Leonardo R. Arriola, Lise Rakner, and Nicolas van de Walle (editors). *Democratic Backsliding in Africa? Autocratization, Resilience, and Contention*. Oxford University Press, 2023, 320 Pages. ISBN: 9780192867322.

Reviewed by: Hamdy A. Hassan, Political Science, Zayed University, UAE.

The examination of the authoritarian state and democracy in Africa requires a deviation from traditional analyses, recognizing the significant role those political leaders, their resources, and belief systems have played in shaping the political landscape.[1] Some scholars elucidate that the leadership variable, coupled with the value and ideological systems of the head of state, are critical in dictating the transition from authoritarian regimes to democratic governance.[2] Nonetheless, a comprehensive understanding of the authoritarian state phenomenon in Africa and its diverse manifestations necessitates a holistic consideration of multiple factors, encompassing cultural, social, economic, and external variables.

Despite endeavours towards democratic transitions since the 1990s, the African continent has neither wholly adopted democracy nor authoritarianism[3]. Most countries exhibit characteristics of competitive or moderate authoritarianism, as illustrated by Kenya, Uganda, and Zimbabwe, where opposition parties routinely secure more than 35% of the votes. Nonetheless, the Freedom House 2021 report underscores a consolidation of the authoritarian state in Africa, with a mere eight sub-Saharan nations classified as free, and an increasing number categorized as "not free," escalating from 14 in 2006 and 2008 to 20 in 2021. This progression towards stringent authoritarianism, marked by suppression of opposition factions, deferral of elections, annulment of presidential term limits, and infringements of human rights, is propelling democratic regression across the continent[4].

Democratic Backsliding in Africa? Autocratization, Resilience, and Contention is an insightful analysis of the state of political liberalization in Africa, providing a nuanced view of why most African countries have not achieved greater political liberalization despite increased societal pressures for more democracy. The book is structured in a way that allows the reader to grasp the complexity of the situation in Africa. After an introductory chapter, subsequent chapters focus on political participation and regime responses, legal strategies used by African autocrats to stay in power, international strategies and the interplay between

international actors and African governments, and six detailed country case studies of Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

The authors argue that governments often go beyond conventional tools of manipulation, such as electoral fraud and political violence, to reinforce their hold on power. They emphasize two often overlooked strategies: exploiting the legal system and leveraging international relations.

Chapter 2: *Political Participation and Regime Responses* by Kendra Dupuy, Leonardo R. Arriola, and Lise Rakner, explain the dynamics of political participation and regime responses in Africa, using the case of Malawi's 2020 do-over election as a focal point. The chapter highlights how citizens' political mobilization via elections can successfully challenge executive power, as evidenced by the Malawi experience. However, it also underscores the grim reality that incumbents in most African countries have mastered the art of manipulating electoral processes to maintain the status quo, thereby stalling democratic consolidation. The authors delve into the strategies employed by incumbents to undermine elections and control constituencies, from channelling resources to resorting to violence when necessary. The chapter poignantly illuminates the limits of manipulating elections, as seen in the mass protests preceding the Malawian election and similar mobilizations in Senegal, Burkina Faso, and Sudan. Additionally, the chapter discusses the challenges incumbents face from rights-promoting digital civil society and information technology, which have emerged as critical enablers of democratic participation. Ultimately, this chapter offers a nuanced and comprehensive examination of the intricate interplay between citizen mobilization, regime response, and the quest for democratic governance in Africa.

Chapter 3, authored by Siri Gloppen, Thalia Gerzso, and Nicolas van de Walle, provides an insightful analysis of the legal strategies employed by incumbent presidents in Africa to manipulate the rules and maintain or enhance their power, a practice termed as 'autocratic lawfare.' The chapter meticulously categorizes these strategies into constitutional, legislative, administrative, judicial, and socio-discursive lawfare, backed by illustrative examples from various African countries. It also recognizes the significance of these legal strategies for the pro-liberal democracy side, discussing how opposition and civil society have, at times, successfully used legal mechanisms to challenge incumbents and prevent democratic backsliding. While acknowledging the variation in the use of these strategies across different regimes and the asymmetrical nature of the law, the chapter ultimately underscores the dual role of law as a tool for both autocratic incumbents and forces of liberal democracy. This chapter is a must-read for anyone seeking to understand the complexities of autocratization and regime change in Africa and the pivotal role played by legal strategies in shaping these processes.

Chapter 4 revolves around the idea that the manipulation of sovereignty claims by incumbent leaders in Africa has played a crucial role in shaping the continent's democratic trajectories. The authors, Lise Rakner and Nicolas van de Walle, argue that these leaders have strategically leveraged international norms of state sovereignty to weaken the influence of external actors, particularly in domestic affairs, while at the same time selectively adhering to global norms to signal compliance. This delicate dance, according to the authors, has had significant implications for the balance between democratizing and autocratizing forces on the continent.

The chapter begins by clarifying the concept and application of sovereignty claims as a defining characteristic of post-colonial politics (pp. 87-9). It then provides a detailed analysis of the post-Cold War era politics of political conditionality and democracy support, highlighting how adherence to the rule of law, democracy, and human rights was often made a condition for financial aid transfers from Western donors. This, in turn, affected policies and debates around national sovereignty. The authors explain how the evolving international landscape, characterized by the rise of donor political conditionality, the emergence of China as a significant regional actor, the War on Terror, and changes in Africa's external relations, has altered the equilibrium between incumbents, opposition, and civil society. These changes, they argue, have resulted in some real democratic gains in a majority of countries but have also opened the door for incumbent elites to employ sovereigntist claims as a shield against domestic challenges and contestation for power.

A particularly noteworthy aspect of the chapter is the discussion on how the manipulation of sovereignty claims by incumbents affects various policy areas. The authors illustrate this by comparing the accommodation of global gender norms by African leaders, which often does not affect the domestic balance of power, with the resistance to Western interference in sexual and reproductive rights, where arguments of state sovereignty and "African values" are often employed.

The chapter concludes by emphasizing the asymmetrical nature of international linkages and the challenges posed by the increasing restrictions imposed by African governments on foreign funding to Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). The authors argue that this leaves international donors with fewer options to support human rights and democracy, as support traditionally channelled through NGOs is gradually closing, leaving governments as the only remaining avenue for international support. This situation, they argue, inadvertently supports the increasingly autocratic tendencies of African executives, as they skilfully leverage the region's participatory politics to claim a broader democratic mandate for their sovereignty claims against the international community.

The chapters 5 to 10 indeed provide a comprehensive yet distressing view of the state of democracy in various African countries. While Ghana shines as a symbol of democratic hope, it stands in stark contrast to the narrative in other nations. The situation in Kenya is particularly concerning, as the political elite's manipulation of institutions to maintain power undermines the very essence of democracy. This manipulation, which stunts the growth of democratic reforms, indicates a more insidious form of autocracy that operates under the guise of democracy. Malawi, although resilient, faces a continuous struggle against recurring authoritarian themes, suggesting that the roots of autocracy run deep and are difficult to eradicate entirely. Zambia's regression from a once-celebrated model of democratization to a backsliding presidential regime underscores the fragility of democratic institutions and the constant threat of reversal. Uganda's narrative is a sobering reminder of the endurance of autocratic rule, as initial promises of democracy have been systematically eroded over time. The case of Zimbabwe is a poignant example of contested autocratization, illustrating the ongoing struggle between autocratic forces, opposition, and international actors. While the resistance against autocracy is heartening, it is clear that the autocratization process continues to adapt and persist.

Ultimately, these chapters underscore the complexity and multifaceted nature of the democratic journey in Africa. It is not merely a linear path towards consolidation but a continuous struggle against deeply entrenched autocratic forces. While there are glimmers of hope, such as Ghana, and pockets of resistance, as seen in Zimbabwe, the journey towards democratic consolidation is fraught with challenges. The chapters collectively highlight the need for a more critical and nuanced approach to understanding the interplay between democratic and autocratic forces in Africa, as well as the importance of constant vigilance and active resistance against autocratization attempts. This nuanced understanding is essential for crafting effective strategies to support democratic consolidation and resist autocratic encroachment in the region.

The book successfully argues that while pro-democracy actors can also employ these legal and international strategies to challenge incumbents and prevent democratic backsliding, incumbents enjoy institutional advantages when implementing these strategies. The case studies provide an in-depth analysis of the interactions between legal and international processes in each country's democratic trajectory. The concluding chapter of the book synthesizes the lessons drawn from the case studies and presents a framework for further empirical analysis regarding the impact of legal and international processes on democratization (pp. 265-269). There is a general pattern of democratic stagnation in Africa, rather than a clear trend of backsliding or progress. Despite the occurrence of national elections and changes in executive power, there is no significant improvement in democratic governance,

as pro-incumbent advantages, weak checks on executive power, and abuses of power persist. The analysis also underscores the importance of ideas and values in shaping political participation and rhetoric, with both governments and oppositions seeking to mobilize citizens based on their views on democracy, governance, and national sovereignty. While opposition campaigns highlight democratic failures, incumbents often hypocritically express support for democracy, revealing a nuanced interplay between normative and instrumental considerations in African politics. Ultimately, despite the short-to-medium term effectiveness of ideational strategies employed by authoritarian incumbents, the book suggests that they are likely to lose the debate on democracy in the long run.

Overall, this book is an important resource for researchers, policy makers, and anyone interested in the political landscape of Africa. It highlights the often-overlooked strategies incumbents use to maintain power and provides a comprehensive analysis of the complexities involved in Africa's democratization process. The authors' careful research and analysis make a significant contribution to the ongoing debates about democratic backsliding and provide a solid foundation for further studies on this crucial issue. However, the analysis lacks the vision of the African civilizational perspective, which takes into account the contexts of the post-colonial state and the developments of the international system in order to understand the political transition processes in African countries. The resurgence of authoritarianism through military coups and the strongman syndrome since 2017 is dynamic and requires a fundamental shift in approach. African states, with the support of regional and international allies, must work to correct shortcomings in governance, social and economic discontent, and mounting insecurity. The African Union and regional organizations must resolutely and impartially renounce all forms of military or constitutional coups, while global powers must support international mechanisms to punish those who retain or seize power by unconstitutional means. However, relying on the international community appears precarious due to the increasing authoritarian tendencies among emerging global powers, such as China and Russia. Ultimately, addressing the underlying social, economic, and political conditions that precipitate political instability is imperative, even if these factors are hidden behind a veneer of democracy.

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