

## BOOK REVIEW

Emmanuel Saffa Abdulai. *Electoral Politics, Laws and Ethnicity in Africa*, Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023. xv + 270 pp. Index. \$98.84. Paper. ISBN: 978-3031341380.

Numerous scholars have contributed to the debate on electoral politics in postcolonial Africa, such as Steytler and Fombad (Nico Steytler and Charles M Fombad (2021) Elections, *Democracy and Constitutionalism in Africa*, p.1.), who remarked that some regimes were “concealing authoritarianism under the veneer of elections.” In light of this, I am happy to review a recently written book by Abdulai, who is not only a legal scholar at the University of Sierra Leone’s Fourah Bay College, but participated in the monitoring of African elections for more than a decade. His book focuses on analyzing election-related issues in Africa with reference to Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Sierra Leone, and South Africa.

The introductory chapter provides the legal framework in which African elections are held. Chapter Two presents a review of the African and international legal instruments. In Chapter Three, Abdulai discusses the constitutional framework for elections in South Africa, Kenya, Ghana, and Sierra Leone. He particularly compares the jurisprudence on elections that were held in the selected countries between 2011 and 2021. Though his presentation is impressive, further analysis of postelection dispute resolution would add value to the book.

Chapter Four, which shows how Electoral Commissions are essential in electoral systems (61), is informative. Indeed he presents a detailed discussion of the models of Electoral Commissions, how they were established, their roles, and their responsibilities. He reminds us that all the Electoral Commissions in, particularly, Ghana, Kenya, South Africa, and Sierra Leone, are classified under the independent model. He expresses reservations about the “independence” of some of the countries’ electoral commissions which have been blamed for electoral irregularities. For instance, he points to the alleged partiality of the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) on which Raila Odinga based his challenge to the elections of 2013. This was later expressed by protests against the IEBC which was accused of being biased in favour of Uhuru Kenyatta’s Jubilee Coalition just before Kenya’s 2017 election. He concludes the chapter by stating that almost all the so-called independent commissions in the four countries lack “substantive/practical independence” (75).

In Chapter Five, Abdulai attempts to compare the political party regulations in Kenya, Ghana, Sierra Leone, and Nigeria. Starting with his country, he examines the postconflict progress in terms of “peace and security environment through the rebuilding of government institutions” (78). This “success story” was also voiced by the late United Nations secretary-general (Kofi Annan) and the former prime minister of Britain (Tony Blair). Although he hints at problems of widespread election-related and youth violence, much of the presentation is focused on the 1991 constitutional provisions for the establishment and roles of political parties.

Furthermore, Abdulai states that the establishment of political parties in Ghana is informed by Article 55 of the 1992 Constitution and the Political Parties Act of 2000. He remarks that, though the legal provisions require political parties to conform to democratic principles, some of their key members practically resort to “the politics of defamation and insults” (85). He adds that, since 1992, “several political parties have emerged with sub-national or ethnic, religious, regional, or supranational faces” (84). Turning to Nigeria, he observes that it is currently dominated by the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) and the All Progressives Congress (APC), with the latter party winning the last three elections in 2015, 2019, and 2023. He notes that, though the Supreme Court ruled in favour of the formation of more embracing political parties in 2002, the electoral politics in that country are still undermined by manipulation and influence of money. With regard to Kenya, he contends that political parties “tend to articulate interests based on ethnicity, aggravating the already prevailing societal divisions, conflicts and tensions” (89). While concluding this chapter, he argues that, although the political parties are constitutionally regulated to promote democracy in these countries, some of their leaders practically become undemocratic.

The second part of the book is composed of Chapters Six to Eight, focused on political party financing, code of conduct, and “judicialization” of elections respectively. Despite the repetitions (156, lines 1–4), the discussion of the three aspects will generate further scholarly debate.

Part Three includes Chapters Nine to Twelve. It displays how a multiplicity of ethnic identities in Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, and Sierra Leone has affected the electoral politics and contributed to violence. Abdulai correctly states that the inadequate legislation and defective judicial systems have generated electoral violence in most African countries. Certainly, this may stimulate further scholarly research, on how bad laws have led to violence in Africa. In addition, post-violence interventions, such as responses to reports of commissions of inquiry, have not been discussed in this book.

Lastly, Abdulai draws important conclusions about elections in Africa. He particularly points to the short-lived postindependence democracy, which was eventually eclipsed by the autocratic regimes of the 1970s and 1980s. He expresses optimism that, “with the advent of major developments in the legal framework on elections, including new constitutional developments replacing the initial post-independence constitutions” (251), the democratic trend may improve. However, the African democratization process may be doomed, as a

result of manipulations of the new/revised constitutions for selfish ends. This is already evident in countries where some politicians claim to amend parts of the constitutions to match with the African reality.

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