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CHEESEMAN (Nic) et FISHER (Jonathan)
*Authoritarian Africa: Repression, Resistance, and the Power of Ideas*
Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019, 176 pages

This book is part of a series entitled “The African World Histories”. It presents a new approach to teaching and learning for courses in African history and African studies, and also seeks to offer a new interpretation of African and global experiences from the perspectives of Africans who lived through them. In general, the book addresses the problem of authoritarianism in Africa by focusing on three topics: repression, resistance, and the power of ideas. The authors have divided the main argument of the book into five chapters. Before considering each chapter, they present their understanding of African authoritarianism, explaining that it is not a static or easily predictable phenomenon because while some authoritarian states have survived for decades despite numerous predictions of their imminent collapse, as with Chad, Rwanda, and Zimbabwe, it is not always the case.

The authors also demonstrate that authoritarian regimes have been sustained by extensive chains of patron-client networks that have linked State resources to businesses, churches, chiefs, and communities. From this standpoint, it is possible to appreciate that this also has a connection to what is known as the “big man” in well-known African studies literature2. In the introductory section of the book, albeit in the absence of a clear definition, the authors suggest an understanding of authoritarianism: for them, what indicates the degree of authoritarianism is the extent to which the realms of law, politics, and security are subject to the personal and particular desires of a leader or ruling clique without checks or contradictions.

The five chapters of the book are structured in chronological order. Chapter 1 explores the transformation of colonial states into authoritarian regimes between around 1945 and 1965, underlining the significance of patron-client relationships and State capacity in both the past and the present. Essentially, the chapter addresses the legacy of colonialism through a prism of the fragility of authoritarianism itself. To this end, the authors begin their approach by describing the case of Ghana to make the claim that colonial power could also be seen as authoritarian. In fact, colonial governments were established in the form of authoritarian regimes with few checks and balances on the powers of the government and sweeping powers to control the lives of Africans subjects (p. 9). The authors also

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demonstrate that the construction of colonial systems transformed African politics in another important respect, because it recognised a strong central authority figure in cases such as the Lozi Kingdom in what is now Zambia, and the Zulu Kingdom in Southern Africa. Cheeseman and Fisher even go so far as to state that colonialism laid the foundations for African politics to become dominated by competition between rival community leaders, and by men (p. 13).

Chapter 2 moves the analysis forward to look at the crucial role of ideas in supporting authoritarian systems in Africa, examining the rise of nationalist dictatorships during the 1960s and 1970s and the conflation of ideas of national “unity” with one-party and personal rule – echoes of which can be found in many of today’s so-called post-liberation regimes. The authors use the case of the Ethiopian empire (p. 19) to argue that in many cases, supposed precolonial traditions such as chieftaincy, kingship and community decision-making would be claimed by, and embedded within, emerging authoritarian systems. Thus, many authoritarian leaders recognised that they needed to imbue these new instruments of political power with traditional, or pseudo-traditional, ideas about authority in order to build and maintain popular support. In another discussion, the authors present what can be considered to be authoritarian typologies in the post-independence era (p. 22). It is interesting to note that Chapter 2 concludes with the statement that many authoritarian leaders relied heavily on external relationship to sustain their rule, and the ways in which they portrayed themselves in these interactions often differed markedly from how they did so at home (p. 43).

Chapter 3 emphasises the economic foundations of authoritarian rule and the critical role played by patronage and clientelist relationships in building popular support. The growing significance of oil, diamonds, international loans, development aid, and other resources for authoritarian regimes during the 1970s and 1980s provides the empirical setting for this chapter. Taking the example of Angola and the MPLA regime, Cheeseman and Fisher note that in the 1970s and 1980s, the economic conditions governments faced influenced their prospects of survival for two main reasons: first, they needed resources in order to be able to fund their activities, whether providing services to their citizens, rewarding supporters, or simply paying the wages of the police and army; and second, in relation to the process by which they accessed their revenues in order to secure the funds they required. The authors also consider the fact that governments that control valuable natural resources such as oil and gas do not need to negotiate with international partners or domestic groups in the same way, which is why they are so often authoritarian (p. 47), because as the Angolan case demonstrates, sustaining the cost of authoritarian rule is far easier when government income is consistently high.

Chapter 4 addresses the importance of Africa’s international relations for the maintenance – or circulation – of authoritarian rule in many parts of the continent, exploring how the end of the Cold War jeopardised the survival of some governments but provided fresh opportunities for others. In this chapter, the authors discuss the role of the international community and African authoritarianism between 1975 and 2000. To illustrate their argument, they point out that the ability of some authoritarian African states to extract vital economic resources and arms from international actors such as United States and Russia (the Soviet Union), has been characterised as “the tail wagging the dog”, when the less important part of something is not being able to control the whole (p. 62). In fact, despite being dependent on aid, many authoritarian African states were able
to skilfully leverage their value as Cold War allies to secure critical international support during the 1970s and 1980s. The chapter also makes the point that the international system has been at best a double-edged sword for Africa’s authoritarian regimes (p. 79).

Chapter 5 reflects on the theory of the legacy of authoritarianism, and examines the impact of authoritarian structures on new democratic political systems. It looks into why some African states have been able to resist post-Cold War continental and international drives towards political reform, and reflects on the prospects for democratisation in some of Africa’s most repressive regimes. It also discusses multiparty Africa and the struggle for democracy between 1995 and 2010. The authors note that the economic dependence of many African governments on foreign loans made them more susceptible to international pressure, while at the same time, growing international condemnation of human rights abuses made it harder for authoritarian leaders to simply repress their opponents, creating a new space for opposition leaders and civil society groups to mobilise for change (p. 84). These regimes adopted different strategies to continue their leadership. For example, the authors demonstrate that by ensuring that their rivals lacked resources, press coverage, and equal treatment under the law, all ruling parties were able to undermine the impact of the transition to multiparty politics, thereby giving rise to “elections without change” (p. 84). In this context, paradoxically, maintaining power could make authoritarian leaders stronger.

To conclude (p. 107-130), the book discusses the impact of authoritarianism on the lives and attitudes of African citizens who have lived under it, and what role it is likely to play in the continent’s future. This book raises an important and very current topic in a context of increasing trends towards “democratic closure” in Africa, as authoritarian practices are on the rise in some countries. The way the book is structured helps the reader understand the dynamics of political regimes in Africa. It is a valuable resource that can be applied not only in the field of political history, but also in various other areas of the social sciences that have an interest in understanding current and past political dynamics in Africa. The glossary the book provides of the main terms used by the authors (p. 131-134) is an interesting source that helps the reader acquire a deeper knowledge of the topics covered. The book is accessible, and has been written for an audience that may know relatively little about the continent, in contrast to narrowly focused monographs intended for specialists in the field.

It can also be linked to other publications relating to the topic of authoritarianism in Africa. For example, in an issue of the journal *Politique africaine* published in 2017, the debate around authoritarianism was revisited to show how former regimes are reinventing politics in Africa. Equally, the studies by Jean-François Bayart and Jean-François Médard also show how authoritarian regimes still dominate in Africa. Both analyses are interesting in that they examine politics through a form of detailed qualitative analysis and fieldwork they call research from below (“par le bas”); this is not the case in Cheeseman and Fisher’s book, however. Despite the excellent way the main arguments are presented by the authors, it would be interesting for the purpose of future studies to analyse each country and take its specificities and particularities into consideration.

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because it does not seem to be possible to approach Africa as a whole with regard to authoritarianism, although the book does present some examples from specific countries. In my view, Africa is a continent with multiple different trajectories, and a detailed comparative analysis among its countries deserved more attention, especially with a view to capturing points of similarity or difference between the trajectories of authoritarianism on the continent.

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