

# BOOK REVIEW

**Ken Ochieng' Opalo. *Legislative Development in Africa: Politics and Postcolonial Legacies*.** Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. xviii + 276 pp. Bibliography. Index. \$31.99. Paper. ISBN: 978-1108710350.

*Legislative Development in Africa: Politics and Postcolonial Legacies* by Ken Ochieng' Opalo is a timely book for those wanting to know more about the overlooked world of African formal institutions. This book contributes to an understanding of why institutions—legislatures, in this case—matter and how they work in Africa, showing the variations in their development across time and space. The book is structured around two research questions: “What explains both cross-sectional and longitudinal variation in legislative strength under autocracy? And, under what conditions do democratic institutions emerge from their autocratic foundations?” (xi). The methodology is clearly explained across the book's chapters, each of which employ different and complementary techniques and data analysis. The book employs a cross-national analysis and comparative research design using the cases of Kenya and Zambia, countries in which the author did fieldwork and collected data between 1964 and 2014.

The volume is divided into six main chapters (plus an Introduction and a Conclusion). It begins with a cross-national analysis of the colonial (Chapter Two, *Legislative Development in Africa*) and the autocratic (Chapter Three, *Intra-Elite Politics and Credible Commitment*) foundations of contemporary legislatures in Africa. It continues by analyzing, in detail, the Kenyan and Zambian parliaments. Political developments under colonial rule have had a lasting impact on institutional development in these two countries. They share similar colonial origins but had a divergent political development due to the differences in their inherited administrative states, including the role of African elites before independence and the composition and independence of political parties in relation to the presidents (Chapter Four, *Colonial Origins of Parliaments in Kenya and Zambia*). Chapter Five (*Elite Control and Legislative Development*) explains why Kenyan legislators “enjoyed higher levels of means independence” (134). Opalo shows how chief executives maintain their power and balance the power of the elites, presenting specific strategies of elite control employed by Kenyan and Zambian presidents. Autocratic presidents vary in the way they control the power of the elites and tolerate legislative

independence. In this sense, the authoritarian regimes that followed Kenya's and Zambia's independence influenced the processes of legislative organizational development and their variations (Chapter Six, Legislative Institutionalization in Time). The two countries have organized regular legislative elections, which are considered "fairly competitive" (210), and these elections have served to incorporate or exclude the elites and to act as a barometer of the regime's performance. Under autocracy, elections can thus have relevant political functions and impact legislative independence and strength (Chapter Seven, Electoral Politics and Legislative Independence).

Throughout the book, we learn how authoritarian or hybrid regimes employ democratic institutions and why these institutions are relevant in an autocratic context. The work strongly contributes to the studies on the institutionalization of legislatures by presenting in detail their historical roots and their function over time. Autocratic regimes and leaders also reinvent themselves after and during critical junctures, as was the case with the transition to multipartism in the 1990s. Opalo advances theoretical knowledge on the specificities of African legislatures that emerged from colonial and autocratic foundations. Considering the colonial origins of contemporary legislatures, institutions were adopted and interacted with intra-elite politics in the post-colony. The differences between colonial powers and the various experiences within the legislatures deserve further research beyond former British and French colonies, as presented in this book, by analyzing what the author considers as the "persistent contemporary effects of the colonial experience with legislatures" (130) in Portuguese and Spanish-speaking countries.

Regarding the autocratic foundations of legislatures, the book offers a detailed analysis of the mechanisms that structure the development of legislatures, highlighting the credible commitment of postcolonial elites. Chief executives need to relate to legislatures, and Opalo shows how autocrats act to balance the power of the elites within existing institutions. In sum, autocrats need institutions and need to concede power to legislators while continuing to use co-optation and repression as mechanisms of survival.

*Legislative Development in Africa* is relevant for those interested in autocratic politics and in different profiles of authoritarian leaders; it demonstrates that secure autocrats and strong legislatures are correlated. The "pendular movements of autocrats" (81) in their rule and the extent to which legislatures are institutionalized are invitations to think about different types of autocrats, from the more secure to the less secure. Apart from its contributions to the study of comparative politics of elites and institutions, the book also contributes to studies of authoritarianism and autocratic leadership, showing that there is room for more detailed studies on the lawmaking process within authoritarian legislatures.

Ana Lúcia Sá 

Iscte – University Institute of Lisbon  
Lisbon, Portugal

[ana.lucia.sa@iscte-iul.pt](mailto:ana.lucia.sa@iscte-iul.pt)

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