

**Cheeseman, Nic and Fisher, Jonathan. *Authoritarian Africa: Repression, Resistance, and the Power of Ideas*. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. US \$19.95, 176 pp. ISBN: 9780190279653**

Cheeseman and Fisher's book *Authoritarian: Repression, Resistance, and the Power of Ideas* is timely and significant in understanding the logic of why authoritarian regimes have persisted and remained a part of Africa's political landscape. The book is an important contribution to the political literature in African studies and a great addition to the advancement of our understanding of African politics. Concise but comprehensive in scope, it provides plentiful substance to address a complex issue that is likely to stir debate on the roots of authoritarian systems in Africa. The authors interrogate how and to what extent European colonialists are responsible for current problems in Africa by linking authoritarianism in Africa to colonialism. The volume is inspiring in how it indicts Africa's colonial past as central to Africa's dilemmas. By exposing the atrocious legacies of colonialism in African political systems, the authors show how the colonial system facilitated authoritarianism in Africa through the institution of various norms and ideas. Their approach is similar to Jeffrey Herbst's (2014) argument that European colonial powers had no incentive to develop state structures and institutions in Africa. Instead, they facilitated the exploitation of Africans.

The primary objective of the book is to elucidate the main factors which have contributed to the persistence and durability of authoritarian rule in Africa since 1945. Precisely, the book examines the variety of authoritarian regimes that have existed across the continent over the last seven decades including one-party states, military rule, and personal dictatorships and it focuses on five central issues which have facilitated authoritarian government. These issues include (1) state capacity; (2) patron–client politics; (3) resource wealth; (4) legitimizing narratives; and (5) international support. The book introduces a variety of authoritarian regimes that have existed in Africa. This compelling volume also offers critical insights by reviewing the traditional story of African authoritarianism by drawing on primary sources of data to provide a new perspective.

The book is structured into five major chapters that explore the history of authoritarianism in Africa chronologically from the colonial era to the

presence. In each chapter, the authors focus on different factors underlying authoritarian rule in Africa. In the first chapter, Cheeseman and Fisher reveal “the change of colonial states into authoritarian regimes between 1945 and 1965” (p. xxx). Accentuating the importance of patron–client relations and state capacity, both in the past and the present the authors’ question why so many African states became authoritarian regimes so rapidly. Among the many answers provided, they argue that “colonial rule predisposed African states toward more centralized and repressive forms of government” (p. 4).

The authors make three key arguments on how African authoritarianism developed out of colonial influences. First, colonialism encouraged Africa’s “Big Men” to operate without checks and balances and domestic legitimacy. These “Big Men” were given grand labels including “Kings” or “Paramount Chiefs”; created by colonial officers as political leaders, they often substituted the lack of legitimacy with force, undermining democratic values. Similarly, provincial and national governments replicated these arrangements and, following independence, many of them controlled the newly formed states that arose out of colonialism (p. 9). Second, colonialism encouraged election rigging and similar electoral malpractices. Colonialism did not create safe spaces for electoral competition. Departing colonial leaders often attempted to shape the outcome of elections or encouraged violence to destroy legitimacy. Britain rigged elections in Africa to ensure that preferred candidates emerged victorious in Nigeria and Kenya (p. 9). Finally, colonialism did not create lasting institutions that would catapult these new states into full-fledged and well-functioning democracies. Colonialism created the culture of corruption, political coercion, including the misuse of law enforcement, and the complete disregard of human life that still plagues many states in Africa. Thus, African states adopted the features of colonial states. Although, they could deal very effectively and brutally with sporadic challenges to their authority, they were poorly placed to withstand a broader uprising (p. 16). They were “fragile” authoritarian states that had to find a sufficient balance between coercion and co-optation in order to govern (p. 17). Therefore, in Africa “Big Men” in the colonial era facilitated colonialism without resistance (p. 9).

In the second chapter, the authors explore how authoritarian leaders in the 1960s and 1970s established their rule of legitimacy in traditions, ideas, and the notion of government from African history. Cheeseman and Fisher argue that in African authoritarianism, ideas and norms serve to justify its

existence. Authoritarianism may also emerge out of some form of national appeal for unity. For instance, Julius Nyerere's request to Tanzania's collective African societal structure to sell *Ujamaa* ideas based on "traditional African democracy" (p. 30). Moreover, authoritarian leaders in Africa defended and restored traditional norms that had been eroded by colonialism and many of them quickly labeled democracy alien to Africa (p. 34). But they did not defend the rights of minorities and preached unity arising from the one-party rule, hence, their ideas of political rule were basically undemocratic and focused on regime preservation (p. 35).

In chapter 3, Cheeseman and Fisher scrutinise the economic foundations of authoritarian rule and the critical role played by "Big Men" and clientelist relationships in building popular support. It is explained how authoritarian regimes emerge out of the economic foundations of states. The increasing importance of aid, oil, diamonds, and international loans during the 1970s and 1980s served as the base for the consolidation of authoritarianism in Africa. Moreover, a large petro-state like Angola can survive by distributing its massive oil rents to secure the support of elites. But when oil wealth decreases, it leads to economic crisis since people cannot meet the expectations they have had from the state. In return, the ruling elites become even more authoritarian (pp. 46–47). Oil states, such as Gabon, Nigeria, Equatorial Guinea, Republic of Congo, Cote d'Ivoire, Sudan, and Cameroon often do not fully rely on taxes which would require accountability on the part of citizens. Nigeria, for example, used oil resources to strengthen its military capacity. It became a regional hegemon, but it is also susceptible to prebendalism, the idea that political leaders have the right to use public property for private interests (p. 51). Thus, most democracies arise when the public becomes the financier of the government. Besides, Africa is entrenched in authoritarianism with an increasing appeal of those who imbue certain elements of development such as Ethiopia's and Rwanda's existing regime. For the authors, such states are not totalitarian since they have "mixes of democracy," such as elections, even with wide-spread repression (p. xxiv). Thus, for the authors, authoritarianism in Africa is a combination of remnants of colonialism and the powers of prevailing ideas.

In the following chapter, the authors explore the importance of Africa's international relations for the maintenance or restricting of authoritarian rule in many parts of Africa. The chapter also explores how the end of

the Cold War threatened the survival of some governments but provided fresh opportunities to others. At best the international system has been a double-edged sword for Africa's authoritarian regimes. Very few have been able to survive by cutting themselves off from international networks, and while some have been able to sustain their rule by forming partnerships with foreign governments, none have been able to consistently rely upon external support. Thus, while scholars such as Jean-François Bayart have underscored how uniquely intertwined domestic and international politics have been since the colonial era, arguing that African governments have survived by manipulating this relationship to their own advantage (Bayart 2000), leaders have often been left disappointed when foreign assistance dried up. Countries such as Rwanda were empowered to adopt more critical approaches to Western donors, in part, by the shifting balance of power within the international community. Gradually, Western donors are being eclipsed by different players who engage with the continent in various ways. Most notably, China and the Gulf States have come to represent a critical alternative source of external assistance to authoritarian regimes, including in Zimbabwe, Sudan, and Eritrea. Unlike their Western counterparts, these states are creating fresh opportunities for the continent's authoritarian regimes.

Finally, in chapter 5, Cheeseman and Fisher discuss two conditions which enabled authoritarian leaders to alter and legitimate their governments for a new political era. Firstly, regimes that had earlier sought to resist holding elections transferred their efforts on how to control and manipulate elections. For the authors, "in this context, holding elections could, paradoxically, actually make authoritarian leaders stronger" (p. 85). Secondly, authoritarian rulers set about legitimising their governments by managing their economies, particularly by reducing corruption and by forming developmental partnerships even if they had limited democratic credentials as manifested in the case of Uganda. Cheeseman and Fisher argue that authoritarian states such as Rwanda and Uganda have had some success, mainly in areas of human and gender rights. "Female Rwandan legislators are broadly effective at representing women's interests at the national level and help promote pro-women policies" (p. 99). Both countries have reserved seats for women and minorities. In Rwanda, women account for close to 60 percent of total legislators (p. 98). Nevertheless, some critics have argued that Rwanda's

inclusion of women is cosmetic-meaning that women do not actually hold much power.

To conclude, the major contribution of this book is the explanatory power it has about authoritarianism in Africa as a persistent remnant of colonialism. It clarifies authoritarianism as a function of colonial heritage and of ideas that have changed over time. For the authors, authoritarianism in Africa is not uniform and differs in each context. For instance, Rwanda legitimises authoritarianism differently from how Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya, Ethiopia, Uganda, and other African countries legitimise authoritarianism. The authors also illustrate how authoritarianism has impeded development and how democracies have much better prospects for both political and economic stability. But this inference requires further study, as there are authoritarian states in the world, such as China, which are economically developed. The book is most suitable for those who are interested in African politics more broadly and those who want to understand the multiple factors underlying African authoritarianism. Unlike other books that focus on authoritarianism in general and on Africa in particular, this book brings at least two new things. Firstly, it clarifies the survival of authoritarianism in Africa through colonial legacies and the power of ideas. The book elucidates the legacies of authoritarian rule and how deeply ambiguous and contradictory these often are. It illustrates that African authoritarianism is not simply the absence of democracy but a deliberate stealth of democracy. Secondly, the book shows how authoritarianism in Africa has become so influential. Authoritarian systems do not only become successful by means of patronage and oppression but also by ideas and logics tapping into powerful historical narratives and experiences.

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## References

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