

# BOOK REVIEW

**Leonardo A. Villalón and Rahmane Idrissa, eds. *Democratic Struggle, Institutional Reform, and State Resilience in the African Sahel*.** New York: Lexington Books, 2020. 230 pp. Index. \$105.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 978-1498569996.

An essential contribution to the literature on the “politics of democratization” in the francophone Sahel, *Democratic Struggle, Institutional Reform, and State Resilience in the African Sahel* seeks to answer a key question: “How have the politics of creating or reframing institutions in the name of ‘democracy’ weakened or strengthened states themselves?” (4). “Micro transitions,” the core concept underlying the volume’s analysis, posits that large-scale political transformations are shaped by the accumulation of small social and institutional changes at the micro level. Formal democratic frameworks do not necessarily correlate with state resilience or fragility; rather, the effects of the politics of democratization on state institutions are “messy, indirect and highly contingent” (17). The theoretical framework of the book, brilliantly explained by Leonardo A. Villalón and Rahmane Idrissa in the introduction and concluding chapters respectively, is driven by six cases: Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad. The volume was drafted by distinguished scholars, many of whom participated, in various ways, in the events under examination.

The examples of Mauritania and Burkina Faso offer excellent illustrations of the complex process of incremental institutional change. According to Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem, in Mauritania, various military regimes sought to form coalitions with civilian elite in order to instrumentalize institutions. However, by engaging in the “process of controlled democratization,” the authorities also needed to take institutions “seriously” (51). Taking institutions seriously, however, can create new opportunities for social actors, who become “increasingly aware of their rights” (52). As in Mauritania, the presence of an authoritarian regime in Burkina Faso, along with the absence of formal democratic frameworks, did not prevent the consolidation of some democratic procedures. This process, described by Augustin Loada, took place not because of actors’


calculations, but rather due to the fact that “no single actor could control” the democratization politics, which subsequently culminated in the end of Blaise Compaoré’s regime (133). Burkina’s 2022 coups d’état do not minimize the 2020 volume’s theoretical contribution, which emphasizes the incremental aspect of changes that took place through Compaoré’s rule. The military’s recent power seizures, which took place twice during 2022, only confirmed the concluding chapter’s observation that the democratization process in the Sahel remains a fragile equilibrium between the “democratic consensus” and the “authoritarian impulse.”

Reforms of the 1990s played different roles in each country, producing “distinct trajectories that have cumulatively influenced the capacity of each state to manage tensions, and the resilience of its institutions in doing so” (20). Senegal and Niger, cases illustrated by Ismaïla Madior Fall and Mahaman Tidjani Alou respectively, demonstrate the resilience of state institutions despite seemingly chaotic political dynamics. In Senegal, numerous constitutional revisions driven by clearly political motives did not lead to state collapse, but to a peaceful transition of power. In spite of an apparently turbulent history, marked by a series of coups d’état (in 1996, 1999, and 2010), Niger has paradoxically managed to preserve a republican state concept and further extend territorial “anchoring of the state” (160).

The various degrees of state resilience which are studied in the book can also be understood as a capacity of state institutions to resist instrumentalization by ruling elites; in other words, the “struggle for power, “*le pouvoir*,” is inherent in democratization” (204). The “memory of how far such fighting or struggles can take” (204) is always present, regardless of actors’ political self-identification or sensibilities. This can be seen in Chad, a country with a long history of conflict, weak institutions, and little confidence in the state’s capacity to claim a monopoly on “legitimate physical violence across the national territory” (185). The author, Lucien Toulou, who drafted the chapter before the death of Idriss Deby in 2021 and his son’s subsequent power seizure, warns that a semblance of continuity in Chad is no guarantee of political stability. To a certain extent, a similar process (absence of consensus on the mechanism of power distribution) can be observed today in Mali, where “democratization’s” apparent success was not correlated with institution building. This is demonstrated by Moumouni Soumano: the political characteristics of democratization itself were based on a “single-minded logic of acquiring and keeping power” (80). The subsequent two coups d’état (in 2020 and 2021), which occurred after the publication of the volume, only confirmed this observation.

While the current crisis in the Sahel was “long in the making” (17), the security situation is once again reshaping the politics of democratization. The analysis presented in this book was essentially conducted before the critical events which occurred between 2020 and 2022. Recent dynamics, however, have only reiterated the need for complex, dialectical perspectives on

institution building and resilience. This work's solid theoretical framework and excellent case studies make it a must-read for every scholar trying to understand the current situation in the Sahel.

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