

Book review: The Struggle of Democratisation against Authoritarianism in Contemporary Africa

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Book review

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Good, Kenneth (2019), *The Struggle of Democratisation against Authoritarianism in Contemporary Africa*, Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, ISBN (10) 1-5275-3309-3; ISBN (13) 978-1-5275-3309-7 (hardback), 170 pages

The work of Kenneth Good, a veteran scholar who has taught at a swathe of universities in Africa and Melanasia, and whose principles led him being booted out of both Rhodesia under Ian Smith and Botswana under Festus Mogae, has displayed a consistent preoccupation with democracy and democratization, and in particular the tendency for elites to hijack democracy. For the present reviewer, his article “Settler colonialism: Economic Development and Class Formation” in *The Journal of Modern African Studies* (14, 4, 1976; 597–620) was formative, its general thrust being that, ironically, through their very success in promoting a skewed capitalism, settler colonial states summoned up opposing classes which ultimately defeat them. In that justly revered analysis, Good examined the histories and trajectories of Algeria, Kenya, Rhodesia, and South Africa, correctly predicting the doom of settler colonialism in the latter two countries where it had not yet been defeated.

Good’s latest book picks up on his abiding themes: popular struggles for democracy against elites, elites’ confounding of those struggles once placed in power, and the perpetual need for renewed democratic struggle. He is a champion of participatory democracy, although he tends to eschew democratic theory for the study of democratic practice.

In this study, Good’s opening chapter outlines his understanding of participatory democracy by exploring how it operated in ancient Athens, was developed again by the Levellers during the English Revolution in the seventeenth century, and subsequently by the Chartists, again in England, in the nineteenth century. He goes on to suggest that participatory democracy made its most striking appearance in Africa in the form of the five organizational principles of the United Democratic Front in the struggle against the apartheid regime in the 1980s: elected leadership at all levels, collective leadership, mandates and accountability, reporting and reporting back, criticism and self-criticism (96). Given this important argument, it is a pity he does not directly relate the Congress tradition of the ANC back to the Chartist movement, a point which would have been well worth making given contemporary debates about the colonial legacy.



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Having introduced us to founding democratic struggles, Good turns to Africa. Here, it has to be said, the book title is misleading. There is a lot more to Africa than the four countries he studies, and what is more, he provides us with no justification of his selection. For this writer, the substitution of Tunisia for Algeria was a disappointment. This is not to downplay in any way the importance of what has happened in Tunisia “where democratization has made big gains” (141), such as in deliberative, participatory constitution-making and the development of a party that is both Islamist and democratic. However, it is to say that, in my view, this short book was something of an opportunity missed. How wonderful it would have been if Good had returned to his wonderful article, written early in his career, and quite consciously picked up on the themes he had developed there! Nonetheless, there is much merit in the present enterprise, although this will be appreciated most by established scholars with ready knowledge of the countries concerned.

Following the introduction, there are chapters on each of the four countries studied (Kenya, Zimbabwe, South Africa, and Tunisia), followed by what is termed an “Afterword.” The chapter on Kenya offers a highly informative overview of how the conservative ruling elite, put in place by the colonial regime to quell the dangers of the peasant freedom movement they labelled Mau-Mau, and how its rule – constructed around accumulation and corruption – has been sustained not merely by rigged elections but by horrific violence. That on Zimbabwe takes us step by step through the vicious brutalities of Mugabe’s regime, the failed promise of the Movement for Democratic Change, and the continuance of authoritarianism under the new, military backed government of Emmerson Mnangagwa. The most developed chapter is that on South Africa, its essence being how the militarist elitism of the ANC ultimately thwarted the democratic impulses of the UDF, culminating in the debacle of state capture under President Jacob Zuma and the rise of Cyril Ramaphosa as a tycoon president. The somewhat cursory chapter on Tunisia (just eleven pages) relates how the security state of President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali (“built upon non-accountability,” 131) was brought down by a trade union-initiated popular movement which has set in motion a democratization dynamic which may yet succeed.

The afterword is just that providing us largely with updates which pick up where the chapters on Zimbabwe and South Africa leave off. As such, it does not qualify as a conclusion and fails to relate back to the opening chapter’s discussion of participatory democracy. Accordingly, we are left somewhat frustrated. Why is it that elites so consistently hamper the democratic project? Is democracy perpetually destined to fail? Alas, Good fails to grapple with these key questions. Nonetheless, Good has provided a useful addition to the literature which will be valued particularly by those who want short overviews of the politics of the countries concerned.

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