

The Moral Economy of Elections in Africa: Democracy, Voting and Virtue by Nic Cheeseman, Gabrielle Lynch and Justin Willis, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2020, 359 pp.

Are elections truly indicative of a democratic society? This is one of critical questions that scholars Nic Cheeseman, Gabrielle Lynch, and Justin Willis grapple with in their recently-published book, *The Moral Economy of Elections in Africa*.

Drawing on the electoral processes and experiences of former British colonies Ghana, Kenya, and Uganda, the authors analyse how political figures and political parties justify their actions, and how voters validate their own choices. The authors categorise these actions, choices, attitudes, behaviours, postures, and political justifications by politicians and voters as political exercises in making moral claims. As a result, they argue, these clashing views come down to two competing beliefs: civic virtue (proper behaviour, rooted in good and participatory citizenship of which civil society and international organisations are the main sources); and patrimonial register (politicians' long-term personal or political ties).

The authors define civic virtue as the citizens' willingness to abide by the democratic norms, voter education programmes and rules prescribed by electoral officials and commissions. Patrimonial relationships, on the other hand, are those shaped by shared common identities such as political affiliations, individual relationships, ethnicity, community lineages, loyalty, and kinships. While the first is preoccupied with overall national interests and values, the authors claim that the latter is focused on self-interests – which in an electoral competition may lead to democratic malpractice.

In moral 'electoral' economies such as those described in Ghana, Kenya, and Uganda, the authors argue that there is a blurred line and competing visions between 'doing the right thing' and election 'malpractice', even if this means undermining the basic principles of democracy. However, the meaning of 'undermining' here is subject to people's own competing visions of what is right and what is wrong, that is to say their moral interpretation.

The work relies on surveys across Ghana, Kenya, and Uganda using in-depth qualitative research, laboratory games, and historical archives. Perhaps the most intriguing element of this study is the concept of political and moral virtuosity: politicians and voters depict themselves as virtuous people; voter manipulation may be justified as being virtuous; and vote-buying (disguised as personal assistance) may also be seen as virtuous. If each action and reaction can be justified and legitimised, the authors defend the notion that being perceived as a good leader or a good citizen is subject to complex moral interpretations.

Lastly, they argue, the moral authority often claimed in the form of patrimonial relationships by well-established politicians does not always translate into votes. In other words, despite being 'generous' where such an attitude is expected, the authors claim that candidates who spend the most do not always win.

Nonetheless, today as in colonial-era Africa, many political parties and those running for office have, for the sake of political expedience, kept alive a sense of patronage towards their citizens under the label of a patrimonial bond. Such a dynamic and hierarchical relationship between patron (the candidate) and client (the voter) has raised the question of whether it is morally justifiable to run and win elections, which are often perceived as being bought, manipulated, or rigged.

While most readers tend to be naive in hoping for an electoral process where civic virtue will offset all other shortcomings, Africa is not alone regarding the moral economy of the electoral process. In the most advanced democracies voters are also prone to different moral interpretations of the same set of choices, even when their politicians ignore, abuse, manipulate, or even transgress their national laws.

The claims of morality presented in *The Moral Economy of Elections in Africa* seem to resonate across different political systems as voters, election officials, politicians, civil societies, and international observers interact and weigh their interests. Cheeseman, Lynch, and Willis also recognise that elections have many political opportunists. However, contrary to the emphasis on patrimonial register, it is also important to acknowledge the economic and financial vulnerability of voters across the African continent. For instance, politicians in Ghana, Kenya, and Uganda do not necessarily want to patronise their people. Often, they have no other viable choice when seeking elected office. As one Ghanaian politician claimed, these are not just requests, they are demands from the voters (p. 1).

Regarding candidates' political generosity: while such patrimonial dependency may weaken their political accountability in the immediate future, in Africa the display of generosity and empathy is of extraordinary value to voters. These values may not necessarily be those that civil society and other supporters of democracy in the continent would hope for; but they are essential to politicians who want to portray themselves as good and sensible leaders deserving of public office.

In this comprehensive study of popular and institutional engagement with democracy in Ghana, Kenya, and Uganda, the authors suggest that Ghana represents a success story filled with virtue and where politicians are willing to accept electoral results as well as power alternance. Kenya they describe as characterised by a high incidence of patrimonial registers, offering a mix of ethnic politics and electoral violence. Lastly, they argue that Uganda is an example

of electoral authoritarianism, where virtue and patrimonial relations are in constant conflict.

Despite this work's resourcefulness and in-depth findings, the general reader may still be left with lingering questions. For instance, if electoral participation does not mean success, then how can we measure a successful election? And if moral neutrality is desired, but cannot be fully expected, then how can the voters be assured that civic ideas are not being undermined during an election? While trust in an electoral process is highly partisan and alternance in office is key to public confidence, should we assume that a successful election is necessarily won by someone other than the incumbent?

Finally, while offering experiences and general principles that can be applied to elections in many regions in Africa, Cheeseman, Lynch and Willis are not claiming any sense of electoral universalism across the continent.

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