

Book review

Violence in African Elections: Between Democracy and Big Man Politics

Kovacs, Mimmi Söderberg and Jesper Bjarnesen (eds.) 2018

*Uppsala/London: Nordic Africa Institute/Zed Books Ltd,
273 pp.*

ISBN: 978-1-78699-230-7 pdf

*Reviewed by Adeniyi S. Basiru**

Since the 1990s when electoral democracies, with institutions of elections, returned to Africa following decades of authoritarianism, violence of all shades has been the defining feature of electoral politics. Interestingly, this development has evoked an avalanche of theoretical and empirical studies which have sought to explore the various dimensions of the phenomenon of electoral violence. However, what would appear lacking in the majority of these studies, is how the everyday politics of locals at the sub-national level interact with macro-level forces and factors to shape the contours of electoral violence. Perhaps, the realisation of a need to fill this knowledge gap inspired the writing of the book under review.

* Adeniyi S. Basiru is an independent researcher and a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Political Science, University of Lagos, Nigeria.

The 273-page book, edited by Mimmi Söderberg Kovacs and Jesper Bjarnesen, is a collection of empirically-oriented essays, written by an assemblage of scholars that participated in a 2-day writer's workshop organised by the Nordic African Institute, Oslo, Norway, in October 2015. A careful reading of the book provides convincing evidence that the scholars who contributed to this book include some of the best minds to address the subject in question. Organisationally, aside the introductory and the concluding parts, the book is partitioned into eleven chapters. It opens with an introductory section in which the editors provide a general overview of the *raison d'être* behind the book as well as the core issues raised by the contributors in the volume. A core argument that seems to run through the introductory chapter is that central to understanding the pervasiveness of electoral violence at all levels in democratising Africa is 'big man' politics.

Following the editors' well-crafted introductory piece, is the first chapter, entitled, 'Ethnic politics and elite competition: the roots of electoral violence in Kenya' (pp. 27–46). Here, deploying a historical comparative method of analysis, Hanne Fjelde and Kristine Höglund not only historicise the trajectories of electoral violence in Kenya, but attempt to lay bare its incubators. They contend that the pervasiveness of electoral violence in Kenya since the advent of electoral democracy in 1992 is rooted in the triplets: ethnic mobilisation, political exclusion and politicised ethnicity – wherein the State and a coterie of actors connected to it are the culprits. In the second chapter, Anders Sjögren, with a focus on Uganda, explains what accounts for varying incentives of the incumbent government to promote violence in concert with non-State actors at the sub-national during elections. Operating within the prism of a toleration-repression conundrum, the author argues that the ruling NRM (National Resistance Movement [Uganda]), when confronted with the toleration-repression conundrum in any electoral cycle, tends to deploy state-sponsored violence according to the level of threat posed by the opposition(s) to its hegemony. As regards the 2011 elections, generally considered to be peaceful, the author avers, 'the presence of the security forces remained at the level of a silent threat, and the government strategy throughout the campaigns did not revolve around intense harassment of the opposition of the kind that had marked previous elections' (p. 54).

The link between land conflicts and electoral violence in Côte d'Ivoire is

the preoccupation of Matthew I. Mitchell in chapter three. Here, the author discusses how Presidents Bedie and Gbagbo as well as other political leaders exploited age-old land grievances in the cocoa region of the country to mobilise for political ends and in the process incubated a citizenship crisis, which snowballed into electoral violence. To be sure, a task similar to Mitchell's is undertaken in chapter four by Willy Nindorera and Jesper Bjarnesen. The duo unearths the roots of the violent protests that dotted the political landscape of Burundi over President Pierre Nkurunziza's third term agenda. They insist that state violence, deployed by the Nkurunziza regime in concert with Imbonerakure youth militias, was a deliberate strategy to consolidate power and silence its opponents.

How uncertainties over the outcomes of an election among competitors could trigger violence at the provincial level is the concern of Ibrahim Bangura and Mimmi Söderberg Kovacs in the fifth chapter. With a focus on Kono District, a swing-vote area in Sierra Leone, the authors contend that electoral competitions in which actors are almost of equal strength can make a swing-vote district a battle-ground in which all manner of violence might be deployed to secure a winning edge. In the sixth chapter, 'Ex-militants and electoral violence in Nigeria's Niger Delta', Tarila Marclint Ebiede informs his readers of ex-militants' agency in the electoral violence equation. Drawing from extensive field data analysis, the author argues that ex-militant leaders (emerging local patrons) adopt a neo-patrimonial theoretical strategy to mobilise their ex-fighters (local clients) to carry out electoral violence with the aim of influencing the outcome of elections in ways that maintain their position of power and political leverage in their communities.

As in the preceding chapter, Mariam Bjarnesen, in chapter seven, explores the agency of ex-combatants (a social category) in the incubation of electoral violence at the local level in Liberia. Deploying ethnographic methodology and focusing on the 2011 presidential election in Liberia, the author explains how a link was forged between the ex-combatants and the major contenders for presidential office. The author argues that elections provide an opportunity for ex-combatants to sell their violent services to the big men in exchange for patronage which may not necessarily be available during off-election periods. In the eighth chapter of the book, Jacob Rasmussen, deploying the concept of parasitic politics and focusing on the Mungiki movement in Kenya, discusses the changing transactional relationships between a militant non-state actor and the

state. He argues that the state has clandestinely patronised a militant non-state actor like the Mungiki at different times, but discarded them when they were perceived as a threat.

Using the Chipangano criminal gang as an illustrative case, Tariro Mutongwizo's chapter nine explores how entrenched alliances between a party-state and a youth gang could incubate electoral violence at the local level. Joining issue with the authors of chapters seven and eight, Mutongwizo contends that the nature of politics in Zimbabwe, as elsewhere in Africa, makes the association of big men (patrons) with clients (usually dispensers of violent services) inevitable and rewarding. More specifically, he argues that the intensity of Chipangano's violence has time-lines. In the author's words, 'the strength of the ties between Chipangano and Big Men also tends to be greater as elections approach, during the build-up to elections and throughout general and by-elections, but these ties are loosened during non-election periods' (p. 205). In the tenth chapter, Daniel Agbibo like Mutongwizo, with a focus on NURTW (National Union of Road Transport Workers) in the Nigerian city of Lagos, explains how the mutuality of interests between the political actors (patrons) and the leaders of NURTW have encouraged and supported violent behaviours of the union's revenue collectors (the *agberos*) in Lagos – especially during elections.

Afra Schmitz's chapter eleven discusses the nexus between campaign communication and electoral violence in Ghana. The author challenges the widely held view that elections in Ghana have been violence free. Drawing from the experiences of the communities in northern Ghana, the author argues that while physical violence of high intensity has virtually been in abeyance in the Ghanaian electoral processes, communicated violence, which entails stereotyping others to gain advantage, has been active. In the author's words, 'communicated violence is closely entangled with physical violence as it evokes images and memories of past violent encounters and a fear of possible future events. To be effective, violence does not need to be physical: references to violence in campaign speeches alone can change realities' (p. 235).

In the concluding part of the book, the editors, drawing from the various viewpoints explicated in previous chapters, submit that syntheses of micro and macro levels of analysis offer valuable perspectives into how patron and client politics or big-men politics shape the contours of

electoral violence.

There is no doubt that the book has not only contributed to the dearth of literature on electoral violence in Africa but has also enhanced our understanding of the subject. To be sure, the book, drawing from empirical studies, addresses in comprehensive details the intersections of micro and macro factors and actors in the electoral violence sector in Africa. The quality of analyses that went into the making of all the chapters of the book is excellent. However, what is missing, is the role of environmental issues in the incubation of violence. This is significant in an era in which environmental issues have been integrated into the discourse on peace and development at regional and global levels.

Notwithstanding, this book is an inspiring read and should be a valuable resource material for members of the research community, locally and internationally. Therefore, it is strongly recommended to scholars and policy makers interested in the study of violence in everyday life. It would also be useful to students of peace studies, political science, sociology, psychology, criminology and electoral studies at the undergraduate and post-graduate levels; as well as police personnel, forensic experts and the general reading public.