attempted to explain the lack of strong institutions and state capacity in Africa, arguing that European colonial powers had no incentive to develop state structures to protect their colonies and create institutions that would lead to formidable states. Instead, they focused on institutions that facilitated the exploitation of natural resources and African labor. Following independence, African states reaffirmed colonial boundaries and formed these states into quasi-members of the international system. As a result, African states have survived without a stable physical, economic, and political infrastructure that leads to sufficient state capacity and nation-building.

Colonial 'Big Man' politics

Part of Cheeseman and Fisher's contribution is not only the account that they provide of the personalities and activities of individual leaders but also their analysis of the causal conditions that lead to authoritarian systems (p.xxx). The colonial system facilitated authoritarianism in Africa through the institution of various norms and ideas. These ideas have been modified and reinterpreted to fit a specific agenda depending on the needs of the time. To their credit, a number of colonial officers attempted to correct the destructive effects of colonialism after the Second World War. British and French officers embraced developmentalism and instituted gradual steps towards liberal democracy. Almost all of the British colonies in Africa had a parliamentary system at independence. There were also opposition parties, independent courts, and a partially free press (p.5). Unfortunately, many of these countries reverted back to authoritarian forms of governance soon after independence, embracing well-known founding leaders, imperial presidencies, and in some cases, dictatorial regimes.

The reversal of democratic gains following independence is perhaps unsurprising. These states had a short history of

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liberal democracy, and most colonialists were far from eager to encourage democratic ideas. Democratic culture, and in particular, free speech, had been curtailed for a significant amount of time. Activism against colonial rule regularly faced imprisonment, protests were violently silenced, and under colonialism, far from being citizens, the people were instead seen as mere subjects of the colonial ruling powers. At independence, democracy became a tool for ethnic mobilization. For many African leaders, a one-party state ensured the preservation not only of the state but also of regimes from the threat of secession and civil unrest. Fisher and Cheeseman are quick to point out, however, that authoritarian regimes were varied and nuanced. They ranged from the totalitarian regime of Idi Amin Dada of Uganda, to electoral democracies under the one-party state of the Ivory Coast, Tanzania, and Malawi.

Cheeseman and Fisher make three critical arguments on how African authoritarianism developed out of colonial influences. First, colonialism emboldened Africa's "Big Men" without checks and balances and sometimes without domestic legitimacy. These Big Men were often chiefs or political leaders created by colonial officers, were given grand labels such as "Paramount Chief" or "King", but were subordinate to colonial officers. In some cases, puppets of colonial administrative officers replaced traditional political leaders having local legitimacy. Such leaders often substituted the lack of legitimacy with force and the undermining of democratic values. Provincial and national governments likewise replicated these arrangements. By independence, many of them controlled the newly formed states that arose out of colonialism (p.9).

Second, colonialism encouraged election rigging and similar electoral malpractices. Colonialism did not create safe spaces for electoral competition. Departing colonial leaders often attempted to shape the outcome of elections or encouraged violence to destroy legitimacy in the event that results were not favorable. Britain rigged elections in Africa to ensure that preferred candidates emerged victorious in Nigeria and Kenya (p.9).

Third, colonialism did not grow economies or create lasting institutions that would catapult these new states into fully-fledged and well-functioning democracies. Colonialism created the culture of corruption, political coercion, including the misuse of law enforcement, and the complete disregard of human life that still plagues many states in Africa. Inevitably, the postcolonial states adopted the features of colonial states. Although, "they could deal very effectively and brutally with sporadic challenges to their authority, they were poorly placed to withstand a broader uprising" (p.16). They were "fragile" authoritarian states that had to find a sufficient balance between coercion and co-optation to govern (p.17).

At each stage of African authoritarianism, Cheeseman and Fisher argue that ideas and norms serve to justify its existence. Patronage or Big Men in the colonial era facilitated colonialism without resistance (p.9). Authoritarianism may also emerge out of some form of national appeal for unity. A primary example can be seen in Julius Nyerere's appeal to Tanzania's collective African societal structure to sell Ujamaa ideas based on "traditional African democracy" (p.30). In some cases, authoritarian leaders championed restoring and defending traditional norms that had been eroded by decades of colonialism. Notwithstanding the complexity of the question of who has the right to define what is African, many authoritarian leaders quickly labeled democracy alien to Africa (p.34). Authoritarian regimes did not defend the rights of minorities. They preached unity arising from the one-party rule, but their notions of rule were fundamentally undemocratic and tantamount to regime preservation (p.35).

Economic origins of authoritarianism

Authoritarian regimes also emerge out of the economic foundations of states. A large petro-state like Angola can survive by distributing its massive oil rents to secure the support of elites. But when oil wealth dwindles, it opens fissures because people cannot meet the expectations they have had from the state. In return, the ruling elites become ever more authoritarian (pp.46-47). These oil states, including Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Nigeria, Republic of Congo, Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire, and Sudan, often do not fully rely on taxes. Taxes would require accountability on the part of citizens. Nigeria, for example, used oil resources to strengthen its military capacity. It became a regional hegemon, but it is also susceptible to prebendalism, the idea that political leaders have the right to use public property for private interests (p.51). Thus, most democracies arise when the public becomes the financier of the government. For example, Mathias Sogaard's article, "[w]ill the rise of the African middle class strengthen democracy?" expounds on this notion. Sogaard suggests that African democracy will have to be organic and led by

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the middle-class. Oil States, as Cheeseman and Fisher argue, are bound by the “proceeds of oil wealth” (p.51).

Authoritarian Africa builds upon Cheeseman’s earlier work *Democracy in Africa* (2015), where he presents a rather optimistic view of the democratic trajectory of Sub-Saharan Africa. Cheeseman argued that there are gradual signs of progress made towards democratization in Africa. Further, a subsequent normalization and consolidation of democracy will depend on the norms that emerge. Africa requires that democracy be defined by Africans through instruments native to the continent as opposed to democracy as a western import. However, even as Africa is entrenched in authoritarianism with an increasing fascination with those who imbue certain elements of development such as Rwanda and Ethiopia’s existing regime. Fisher and Cheeseman argue that such states are not totalitarian since they have “mixes of democracy”, such as elections, despite wide-spread repression (p.xxiv). Their model of authoritarianism draws authority from a combination of the charismatic appeal of the leader and the bureaucratic authority of formal rules and regulations. One aspect that would benefit from further coverage in the book, is an explanation of how some countries transitioned from authoritarianism to democracy and why such cases are unique. Case studies of Botswana, Ghana, Tunisia, and Senegal would add value to the scholarship of Africa’s political development.

Benevolent authoritarianism?

Authoritarian states such as Uganda and Rwanda have had some documentable success, especially in areas of human rights, and in ways that are more progressive than many democracies. Both countries have reserved seats for women and minorities. In Rwanda, women account to close to 60 percent of total legislators (p.98). Some critics have labeled Rwanda’s inclusion of women as cosmetic, but “female Rwandan legislators are broadly effective at representing women’s interests at the national level and help promote pro-women policies” (p.99).

One contribution of this book is its explanation of authoritarianism as both a mixture of remnants of colonialism and the powers of prevailing ideas. Yet the authors are careful not to conflate authoritarianism as uniform. They show that authoritarianism differs in each context. Apartheid South Africa legitimizes authoritarianism differently from how military rulers in Nigeria do. Rwanda’s excuse for its lack of democracy is different from that of Kenya under Daniel Moi. However, the book illustrates that authoritarianism, where Africa is concerned, has not led to development. As of now, democracies have much better prospects for both political and economic development. While this conclusion requires further study, it does highlight a concern that Africa’s fascination with the Chinese model does not seem sound – and has the potential to disappoint its proponents.

To conclude, *Authoritarian Africa* is a bold and readable text. It is concise and a great addition to the understanding of African politics. The fact that the authors focus on the colonial cultural origins of some of Africa’s challenges offer two hopeful things. First, that cultures are not static. If the colonial culture was imposed, then it can also be disposed of. Cultures are not necessarily rigid: they *can* change. Second, as states, African societies are young, both historically and demographically. And as they evolve, there is potential for more progressive ideas to take hold. The book does fulfill the objectives of clarifying authoritarianism as a function of colonial heritage and ideas that morphed over time.

About the author:

Cliff (Ubba) Koderer holds a Ph.D. in International Relations with a focus on African affairs from Florida International University. He is currently a Visiting Professor of Political Economy at the College of Idaho. Ubba also runs a Pan-African YouTube Show The Ubba Koderer show, where he discusses African Affairs.