

BOOK REVIEW

Michael Wahman. *Controlling Territory, Controlling Voters: The Electoral Geography of African Campaign Violence*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2024. 272 pp. \$90. Hardcover. ISBN: 9780198872825.

In *Controlling Territory, Controlling Voters*, Michael Wahman lays out a new theory of when and why election violence occurs in weakly institutionalized political systems. In contrast to the common wisdom, which argues that violence is most likely in competitive or “swing” districts, Wahman shows that violence instead clusters within less competitive constituencies, and he argues that violence is used to create a reality or a perception of party strongholds as “no-go zones” for rival parties. Drawing on very careful case studies of Zambia and Malawi, Wahman uses a variety of data sources to show how election violence is used to maintain “geographically polarized [party] systems.” Like the rest of Wahman’s work, the book is meticulously researched and very careful about the strengths and weaknesses of the data presented.

To my mind, there are two major strengths of this manuscript. First, this book underlines the importance of bringing territory into our understanding of vote mobilization and campaigning in sub-Saharan Africa. For some time, there has been too much focus on ethnicity and ethnic clientelism as the means by which parties build constituencies and win elections. Wahman shows us that parties build and defend territories, reordering the election landscape in the process.

Second, the book rightly draws our attention to low-intensity violence as consequential in shaping voter experiences of elections and their political participation. For years, Afrobarometer data has suggested high levels of citizen fear during election periods across a wide range of countries, but the literature on election violence has overwhelmingly concentrated on a small number of high-violence cases, especially Kenya. This may contribute to a perception that elections without a body count are “good” democratic elections. Wahman rightly points out that “no-go areas”—which can be policed by less visible, low-intensity violence and intimidation—have significant effects on democratic choice.

There were some areas where I wish the book had done more. First of all, though I appreciated Wahman shifting the emphasis away from ethnicity and ethnic clientelism, I often found myself wondering about the possible role of ethnicity. It is not clear whether geographically polarized party systems are dependent on particular ethnic configurations, or whether local partisan minorities within strongholds are generally ethnic out-groups. Second, the book’s empirics are focused to a large degree on substantiating the association between violence incidents and party strongholds and examining the consequences of this for voter attitudes. It would have been interesting to learn more about how

party strategy is implemented and party strongholds constructed. The book advances a very strategic model of how parties operate, in which they deploy resources to strongholds rather than swing constituencies to maximize vote share. But do party cadres share this vision? Greater focus on the motivations and behavior of violence perpetrators could shed light on the degree to which violence is strategic and instrumentally applied—or whether it is responsive to emotions, including those rooted in the perceived ownership of territory.

Let me close with a few thoughts on how this excellent book might shape the research agenda going forward. First of all, though the author includes a chapter that extends his analysis beyond the core cases of Malawi and Zambia, I hope that future work will examine the generalizability of Wahman's arguments. For me, as a sometime Zimbabwe specialist, the book retains a strong southern African flavor. The parties in this book have organizational heft and seem to care about building and maintaining a party brand. As we look across sub-Saharan Africa more broadly, these kinds of parties are rare. Is violence used differently—and is it more likely to cluster in competitive districts—in weak party contexts? I would also like to see future work engage with how geographically polarized party systems operate in an increasingly urban Africa. It would seem more difficult to create territorial strongholds in urban areas, yet this is where election violence in many countries is concentrated. Are parties attempting to build strongholds in urban spaces? How is that effort complicated by the high levels of social and ethnic diversity in these contexts? And, as votes shift to areas where strongholds may be harder to construct or defend, how will this affect party strategy and use of violence?

Overall, this is a thought-provoking book that presents a wealth of novel data. It will be of interest to Malawi and Zambia specialists, who will appreciate the fresh approach to regional politics, but also to broader audiences interested in election violence and democratic accountability.

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