

Laura Thaut Vinson. *Religion, Violence, and Local Power-Sharing in Nigeria*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. xxvi + 337 pp. £75.00. Cloth. ISBN: 9781107179370.

The adoption of power-sharing structures to ensure the inclusion of different cultural groups in government has long been considered an effective conflict resolution measure in divided societies. In recent years, however, power-sharing has been increasingly criticized for, among other things, reducing political competition and stalling democratization, stimulating inefficient public spending, interlocking politicized cultural identities, and ultimately, failing to ensure stability and peace. In her recent book, *Religion, Violence, and Local Power-Sharing in Nigeria*, Laura Thaut Vinson argues that while these criticisms may hold for power-sharing on the national level, sub-national power-sharing structures can still effectively prevent localized violent communal conflict. Local power-sharing is argued to be more effective because its effects are more visible in terms of political power and resource allocation, and accountability is higher. Focusing on Nigeria's central Middle Belt region, Vinson demonstrates how the presence of *informal* power-sharing measures at the Local Government Area (LGA) level, in which leading political positions are divided or rotated between cultural groups, can explain why some communities face recurrent outbursts of religious violence while otherwise comparable communities do not.

Vinson focuses specifically on inter-religious communal violence as a product of the increasing politicization of religious identity and widening Muslim-Christian divisions in Nigeria and elsewhere. Indeed, while local power-sharing institutions in Nigeria's LGAs were mainly adopted in the context of politicized *ethnicity* before the 1990s, these institutions often continue to prevent violence with the emergence of politicized *religion*. Yet, as Vinson convincingly argues, while ethnic and religious identities may overlap to an important extent in Nigeria, religious violence is a distinct phenomenon, precipitated by different triggers, and pitting members of the same ethnic group and even family against each other. The politicization of religion has followed the growth of Christianity in Africa since the 1980s, in particular the Pentecostal-Charismatic revival. The growth of politically virulent Pentecostalism in Northern Nigeria along with the increase in Islamic fundamentalism have given rise to new tensions and outbursts of religious violence which at times have claimed hundreds of lives (e.g., 2002 Miss World riots in Kaduna, 2008 Jos riots, 2011 post-election violence).

While such large-scale violent events attract global media attention, not all cases of religious violence make international headlines. Hence, a substantial share of such cases are not picked up by conventional conflict datasets. In order to study religious violence, and in particular variation between Nigerian LGAs in the occurrence of violence, Vinson constructs a new dataset on communal conflict in Kaduna and Plateau

States—two states which have experienced recurrent inter-religious crises—by relying on local newspapers. These data are combined with information collected on informal local power-sharing measures in each of the states' LGAs via interviews. While this empirical exercise already reveals an association between power-sharing and conflict, this relationship is further strengthened by three pair-wise comparisons of six LGAs which are equal in many respects (pluralism, geography etc.), except for the presence of power-sharing measures and conflict. In-depth interviews and focus group discussions demonstrate that it is indeed the power-sharing measures adopted at the local level that can be associated with religious tolerance, cooperation (e.g., mixed neighborhood watch groups), and a dam against the spill-over of religious violence elsewhere in the region.

The argument for local power-sharing is empirically convincing, yet several elements of the book also hint at potential theoretical caveats. Indeed, it appears as though many of the weaknesses of national power-sharing are actually replicated at the local level. As revealed by the case studies and interview material, even in Nigeria's peaceful power-sharing LGAs there is a heightened awareness of communal identity and its political and economic ramifications, hence potentially undermining integrationist efforts toward identity. While this might be a (Nigerian) reality one simply has to deal with, it also appears that power-sharing can undermine democracy and inclusion because some smaller groups still remain excluded, giving cause for new tensions. Indeed, the informal power-sharing measures in Nigeria appear to reduce religious violence almost by happenstance, as they are actually tailored toward ethnicity. To what extent are such structures immune to changes in the political salience of cultural identities in general, however? Furthermore, the question remains as to what extent power-sharing structures remain stable when faced with elite defections, new challengers, economic shocks, and external manipulations.

These dynamic aspects of power-sharing would be interesting to address in new research on who the local elites are, how they ensure control over prevailing power structures, and how crises are dealt with through an in-depth analysis of LGA politics. Such a political-institutional focus could be combined with a micro-focus on participants of communal violence, their motives, and how they are mobilized—which is also recognized as a crucial concurrent research question by the author. Nonetheless, Vinson's work undoubtedly offers a rigorously researched stepping stone toward further studies of these issues.

Leila Demarest
University of Leuven (KU Leuven)

Leuven, Belgium

leila.demarest@kuleuven.be

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