From Protest to Parties: Party-Building and Democratization in Africa by Adrienne LeBas (review)

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Abstract

In the 1990s Africa adopted multiparty democracy. Yet even a casual observation would show that in some countries opposition parties are strong while in others they are weak and fragmented, even countries that exhibit similar institutions and electoral rules. In From Protest to Parties Adrienne LeBas attempts to unravel this puzzle by means of a comparative study of Kenya, Zimbabwe, and Zambia. LeBas notes that in Zimbabwe and Zambia the main opposition parties are relatively strong, while in Kenya the opposition is fragmented. In explaining this state of affairs, she considers ethnicity and authoritarianism as central variables. This way of visualizing democracy and party politics in Africa is indeed not new. (See, for example, Sebastian Elischer's "Do African Parties Contribute to Democracy? Some Findings from Kenya, Ghana and Nigeria" [Afrika Spectrum 43 (2):175–201 (2008)]. Tackling the puzzle, LeBas presents two main arguments. First, she maintains that where authoritarian states relied on alliances with corporate actors, particularly organized labor, as was the case in Zambia and Zimbabwe, they unintentionally armed their opponents with structures and resources that could later be used to mobilize large constituencies and exert an effective challenge to the state. "In countries like Zimbabwe and Zambia," LeBas states, "… opposition parties were able to draw upon cross-ethnic mobilising structures provided by labour. In contrast, in countries like Kenya, authoritarian states relied on patronage and networks of ethnic brokerage in order to rule … and opposition parties were prone to fragmentation along ethnic lines" (246). While this reasoning is in may ways convincing, it fails to account for a situation in which ethnicity-based conflict is almost absent but opposition parties are weak. In Tanzania, for example, about 120 tribes exist, but ethnicity has not been a divisive force, partly owing to a successful national-building project championed by the late Mwalimu Julius Kambarage Nyerere. And yet opposition parties in Tanzania are still relatively weak. LeBas's second argument is that opposition parties are more successful when they pursue strategies intended to intensify political polarization—that is, strategies that distance those parties from the incumbents. LeBas finds this strategy paradoxical since it sometimes leads to violence. This is partly true. In Zanzibar, for example, the main opposition party, the Civic United Front (CUF), applied such a strategy against the ruling party Chama Cha Mapinduzi. The result has been twofold: the CUF has been strong, but at the same time the country has remained politically unstable. LeBas presents original research based on primary data to support the arguments she advances. There are some areas where the book slips up, however. One serious problem is related to her methodology and data. LeBas claims her argument to be "generalizable to other late Third Wave democratizers" (5), but this is problematic since her study is limited to three cases. To develop a general theory, the author would have to use a large-n comparison and include many more cases to show pattern and trends. Similarly, the data presented are somewhat outdated. Most interviews were conducted in 2002, 2003, and 2004, with the largest share of the empirical attention devoted to Zimbabwe. Yet to study the strengths or weaknesses of opposition parties means to situate them against the ruling parties. In their seminal work Democratic Experiments in Africa: Regime Transitions in Comparative Perspective (Cambridge University Press, 1997) Michael Bratton and Nicholas van de Walle rightly argue

that a regime transition is a struggle between competing political forces over the rules of the political game and the resources with which the game is played. What I find strange is that LeBas sidesteps this point and treats the ruling parties as passive entities: “I argue that the weakness of opposition party mobilization—not the resources or cohesiveness of the ruling party—is the primary cause of this kind of authoritarian persistence. This weakness is in turn determined by the choices of parties themselves…. This book suggests that differences in opposition strength are not primarily a reflection of the skills or short-run strategies of incumbents…. Nor should we see the deficiencies of opposition as the result of political opening” (8). In some cases, LeBas makes claims without supporting evidence, which amounts to mere speculation...