

Tanja Kleibl, *Decolonizing Civil Society in Mozambique: Governance, Politics and Spiritual Systems*. London: Zed Books (hb £95 – 978 1 7869 9934 4; pb £28.99 – 978 1 7869 9935 1). 2021/2023, 193 pp.

As the world raises questions over the relevance of state and political parties in pursuing a common well-being, civil society organizations have appeared as alternatives to bad governance and inefficiency of state apparatus. In this timely and well-articulated book, Tanja Kleibl refreshes current theorizing and debates about the meaning, role and function of postcolonial civil society. Building from the theoretical reflections of Gramsci on hegemony and civil society, an extensive literature review and oral interviews, Kleibl argues against the dominant Eurocentric normative assessment of African civil society.

The first part of the book provides an overview of the main civil society and development theoretical debates with a reflection on postcolonial complexity within civil society in the poorer countries of the global South. It criticizes the modern use of civil society for perpetuating colonial structures and discourses, thus limiting the development of an autonomous local civil society. Alternatively, it suggests an approach that goes beyond Western institutional structures and considers the socio-cultural contextual meanings articulated by people who appear to have little influence on mainstream civil society debates.

Part II gives insights into the development of the public sphere(s) and its links to the legal framework and to civil society development in Mozambique. It sees civil society as a product of long historical processes. It observes that, from colonial times, urban elites have dominated civil society, excluding the majority of poor people in rural areas. This elitist and exclusionary civil society led to the emergence of ‘new dynamics outside the world of NGOs and new solidarities that are going beyond the actions of legalized civil society actors; some are connected to the primordial public and some are played out in violent ways’ (p. 64).

Part III critically examines the ‘good governance agenda’ introduced by the donor-led NGO–civil society model in Mozambique. It claims that donor-led NGOs as well as the government of Mozambique are dependent on external funding and capacity building, rendering them accountable to the international donor community rather than to their own citizens (p. 70). It goes on to contend that, with the NGOs losing political space, ad hoc protestors, spiritual and religious leaders and online communities of solidarity are filling the gap.

Part IV builds from a case study in Inhassunge District in Zambezia Province, to test the applicability of the Western concept of civil society in Mozambique. It observes that, in the case of Inhassunge District, people have no idea of civil society as conceptualized in the West.

The book closes by urging readers to critically examine, interrogate and deconstruct the liberal concept of civil society in postcolonial Africa, keeping in mind its historical threads. It recommends the inclusion of traditional structures, indigenous and religious ceremonies, magicians, traditional healers and ad hoc protests into a definition of civil society. In sum, it demonstrates that, in the case study of Mozambique, modern ‘liberal civil society is either co-opted, intimidated or absorbed into state-controlled civil society networks or government-organized semi-state

structures' (p. 136). Keeping this in mind, it recommends consideration of the various inherited social arenas and discursive patterns behind the idea of civil society.

While the argument is not entirely novel, the fact that it builds from extensive fieldwork, including engagement with faiths and beliefs, brings new insights to the understanding of the complexities of civil society in the African context. In fact, Kleibl's major contribution to the study of civil society in Africa is her immersion into the spiritual dimension of civil engagement. However, the analysis offered in this book would have been immeasurably strengthened by engaging more voices from the districts where complementary research was conducted. Having placed civil society in historical perspective, the author could have been cautious in the way she brings current developments in Mozambique into her argument. For example, her reference to the ongoing conflict in Cabo Delgado is factually flawed (the insurgency began in 2017, not 2020, as indicated on page 6) and does not fit well with the main narrative. The title is both appealing and misleading. The book captures the theoretical discussion on postcoloniality but it fails to provide evidence of the decolonization of Mozambican civil society. What transpires from the case study is an ongoing struggle for the decolonization of civil society in Mozambique.

It is important to observe that the publication of this review coincides with massive protests against the 2024 general and provincial elections results in Mozambique which, once again, gave a landslide victory to the ruling Frelimo party despite growing unpopularity. The reaction of civil society organizations to the protests and to disproportionate use of force by police reflects this struggle for decolonization of civil society in Mozambique. With few exceptions, the majority of civil society organizations are loath to address the deep causes of political violence; instead, they focus on appealing to people and police forces to restrain from acts of violence, including the shooting of unarmed civilians by police. Consequently, many anonymous leaders have emerged to lead protests in the neighbourhoods, thus rendering formal civil society organizations marginal.

The book is suitable for a large audience, from academics to policymakers, NGOs, international donors and all those concerned with the politics of development in the global South. However, for the majority of the Mozambican public, not highly proficient in English, it will be a challenge to navigate through the dense theoretical discussion on postcoloniality. A translation in Portuguese would facilitate the accessibility of the book across the Lusophone world, particularly in African countries that face similar challenges.

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doi: [10.1017/S0001972024000676](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972024000676)