

BOOK REVIEW

Daniel Plaatjies, ed. *Making Institutions Work in South Africa*. Cape Town: Best Red, 2021. viii + 240 pp. Foreword. List of Tables and Figures. Index. \$32.00. Paper. ISBN: 978-1-928246-36-7.

Making Institutions Work in South Africa, edited by respected public servant and academic Daniel Plaatjies, comes out at a time when South Africa's political institutions are in decay. The contributors to this volume are oriented toward the tradition of neo-institutionalism. In this tradition, as summarized in Plaatjies' introductory chapter, institutions consist of rules, norms, and organizations that enable and shape collective action within and between states, markets, and societies. The strength and character of these institutions are seen as essential to the promotion of constitutional democracy, economic development, and social justice. Observers of contemporary South Africa will be aware of a seemingly inexorable surge of cases of institutional collapse. Against the tide, contributors to this volume set out to understand what is driving this process, why some institutions continue to work, and how others might be fixed.

The topic is as broad as that, and the contributions scatter across it. In Chapter Two, Erwin Schwella foregrounds the role of political leadership in promoting trust in public institutions. He traces past failures, considers present obstacles, and provides a model for future leaders who come forward to tackle this issue. In Chapter Three, Sean Dougherty, Andrea Renda, and Lisa von Trapp survey the proliferation of independent public advisory and oversight bodies across OECD countries, drawing lessons for South Africa. Luiz de Mello's Chapter Four uses data from the World Values Survey, Polity IV, and other sources to examine how attitudes to technocratic and democratic government are shaped by exposure to economic crises, technocratic governments, and democratic transitions.

The volume gains focus with Neva Seidman Makgetla's interesting Chapter Five. Makgetla presents a political economy of South Africa's institutional degeneration. Colonialism, apartheid, and democratization produced an especially sharp divide between those who hold political power in the state and those who wield economic power in the private sector. The turn to neoliberal state-building, which decentralized government functions,

multiplied autonomous agencies, and favored the elaboration of checks and balances across economy policy, further hampered the state's ability to coordinate economic change. In this context, state-led economic initiatives have been bogged down in conflict, institutional complexity has blurred lines of accountability and reduced transparency, and these developments have produced an efflorescence of corruption. Kenneth Creamer's complementary Chapter Six builds the case for social compacting between the state, business, and labor as part of the solution.

Chapter Seven marks a transition to studies of relatively strong and effective post-apartheid institutions. Steven Friedman considers South Africa's National Treasury, a keystone achievement of Makgetla's era of neoliberal state-building. Friedman argues that the Treasury's strength derives from its centrality in managing the country's integration into the global economy. In this role, pressures to perform are high, actions produce immediate and significant consequences in the form of market responses, and the institution is thereby insulated from political interference and corruption. These dynamics were dramatized in the later years of the Zuma presidency, when a series of political attacks on the Treasury's autonomy were repelled, including by the active efforts of critics of Treasury neoliberalism across South Africa's left-wing.

The judiciary is widely hailed as a more progressive post-apartheid accomplishment. As the broader state has deteriorated, the courts have only grown in stature and power, producing accusations of judicial overreach. Michael Cossor, Narnia Bohler-Muller, and Gary Pienaar shrug off those accusations in Chapter Eight, stressing instead the dangers of judicial underreach, and delineating the legitimate scope of judicial interventionism. In Chapter Nine, Jonathan Klaaren turns to the related, successful post-apartheid reform of Legal Aid South Africa. Showing how this reform drew on the growing political weight of the courts and the legal profession, Klaaren uses the case to develop a sociology of South African pockets of excellence. Mohamed Adam's Chapter Ten offers recommendations for how to rebuild corporate governance in South Africa's much maligned state-owned enterprises, especially the electricity utility, Eskom. Rachel Adams, Stephen Rule, and Temba Masilela use the final Chapter Eleven to trace the historical evolution of South African immigration policy.

Making Institutions Work in South Africa is a welcome attempt to comprehend the country's current institutional malaise. The volume is also notable for addressing the critical, understudied question of what accounts for variation in institutional performance across the South African state. It should be clear, however, from the summary above, that the volume's theoretical framework is so abstract as to lose focus on its subject matter. The chapters come together unsystematically and without rigorous comparative guidance and analysis, and they too often lack original empirical impetus. These are prominent limits of contemporary South African governance scholarship and, unfortunately, *Making Institutions Work* does not transcend them.

In the period since the manuscript was prepared, South Africa experienced the socio-economic fallout of COVID-19, a collapse of confidence in President Ramaphosa's ability to lead the ANC into reform, and a concomitant explosion of political gangsterism, racketeering, and other forms of unproductive economic predation. These developments put into question the legitimacy of the post-apartheid regime, the authority of the South African state, and the prospects for the country's economy. They erode the underlying assumption of "normal politics" that frames much of the volume, casting attention instead on the fundamentals of constitutional order, power concentration, and sovereign action.

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