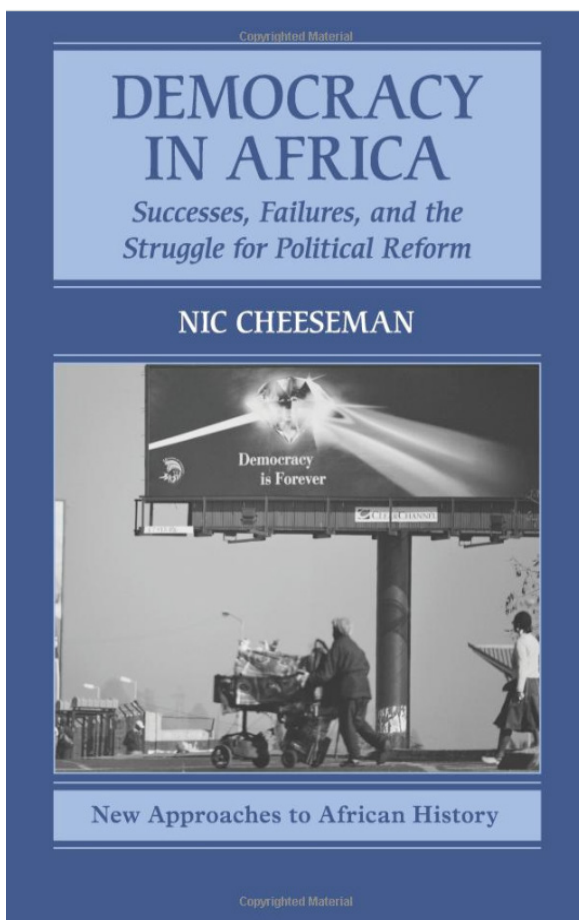


Democracy in Africa:

Successes, Failures, and the Struggle for Political Reform

By Nic Cheeseman

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Reviewed by Abdinor Hassan DAHIR



The question of why democracy in Africa failed or succeeded has long been debated in academia. Nic Cheeseman, in his book, *Democracy in Africa: Successes, Failures, and the Struggle for Political Reform* has written a fascinating account on the extent African states have moved toward, and away from democracy. Containing six chapters together with introduction and conclusion, the book provides a great in-depth analysis of the history of democracy in Africa.

The book does not adopt a specific definition of democracy, rather it consistently refers to effective rule of law, state monopoly of violence and freedom of expression as its primary ingredients. Unless these requirements are satisfied, African leaders, worrying about the economic and political conundrum of an election defeat, will continue retaining power at any cost.

Cheeseman singles out three fundamental obstacles of democracy in Africa. They are the rise of neo-patrimonialism, the establishment of centralised state structures that have absolute control over economic opportunities and the legacy of the colonial past. The author argues these three barriers “made it more likely that leaders would choose repression over reform” (28).

The book refers to the first crisis of democracy in the continent that took place in Congo-Kinshasa (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo), which resulted in the tragic killing of PM Patrice Lumumba. The Congo crisis “raised deep concerns about the feasibility of democracy in Africa” (37).

Cheeseman goes on to mention that the two most common regimes in postcolonial Africa were military dictatorship and one-party state rule. Several African leaders, such as Tanzania’s Julius Nyerere presided over semi-competitive elections under the one-party state. The book contemplates that “civilian one-party states proved to be the most stable form of government in Africa after independence precisely because they combined tight control with political participation”(42). However, not all African states abandoned democracy. In fact, two countries that

have enjoyed uninterrupted multiparty politics since their independence are Botswana and Mauritius.

The rest of the book deals with three significant changes in both global and local domains from the late 1980s that have forced the “Big Men” to pursue democratic reforms. First, the economic decline of the 1980s where falling revenues undermined the ability of the leaders to satisfy their support base, rendering them dependent on financial assistance from international actors, such as IMF and the World Bank. These multilateral organizations had strings attached to their support, namely that leaders were required to pursue economic reforms. Second, mounting domestic unrest, primarily due to a generational shift—the rise of young generation whose defining moment was not of the glorious defeat of colonial rule but of unemployment, corruption and repression—dramatically intensified the pressure for democratisation. Third, the end of the Cold War—meaning Western governments had little security-based incentives to support authoritarian leaders, encouraging them to export democracy—intensified the opposition to authoritarian rule.

Some incumbent leaders adjusted themselves to this changing climate either by initiating a top-down democratisation process (e.g. Senegal) or exploiting ambiguity over regional insecurity to retain power (e.g. Uganda).

The reintroduction of democracy exacerbated civil wars in a number of African nations, including Rwanda, Burundi, Liberia and Angola. Cheeseman argues this was primarily due to the “winner-takes-all logic” (144) among the African populace. This notion seems to discredit leading causes of other political instabilities in the continent, such as the Algerian civil war that resulted from a military coup invalidating an Islamist electoral victory.

In other parts of the continent, international actors engineered power-sharing arrangements, such as Zimbabwe, Kenya, Côte d’Ivoire and South Sudan, to contain violence following electoral disputes. However, power-sharing agreements—that sometimes “strengthened the position of authoritarian incumbents” (216)—are not substitute for multi-party politics.

Cheeseman believes civil wars and instabilities in Africa could be reversed by designing political systems with the right balance of competition and inclusion. In doing so, African constitutional craftsmen do not need to look towards the West, but rather they need to find alternative democratic forms at home. Above all, each constitutional design should be developed in a manner applicable to a country's own past, since "there is no one-size-fits-all template for how to build a stable multiparty system" (232). Here, Cheeseman provides a holistic intersectional approach to Africa's state-building procedures as well as how the history of each country plays into its success formulae.

Cheeseman has much more to say on Sub-Sahara Africa than North Africa. His insight into Southern, Western and Central Africa is significantly sharper than his analysis of that for Eastern and Northern Africa. This is probably due to his long-term focus, and frequent visits, on those regions. Although Cheeseman briefly touches on the role of Belgium and CIA in the assassination of Patrice Lumumba of DRC, he did not elaborate the role of Cold War in the collapse of African democracy and the subsequent rise of African "Big Men".

Cheeseman notes the compatibility of federal governance system to Nigeria due to its ethnic diversity, but he tends to discredit federalism in Ethiopia—Africa's second most populous country with over 80 different ethnic groups. Neither does he mention why Ethiopia, which was not a European colony except five years of Italian occupation, kept imperial rule until its violent overthrow in 1974. As long as the history of democracy in Africa is concerned, the author does not acknowledge Somalia as the first African democracy, where a sitting president was defeated and a peaceful transfer of power followed.

The book covers the rise of women's movements in Africa and acknowledges that Africa produced female heads of states (e.g. Liberia and Malawi). However, it fails to explicitly acknowledge the African continent has the highest number of women parliamentarians (e.g. Rwanda) in the world. Furthermore, it does not mention that women in precolonial Africa played important leadership roles—they launched military conquests, established states, and ruled kingdoms—and how, and why, they lost out those arrangements.

Since the release of Cheeseman's book in 2015, the continent has witnessed a general democratic trend where some "Big Men" rulers have been unseated. These include Yahye Jammeh of Gambia, Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, José Eduardo dos Santos of Angola as well as the recent insider revolution of long-term ruling parties that changed its leadership, such as South Africa's ANC and Ethiopia's EPDRF. Additionally, Nigeria and Mali witnessed peaceful transfer of power in 2015 and 2018 respectively for the first time in many years.

Conversely, President Nkurinziza of Brundi ignored constitutional term limits to cling to power through a generally discredited election. Uganda's parliament removed presidential age limit that paves the way for President Museveni to retain power for life. In 2015, Rwanda removed presidential term limit effectively allowing Paul Kagame to run for third term. In 2017, Kagame secured 99 percent of the votes through politically closed elections. Moreover, Uhuru Kenyatta of Kenya managed to hold on to power for another term through corruption and election rigging. Egypt's Abdelfatah al-Sisi won 97 percent of the 2018 presidential elections via a campaign marked by arrests, intimidation, and fear.

Democracy in Africa: Successes, Failures, and the Struggle for Political Reform is informative, thought provoking, and full of wisdom. It should be read as the past and present discourse of democracy in Africa. For a person new to the subject, it is an inclusive detail. For those have knowledge on the subject, the evidenced arguments and lively examples will provide a new perspective.