

BOOK REVIEW

Rebecca Tapscott. *Arbitrary States: Social Control and Modern Authoritarianism in Museveni's Uganda*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. 256 pp. \$100. Cloth. ISBN: 9780198856474.

This book is an important read as it breaks down complex ways through which an African regime manages to control the populace. There is deliberate creation of an atmosphere in which citizens are denied a shared focus, ultimately undermining collective action and effective checks on state authorities. This is summed up well by the author: “the regime maintains control of its populace primarily by fostering an institutional environment that injects multiple kinds of uncertainty into civilian interactions with state authorities” (45).

Three key terms in the book are worth noting: modern authoritarianism, arbitrary governance, and institutionalized arbitrariness. Modern authoritarianism refers to “regimes that use rule of law-compliant reforms to undermine checks on executive power” (17). Arbitrary governance is a new form of modern authoritarianism that places emphasis on “weakening competition” rather than “maximizing control” (3). Institutionalized arbitrariness refers to the “state’s ability to reinforce its interventions with overwhelming and unaccountable violence, making it difficult for citizens and local authorities to calculate and assess the risks of possible intervention” (3). This leads to self-policing.

The book employs well-grounded discussions and literature to examine authoritarianism, not just using the African continent but also global examples. Several notions/concepts are also used and, even though these (such as those used in Chapter Seven) can seem too overwhelming for the reader to follow, they nevertheless contribute to grounding the work in wider discussions.

Use of local examples to demonstrate the concepts enriches the book and here reference is made to the case of Odera and his brother, as captured in Chapter One, which provides a perfect illustration of the dilemmas and contradictions citizens are confronted with and face daily. In Chapter Five, the use of a local vigilante group demonstrates how one outfit in multiple security outfits asserts jurisdictional claims, helping to illustrate institutional fragmentation/contestation over the use of state violence. Another example of the crime preventer program discussed in Chapter Six illustrates how the “loose and undefined mandate” (139) of a security outfit interplays with manipulation, fragmentation, competition, dismissal, and unfulfilled promises, ultimately yielding allegiance to the regime and not to the outfit’s members—“as a result, crime preventers allied themselves with the regime, not with each other” (148). The crime preventer program was thus opportunistically exploited to the regime’s advantage without threatening the regime.

Even though Tapscott's focus on security outfits (including vigilante groups) is commendable, the reader is left wondering how a book examining the weakening of competition ignores other forms of political manipulation such as the co-optation of the opposition, a clear trend in Ugandan politics. Could this be explained by the focus on security and/or policing? A discussion on this would fit into what Tapscott clearly shows as an unpredictable governance model that does not necessarily entail outright crushing of the opposition through strategies such as destabilization, fragmentation, and dilution.

Having highlighted some of the book's strengths, it is worth noting some areas that could have been improved. Notably, Chapters Five, Two, and specifically Seven are unnecessarily long. Also, some statements either needed to be fact-checked or clarified. For example, there is a reference to Milton Obote's first tenure as 1966–1971 (48) and government security blocking the "Kabaka from travelling within the kingdom" (56), a description of the title of DPC as district police commissioner (87), and writing that Mbarara is Museveni's home district whereas in fact he comes from the nearby district of Kiruhura. Thus, some assertions lack precision.

There are also sentences that read like sweeping statements. For example, "Ugandans broadly described the state as unpredictable and volatile" (18), "many ordinary civilians reported that they have difficulty navigating the state's governing system" (42), "a wide cross-section of Ugandans adamantly expressed the belief ..." (43), "several alleged that the military has been responsible for voting fraud in the past" (134). On page 168, the author makes reference to government authorities redistributing weapons confiscated through state disarmament to new recruits into state-backed militias. Although it is not my intention to refute this statement, it would have been good for the author to note, even if briefly, that the state has also publicly destroyed huge quantities of guns from disarmament. In other words, some passages could have been more nuanced at sentence level.

Overall, this is an important contribution to the study of forms of authoritarianism that goes beyond mere categorization of Uganda as a hybrid and competitive authoritarian regime. The last chapter (Chapter Eight) attempts to expand the notion of arbitrary governance beyond Uganda to cover other countries with a few historical similarities: Rwanda, Ethiopia, and Zimbabwe. The number of interviews conducted is impressive, the various quotes and vignettes add empirical gravitas, and the selection of case studies that go beyond northern Uganda to cover Mbarara (western), Soroti (eastern), and Moroto (north-eastern) gives the reader a feel of countrywide representation. Citizens in the various case studies experience arbitrary governance, even though variations exist according to a range of factors.

Ivan Ashaba 

Institute of Development Policy, University of Antwerp, Belgium

Ivan.Ashaba@uantwerpen.be

doi:10.1017/asr.2024.49