

Doces, John A. *Political Violence: Colonization, Democracy and Conflict in the Developing World* . Northampton, MA, USA: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2024. x + 186 pages. Hardcover.

Political Violence: Colonization, Democracy and Conflict in the Developing World is the latest study of Sub-Saharan Africa by political scientist John A. Doces of Bucknell University. This book blends scholarship and field research and culminates with an analysis of election-related violence in eleven states.

Doces argues that the West unwisely imposed competitive elections on fractured and modernizing societies. He takes a skeptical view of the prospects for liberal democracy in Sub-Saharan Africa and recommends the West no longer meddle in such problems.

Initial chapters review the causes and consequences of violence in developing countries. The author acknowledges that global turmoil has declined and rejects the Garden of Eden fallacy whereby Sub-Saharan Africans lived in harmony until Europeans arrived. Nonetheless, Doces singles out Western states and donors as the driving forces behind elections and thus election violence. Unlike other studies of the developing world, his framework assumes the autonomy of politics and breaks from not just structural materialism, but scholarship that focuses on tribal and ethnic conflicts rather than the elections that give these conflicts an opening. Western imperialism and policies, moreover, owe as much to liberal ideology and national security as economic interests. Doces then discusses conceptual differences between *democracy* as a regime type and *democratization* as a volatile work-in-progress. Another problem is that election culture in Africa has become amoral, prone to violence, and bad for socioeconomic development. The heart of the book is Chapter 5, "The Evidence," which provides brief histories and analyses of Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Nigeria, Burundi, Uganda, Ethiopia, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Botswana, and South Africa. Original research includes graphs of incidents and fatalities since

1997 based on Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED), and opinion surveys from Uganda (2021), Côte d'Ivoire (2020), Senegal (2024), and Nigeria (2023).

The author's skepticism recalls the controversial landmark in comparative politics realism, Samuel Huntington's *Political Order in Changing Societies* (1968). Likewise, the warning that Western values are "unique, not universal" dates to at least a Huntington *Foreign Affairs* article from 1996. Mainstream political science, however, has undervalued Africa. Moreover, Doces' research is timely as Africa seems trapped in conflicts that again suggest the abilities of any state to gain legitimacy, govern effectively, and promote development are more fundamental than its regime type.¹ These problems resonate with a wide range of the social sciences.

The primary caveats to *Political Violence* involve the author's streamlined connection of African democracy to the West. Government and donor policies have varied historically by intentions, capabilities, and results, and cannot alone explain why African states continue to hold elections. In fact, the weaponization of the ballot described by Doces would seem to provide incentives for local actors to continue elections independently.

The strength and primary point of recommendation of the book is Chapter 5. Reliable data on political violence is difficult to obtain. The African states in question have the formal responsibility to collect and publish information that finds its way to media and organizations like ACLED, but these states may not always report complete or accurate statistics. The author therefore carefully describes ACLED for the reader and creates graphs that date to 1997, which stretches the time period and compensates for unreliable estimates from any particular year. Yet it is still hard to determine if a battle or fatality is strictly partisan or tied to other political violence or even crime. Doces' solution is to match spikes in violence to political events. Except

for Botswana, these spikes are often associated with elections. This method offers a more profound gauge of liberal democracy than advanced statistics or subjective ratings from organizations like Freedom House and Polity. Doces' survey team also finds elections are associated with higher stress levels and parochial identities.

Variations and trends among states are both compelling and theoretically important. Fatalities in Ghana and Zimbabwe did not exceed two hundred per election period, for example, while fatalities in Kenya often approached one thousand. No state that endures significant election-related deaths is a liberal democracy because the rule of law is demonstrably weak, and because such turmoil is usually the tip of a virtual iceberg comprised of corruption and dirty tricks. But such regimes are not authoritarian, since competitive elections determine who rules. Analysts must then consider if liberal democratization is underway or if a state, and other interested parties, must adapt to consistently illiberal democracy.

In conclusion, it is easy to recommend *Political Violence*. Doces' perspective and evidence make the book invaluable for social scientists interested in learning and teaching Sub-Saharan Africa or adapting his methods to other regions.

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¹ Gabriele Steinhäuser, Andrew Barnett, and Emma Brown, "Africa Has Entered a New Era of War," *Wall Street Journal*, 31 December 2024.