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BOOK REVIEW


As the copious bibliography in Richard Joseph's edited volume on State, Conflict and Democracy in Africa (Lynne Rienner, 1999) clearly demonstrates, democracy and democratic transition in Africa have become one of the most over-researched topics of the last decade in African studies. What, then, would yet another collection of academic papers on this theme bring to this debate? A distinctly African and Pan-African perspective, argue the editors, both executive officers of the organisation sponsoring this volume – the African Association of Political Science (AAPS). According to them, "AAPS is particularly well placed to bring some sense of theoretical and methodological rigour to the discourse on democracy" (p. vii). Indeed, as the editors acknowledge, AAPS scholars were among the first to raise the issues of democracy and democratisation in Africa in the early 1980s, and authored most of the studies on democracy conducted under the auspices of the Third World Forum's programme on Alternative Futures for Africa. Their contributions to the (then emerging) debate were eventually published as Popular Struggles for Democracy in Africa under the editorship of Peter Anyang' Nyong'o (UN. University/Zed Books, 1987). Subsequently, the AAPS launched a research programme on "The State and Democracy in Africa" in January 1993 which culminated in a series of papers presented at the Association's 10th Biennial Congress held in Ibadan. Nigeria (20-24 August 1995). It is these papers which have been published.

According to Nzongola-Ntalaja and Lee. – the former, a past president of both AAPS and the African Studies Association and Professor Emeritus of African Studies at Howard University; and the latter a visiting scholar at Georgetown University, both in Washington, DC – The State and Democracy in Africa is "a modest attempt to understand the quest for democracy in Africa today, to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the social forces struggling to realise it, and to examine the role of the state in either promoting or blocking the democratic transition" (p. 1). The 16 chapters in the volume are organised around four main themes, namely: (1) democracy and democratic transition in Africa (Chapter 1); (2)
key social forces and actors in the democratisation process (Chapters 2-5); (3) the role of the state in the democratic transition (Chapters 6-14); and (4) linkages between democracy and human rights, with particular focus on the rights of women (Chapters 15-16).

In the first chapter, Nzongola-Ntalaja analyses the meaning of democracy both as a universal idea and as an African notion, and examines the major problems facing democratic transitions in Africa today. He concludes that democracy is above all a moral imperative; but it is also a continuous social process of expanding political space in the interest of the popular masses, as well as a political practice that empowers people to rise up against the old political order to replace it with a new one. In the next four Chapters (2-5), the structure and role of some of the key social forces and actors in the democratisation process in Africa are analysed. Onalenna Doo Selolwane documents women’s exclusion, past and present, from the political space in Botswana, and shows how their struggle for equality — including a fairly successful political education strategy — has extended the boundaries of democracy in that country. Akiki Mujaju shows that while civil society — i.e. cooperatives, trade unions, academics, youth and women — did have a voice in Ugandan politics between 1962 and 1979. That voice has since been muted, and these organisations have not yet acquired sufficient autonomy to constitute a significant countervailing power to that of the Ugandan state.

The role of the popular masses in the democratic transition process of Zaire [now the Democratic Republic of Congo: DRC] is well documented in two Chapters (4 and 5) written (in French) by two prominent Zaïrois academics/activists. Mulambu Mvuluya analyses the strengths and weaknesses of the Zairian democratic transition process and shows how this process was deliberately manipulated and subverted by the late president Mobutu Sese Seko in order to allow him to retain power. Kalele-ka-bila focuses on a novel grassroots organisation created in early 1993 to advance the struggle for democracy in Zaire, the parlementaires-debout (or street parliamentarians), a socially-diverse group whose main activity consisted in assembling daily around the corner from major newspaper stands to discuss politics and decide on the appropriate course of action to advance the cause of democracy.

The next three Chapters (6-8) look at various aspects of South Africa’s negotiated transition to majority rule and democracy. Discussing the major challenges facing the Mandela government during its first 15 months (May 1994 to August 1995), Margaret Lee rightly concludes that by allowing white economic hegemony to be maintained, the negotiated political compromise would prevent the Mandela government from pushing forward its agenda for socio-economic change, wealth redistribution and service delivery to the masses. And, like Geoffrey Wood after her, she ends on a pessimistic note, observing that the huge popular expectations raised by South Africa’s democratic transition will prove
increasingly difficult to satisfy and may mortgage the future of democracy in that strategic African country (pp. 87, 99).

Wood’s contribution focuses on political allegiances, participation, aspirations, and attitudes towards South Africa’s fledgling democracy in the immediate post-elections period, based on a potential voters’ survey in the main urban centers of the Eastern Cape Province. Cheryl Hendricks revisits the problematic issues of nationalism, ethnicity and identity – but also those of race, class and gender – in the context of the new South Africa. She concludes that thus far, the Mandela government has been fairly successful in its nation-building exercise, but warns that both ethnicity and race are likely to be at the center of the debate on the country’s national question for some time to come.

In the next Chapters (9-12), four Nigerian political scientists take a critical look at the various political, social and institutional obstacles impeding progress towards democracy in Nigeria. In a trenchant and lucid piece quite reminiscent of Michael Chege’s “Africa’s Murderous Professors” (The National Interest 46, Winter 1996/97: 32-40), Jibrin Ibrahim unmasks and denounces the “IBB professors,” a group of leading Nigerian political scientists who were recruited by the benevolent military dictator General Ibrahim Babangida (IBB, 1985-1993), ostensibly to design and implement the government’s transition programme to civil and democratic rule; but in fact to orchestrate sycophancy and praise-singing in his favour, as well as devise tactics and strategies for perpetuating his authoritarian rule. Jibrin Ibrahim concludes with this indictment: “Our own IBB professors also bear responsibility for the major reversals of Nigerian federalism, public ethos and democratic aspirations suffered under their tutelage” (p. 123). Said Adejumobi, on the other hand, documents a unique case of extreme political engineering aimed at promoting a “guided democracy” as a strategy of transition to civilian rule under the Ibrahim Babangida administration in Nigeria: the creation, on 7 October 1989, of two government-sponsored political parties, the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the National Republican Convention (NRC). The two were basically identical centrist parties – the NRC a “little to the right” of the center and the SDP a “little to the left” of the center – adhering to a liberal-capitalist ideology.

Abubakar Momoh focuses specifically on the political context and implications of the annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential elections which saw the resounding victory of Chief M.K.O. Abiola, and shows how the latter was deceived by General Sani Abacha, who seized power on November 19, 1993, into believing that he could assume power as the elected president of Nigeria. Taking Nigeria as a case in point, Dele Olowu observes that “after two decades of attempts to revitalise or strengthen local governments, the opposite results have occurred, with the state becoming more centralised, both politically and economically” (p. 172).

In the book’s last four Chapters (13-16), various aspects of democratisation in
Africa are examined. In a purely legal-institutional analysis, Amos Anyimadu shows how the constitution-making process illuminates fundamental aspects of the relationship between and within state and society in Ghana. Carlos Lopes analyses the crisis of governance in Portuguese-speaking African states and shows how these states, under the influence of structural adjustment programmes, have evolved from the African socialism and populism of the national liberation struggle toward liberal-democratic political systems. Horace Campbell looks at the issues of democracy and human rights, particularly as they relate to current struggles for peace and the rights of women in Africa. Victor Ayeni examines the current role of the ombudsman in Africa to determine if such a role makes any difference to the situation of women and concludes: "the situation of the African ombudsman largely reproduces the indifference with which women are regarded in the larger administrative system" (p. 226).

The State and Democracy in Africa constitutes a good selection of the best that a new generation of African political scientists has to offer from a distinctly African and Pan-African perspective. Though himself very much a representative of the older generation, Nzongola-Ntalaja's balanced, perceptive and skillfully-crafted introductory chapter provides a solid theoretical foundation for the remainder of the work. This contrasts with Horace Campbell's Marxist-Leninist discourse which is reminiscent of the heady days of the African revolution. Several contributions by the new generation of African scholars provide a unique vista and fresh perspective on hitherto neglected and little-known aspects of the contribution of popular forces to democratisation in Africa. This is the case, in particular, with Onalenna Doo Selolwane's sensitive analysis of women's exclusion from the political space and struggle for equality in Botswana; Kalele-ka-Bila's lively description of a new type of civil society actors in Zaire, the parlementaires-debout (street parliamentarians); Jibrin Ibrahim's severe indictment of the "IBB professors," the cream of Nigerian political scientists co-opted to assist General Ibrahim Babangida in perpetuating his prebendal and autocratic rule; Said Adejumobi's revealing and insightful analysis of the peculiar political engineering experiment of IBB's two-party system in Nigeria; and Abubakar Momoh's perceptive insights into the political context and implications of the annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential elections in Nigeria.

While operating within the obvious constraints of a 15-month time-frame (May 1994 to August 1995) and sparsely documented, Margaret Lee's conclusion that the perpetuation of white economic hegemony resulting from the negotiated political compromise in South Africa would prevent the Mandela government from implementing its socio-economic transformation agenda is essentially correct, and has been vindicated by subsequent developments. The same applies, pari passu, to Cheryl Hendrick's cautionary note about the enduring power of ethnicity and race in the South African political context. And though couched in very general
terms, Carlos Lopes’ insights into aspects of democratic governance in Portuguese-speaking Africa are informative and useful.

In spite of these impressive qualities, The State and Democracy in Africa is disappointing on several counts. First, except for the two excellent contributions in French by the two Zairois/Congolese academics/activists – and while containing no less than three contributions on South Africa and four on Nigeria – Francophone Africa is conspicuously absent from this volume. This is regrettable for an organisation such as AAPS that has a Pan-African outlook and a continent-wide mandate. Second, since the publication of this book, the political landscape in some key African countries has changed so dramatically as to render most of the analyses obsolete and of merely historical interest. This is the case, in particular, with the DRC/Zaire, which saw the political demise and death in exile of Mobutu, followed by the military conquest of power by Laurent-Désiré Kabila in May 1997; and for Nigeria, which witnessed the death of IBB’s successor, Sani Abacha, in June 1998 and also of the presidential hopeful Moshood Abiola in detention in July 1998, not to mention Olusegun Obasanjo’s stunning political come-back through the February 28, 1999 presidential elections.

A number of the contributions are also marked by the poverty of theoretical insights, lack of analytical rigor and paucity of substantive facts and data. For example, the chapters dealing, respectively, with civil society in Uganda, voters in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa, decentralisation in Africa, constitution-making in Ghana and women’s rights. Perhaps the effect of these weaknesses could have been mitigated if the editors had written a general conclusion to cater for them.

All said, The State and Democracy in Africa constitutes a representative sample of writings by a new generation of African political scientists on the social and political dimensions of democratic transition in various African countries from a distinctly African and Pan-African perspective. It is a very interesting and useful collection of studies otherwise not easily accessible. It should, indeed, be seen as an indispensable addition to the vast and rapidly expanding body of literature on democracy and democratic transition in Africa.

Guy Martin,
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Figure 1: Complex Institutional Interrelationships at the height of Liberian Crisis.

- The Authority
- IGNU/LNTG I-III
- SMC, C5, C9, Ministerial Contact Group
- ECOMOG
- Extra-regional actors: INN/UN/UNOMIL
- Military strategies
- Political strategies
- Disarmament committee
- Technical committee
- JCMC

- Direct communication
- Indirect communication