

BOOK REVIEW

Mimmi Söderberg Kovacs and Jesper Bjarnesen, eds. *Violence in African Elections: Between Democracy and Big Man Politics*. Africa Now Series. London: Zed Books, 2018. 320 pp. Index. \$95.00 Cloth. ISBN: 978-1-78699-229-1.

On October 15, 2019, Mozambique held its sixth general election, which was marred by violence and election rigging. Electoral violence is a major concern on the African continent. As multiparty elections became the most legitimate and “peaceful” route to political office in Africa’s new and emerging democracies, they also paradoxically brought with them various kinds of violence. The phenomenon of election-related violence on the continent has increasingly gained attention among academics and electoral practitioners, especially over the last ten years.

So, why should we read *Violence in African Elections* by Mimmi Söderberg Kovacs and Jesper Bjarnesen? First and foremost, because it covers a topic that is absolutely crucial for understanding contemporary African politics through a novel lens—the “everyday politics of electoral violence” (2)—from a bottom-up and multi-layered perspective of the phenomenon. This edited volume is among the few studies that have gone beyond the national or macro level to explore the sub-national or micro level—but through a dynamic interaction analysis between the two—to understand different experiences of election-related violence within African states. The focus on the micro level is immediately sustained by Kovacs’s introductory chapter, which presents a comprehensive overview of the academic literature, from which the need to shift the level of analysis to seize the micro-foundations of electoral violence becomes very clear. This micro-level focus allows an understanding of the relationship between the national dynamics and the occurrence of electoral violence at the local level, and how and why local actors interact with national political elites to produce violence during electoral processes.

This book demonstrates the richness of the qualitative research involved, as it presents eleven case studies that, in turn, cover nine countries (Côte d’Ivoire, Burundi, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Nigeria, Uganda, Sierra Leone, and Zimbabwe). These case studies, presented from Chapter One to Chapter Eleven, give the reader an in-depth analysis of the dynamics between the national and sub-national levels, and they explore the agency of the

various actors involved in acts of electoral violence, including former combatants, unemployed youth, and less obvious ones such as transportation trade unions.

Three core issues are at the heart of this book. The first is the patronage-based explanation of power distribution that must consider the agency of local actors and, more importantly, the notion of a mutually reinforced interdependence between the “Big Man” and his clients. Chapter Six by Tarila Ebiede illustrates this convincingly, through a discussion of the relationship between ex-combatants and the political elite in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The second issue is the temporal and spatial variation within countries in terms of electoral violence, in which the geography of electoral violence reveals a propensity for violence in some specific regions or districts due to their electoral relevance. Chapter Five by Ibrahim Bangura and Mimmi Söderberg Kovacs uses the swing Kono district in Sierra Leone as an example of this phenomenon. The book also considers the role of historical legacies and of some continuities in political institutions that make electoral violence a viable strategy for political survival. Indeed, in Chapter Two, Anders Sjögren outlines these legacies of government-sponsored violence in Uganda over the five most recent presidential elections. The third issue is the other more subtle forms of election-related violence in addition to those that are mainly considered, as seen in Chapter Eleven by Afra Schmitz, which discusses the electoral campaign evoking past violence in Ghana's Upper West region, or in Chapter Seven by Mariam Bjarnesen, which examines the mobilization of ex-combatants by the political elite for a demonstration of force during the 2011 Liberia elections.

In spite of all of these innovative aspects, there are yet some avenues for future research, such as the agency of international and domestic electoral observers, or how this particular focus on Africa helps explain the phenomenon more broadly, and how comparable electoral violence in Africa is to violence in other regions of the world.

To sum up, this collective book is a valuable contribution to the research on electoral violence in Africa. Academics should follow up the book's findings with more case studies and comparative research to continue to explore the intricate dynamics of macro and micro dimensions underlying electoral violence throughout time and space, and within and across countries. Electoral practitioners will also find portions of this book useful, as the final chapter by the editors Jesper Bjarnesen and Mimmi Söderberg Kovacs translates the research findings into specific policy and practice recommendations for supporting and observing electoral processes in Africa's democracies, of which everyday electoral violence is a fundamental aspect.

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For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

- Bekoe, Dorina A., and Stephanie M. Burchard. 2017. "The Contradictions of Pre-election Violence: The Effects of Violence on Voter Turnout in Sub-Saharan Africa." *African Studies Review* 60 (2): 73–92. doi: [10.1017/asr.2017.50](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2017.50).
- Demarest, Leila, and Arnim Langer. 2019. "Reporting on electoral violence in Nigerian news media: 'Saying it as it is?'" *African Studies Review* 62 (4): 83–109. doi: [10.1017/asr.2018.150](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2018.150).
- Pfeiffer, Elizabeth. 2018. "'The Post-Election Violence Has Brought Shame on This Place': Narratives, Place, and Moral Violence in Western Kenya." *African Studies Review* 61 (2): 183–209. doi: [10.1017/asr.2017.117](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2017.117).