

# MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

The African e-Journals Project has digitized full text of articles of eleven social science and humanities journals. This item is from the digital archive maintained by Michigan State University Library. Find more at:

<http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/africanjournals/>

Available through a partnership with



*Scroll down to read the article.*

## Review

Richard Calland (ed) (1999) *The First Five Years: a review of South Africa's democratic parliament*. Cape Town: Idasa.

Lubna Nadvi

South Africa's landmark transition from an oppressive apartheid regime to a democracy has been one of the major historical events of the twentieth century. No less of an accomplishment has been the establishment of a new democratic parliament in the country, whose performance in its first five years has drawn both sharp criticism as well as moderate praise. It is also the subject of this new volume edited by Idasa's Richard Calland.

The diverse and complex nature of South African politics renders it a fascinating case study of fledgling democracies around the world. This book attempts both a political as well as somewhat introspective analysis of the process of democratic consolidation in South Africa, through an examination of parliament's performance over the last five years. Despite some shortcomings it provides a concise but well-detailed explication of parliamentary developments in the period 1994-99. It covers some of the most topical issues concerning parliament, and in many instances does so within the context of well-established political theory. This ultimately provides a useful theoretical backdrop against which to understand, for example, the degree to which the South African legislature differs from, or is similar to, other traditional models of parliaments. One chapter in which this is clearly illustrated focusses on the National Council of Provinces and explains succinctly how and why the existence of the NCOP makes this parliament different from the traditional Westminster system. The volume is thus a useful source of information on features unique to the South African parliamentary system.

Much of the analysis and explanation of the workings of parliament is located within a theoretical and practical understanding of South Africa's particular socio-economic conditions. The book discusses briefly the

historical and political framework of South Africa's past, within which the transformation of parliament had to take place, as well as the specific issues which needed to take precedence in the process of such a transformation. Some of these issues were legislative measures on, *inter alia*, land reform, housing, social security, health care, and water. It also examines the various mechanisms and structures initiated by the new parliament, as well as those that were modified and given greater powers, such as the parliamentary committees. These latter were tasked with ensuring that legislative proposals were interrogated in a far more substantial manner than in the previous apartheid parliamentary regime.

The assessment of these various parliamentary structures, their successes and failures, and why these are significant within the context of South Africa's current political climate, are useful as insights into the complexity of the country's current politics. The book does not, however, go much beyond acknowledging the ostensible limitations of conducting an analysis within the conceptual model of liberal Western democracy, one not necessarily compatible with an Africanist understanding of governance and social existence. The analysis does not therefore succeed to any significant degree in capturing an inclusive understanding of traditional African approaches to politics, for instance the role of traditional leaders and elders. Instead, it has opted to pursue a largely liberal democratic perspective.

The late Nigerian political economist Claude Ake once argued in his paper 'Rethinking African Democracy' that one can speak of an African democracy, which is intrinsically premised on communal values, and that it should not have to suffer the indignity of being dictated to by notions of Western liberalism and capitalist tendencies. What has seemingly become a flaw of both the way the South African parliament has evolved, as well as some of the analyses that have emerged of this process, is that there is far too much of an infusion of a Western liberal conceptualisation of democracy, which ultimately does not consciously seek to address the material concerns of most South African citizens.

Particularly interesting and commendable features of the book, however, are its chapters on women in parliament, the assessment of the performance of different political parties as well as individual MPs, and the issue of ethics. These serve also to point to areas where certain shortcomings exist in South Africa's political and parliamentary system, and which need seriously to be addressed. Reference is also made to individuals who have

played significant roles in (i) the transformation process, (ii) landmark political, legislative and social events over the last five years, and (iii) scandals, which have reflected negatively on this parliament.

This is as detailed and insightful a review of the South African parliament as is yet available, and there is little faulting its well laid-out presentations, tables, diagrams and other features, which make it an accessible, carefully written text. It is ultimately a must for anyone interested in South African politics.