

BOOK REVIEW

Jeffrey W. Paller. *Democracy in Ghana: Everyday Politics in Urban Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. vii + 313 pp. Figures. Tables. Appendix. Bibliography. Index. \$100. Cloth. ISBN: 978-1-316-51330-9.

Ghana in the early twenty-first century is a country regularly celebrated as one of Africa's democratic success stories. At the heart of Ghana's achievements, many argue, is the apparent solidification of the political and popular legitimacy of the country's democracy during the now almost thirty-year-old Fourth Republic. The highlight of Ghana's achievements is not only the country's eight successful national elections during the Fourth Republic, but, perhaps more importantly, the three transfers of power between the country's two major political parties. As numerous scholars, political observers, and others have lauded Ghana's democratic accomplishments, Jeffrey Paller, in *Democracy in Ghana: Everyday Politics in Urban Africa*, asks his readers to dive deeper into the country's political culture and look beyond the national electoral system and the headlines it garners to the ways in which politics operate at the community level. "Everyday politics," as Paller terms it, is a political approach centered on the quotidian interactions between community members, community leaders, politicians, and those aspiring to gain new forms of political and social capital, among others, as they all come together to negotiate, define, and reshape the prospects for their and their communities' futures in the Fourth Republic.

In his exploration of Ghanaian everyday politics, Paller situates his study within a set of neighborhoods and localities in and around the country's capital of Accra (namely, Old Fadama, Ga Mashie, and Ashaiman). As Paller emphasizes throughout his text, the urban setting is key to his understanding of everyday politics. Histories of urban migration to places like Accra have resulted in diverse political environments, as peoples from a range of diverse backgrounds have come together to construct and shape their communities' social and cultural lives. Moreover, as Paller highlights, cities are confined physical spaces, which forces interaction between peoples (21). As a result, in Paller's book, the story of everyday politics in Accra is ultimately the story of the city's growth and of all the conflicts over land, autochthonous rights, power, and transformation that have shaped the city's history during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

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Paller divides his book into two parts, with two chapters comprising Part I and four in Part II. An introductory chapter precedes the first part. The introductory chapter, along with the two chapters of Part I, are largely comprised of literature reviews and secondary source-driven histories positioning Paller's book in the broader fields of comparative African politics, urban studies, and the history of Ghanaian urbanization and urban migration. Diverging from the first part, Part II showcases Paller's extensive fieldwork in Greater Accra as he integrates a range of qualitative research methods—surveys, participant observation, and archival research, among others—into a multidisciplinary tour showcasing the ways in which Ghanaians engage with and make politics work for them in their communities. Addressing issues of clientelism, patronage, formal and informal politics, poverty, and civic organization, the chapters that comprise this section reframe the praxis of democracy in Ghana. More important to the individuals he worked with than the quadrennial act of voting, the processes of negotiation, distribution, and activism Paller details in these chapters are all part of a broader web of organically cultivated political norms, assumptions, and expectations that undergirds the political activities of Accra's diverse populace. What Paller so skillfully also demonstrates in this part is that the practice of everyday politics does not operate in a vacuum. Rather, it both intersects with and diverges from the country's broader electoral politics as local or even neighborhood-level issues rise to regional or national concern and as local figures marshal community networks of clientship and patronage in their efforts to raise their political profiles.

At the core of Paller's book, then, is a rethinking of what democracy looks like in Ghana specifically and, as he hypothesizes in his concluding chapter, in Africa more broadly. Where Paller truly succeeds in this endeavor is in his steadfastness to the belief that everyday politics must be addressed on its own terms. In this manner, Paller challenges conventional narratives of Ghanaian politics that prioritize the country's electoral politics or ones that view everyday politics as a peripheral part of the broader umbrella of Ghanaian electoral politics. Instead, Paller presents everyday politics in at least this specific area of twenty-first-century Ghana as feeding both into and off of the country's electoral politics as well as simultaneously operating independently of that system and on its own terms. As a result, Paller's *Democracy in Ghana* forces its readers to think beyond Ghana's rightly lauded history of elections during the Fourth Republic in their reflections on the meanings and praxis of democracy in the country's urban centers. What Paller's book so richly constructs is a framework for understanding democracy embodied in the webs of expectations, histories, and day-to-day interactions of its citizenry.

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For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

Mueller, Lisa. 2018. "Personal Politics without Clientelism? Interpreting Citizen-Politician Contact in Africa." *African Studies Review* 61 (2): 28–54. doi:[10.1017/asr.2017.131](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2017.131).

Rabinowitz, Beth S. 2018. "More than Elections: Rural Support and Regime Stability in Africa." *African Studies Review* 61 (3): 27–52. doi:[10.1017/asr.2018.36](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2018.36).