

Book Review - Consolidation of Democracy in Africa: A View from the South by Senzo Ngubane

Consolidation of Democracy in Africa: A View from the South - Solomon, Hussein and Liebenberg, Ian (eds.) 1999. Ashgate: England & USA, 367 pp.

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Since the emergence of the Post-Cold War era a large amount of contributions have been made, both as oral and as written statements, about Africa's democratisation (or lack thereof). As Africa approached the turn of the 20th century, the issue of democratic transition and consolidation continued to be a matter of contested terrain among academics, students of African politics and policy makers. This book should be seen as a further contribution to this vigorous debate about the nature and content of democracy in Africa. It deals specifically with the issues involved in the process of democratic consolidation. Consisting of nine chapters, this book looks at various organs of society (for example, civil society, the state, the military) and the extent to which each of them contributes to or hinders democratic consolidation.

The first chapter, by Irina Filatova, traces the evolution of the African state and the failure of democracy to take root on the continent. The "misbehaviour" of most African states, as reflected in the phenomenon of coups and counter-coups, is regarded as one of the things that has hindered the path to democracy. The second chapter, by Clive Napier, tackles the issue of constitutional reforms in Africa. This is done by looking broadly at four different phases from pre-colonial Africa to the post-colonial 1990s era which have a bearing on Africa's constitutional issues. Also, a critical appraisal is given of the countries which have embarked on this constitutional transformation route, such as Zimbabwe, Kenya and Swaziland.

Ian Liebenberg and Elke Zuern, in chapters three and four respectively, deal with the challenges and role of civil society in democratic consolidation. Liebenberg's chapter depicts a clear picture of the theoretical discourse and raises a number of important questions around the notion of a civil society, or a civil community, as he calls it.

In chapter five, Mark Malan confronts Africa's old problem of civil-military relations. It gives reasons, without necessarily offering justification, as to how and why, historically, the military have had to "step into" politics. However, with regard to the newly found democratisation in the 1990s, the chapter also delves into the problems associated with creating "proper control" by civilians over the military.

Chapter six, by Linda Cornwell, deals with the relation(s) between gender (women), development and democracy in Africa. Cornwell calls for a gendered approach to development and democracy. The chapter also contains basic facts and figures relating to the position of women in Africa, which may serve as an excellent reference point of statistical information.

In this day and age, globalisation relates to everything and it "spells confusion)about what it is, how the process unfolds, and where it is leading developed and developing countries to" (p 203). This quotation captures the main theme of what chapter seven, by Petrus de Kock, is about. The chapter

rightly states that the structure of the international (political) economy is one that is based on unequal power, which reflects the domination of the developed countries over developing states. In the context of democratic consolidation (in Africa), De Kock argues that in order for democracy to flourish, the economic and social needs of the people need to be taken into consideration.

The penultimate chapter, by Mandla Seleokane, deals with human rights and democratic consolidation in South Africa. The chapter provides a precise summary of the country's Bill of Rights. It then looks at the Human Rights Commission as one of the institutions set up under Chapter Nine of the South African Constitution to assist in the promotion and support of the country's democracy.

Chapter nine, co-authored by Agranoff, Sindane and Liebenberg, looks at the concept of power sharing (decentralisation or devolution of powers to local/regional authorities) among the various levels of government in a democratic state. The chapter refers extensively to other countries, such as Spain, which have had to deal with this issue. Although the authors mention that this subject is "to an extent under-researched in South Africa" (p 267), the chapter does have examples from the South African democratisation process.

A useful aspect of this book is that the editors did not only introduce the chapters in the introduction. In the conclusion they also summarised the main arguments and themes which came out of the various chapters.

After the conclusion there follows an appendix entitled "Ninety-two Days in the Life of a Continent". Although it provides a useful summary and analysis of major events that occurred in Africa during the period under examination, the section seems to be out of place in a publication on democratic consolidation.

The book can assume its place among other important publications on democratisation and democratic consolidation. It covers most of the key issues which face any country (particularly in Africa) involved in this process. It would therefore be a good reference for students of African politics and practitioners in the field. Finally, the book comes with an exhaustive list for further reading, which contains almost all key publications by African and other scholars who have contributed to this challenging topic of democratic consolidation in Africa.

Notes

A shorter version of this review appeared in Conflict Trends 1/2001.

References