

# BOOK REVIEW

**Carl A. LeVan. *Dictators and Democracy in African Development: The Political Economy of Good Governance in Nigeria*.** New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018. xix + 282 pp. Appendix. Bibliography. Index. \$76.00. Cloth. ISBN: 978-1-107-08114-7.

In *Dictators and Democracy in African Development: The Political Economy of Good Governance in Nigeria*, Carl A. LeVan seeks to provide an answer to the question: “How does the distribution of political authority affect the Nigerian government’s ability to formulate and deliver policies conducive to development?” (3). Rather than refer to the standard set of factors typically used to explicate Nigeria’s underperformance, such as the colonial legacy, ethnic diversity, foreign debt, poor leadership, and the negative effects of a strong oil economy, LeVan refutes these orthodox explanations. He argues, instead, that “the key factor is not simply the status of the regime as a dictatorship or a democracy, but rather the structure of the policy-making process by which different policy demands are included or excluded” (4). Specifically, LeVan proposes that Nigeria’s governance performance has been weakened by the dominance of “veto players”—a concept he takes from George Tsebelis—who can obstruct policy reform and negotiate concessions.

In proposing the “veto players” theory as an alternative narrative, LeVan draws from a variety of sources—including government documents, interviews, and newspapers—which he collected in Nigeria between 2003 and 2007. Using primarily a mixed-methods approach that encompasses an analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data of Nigeria’s post-independence history, and drawing from the author’s knowledge of Nigerian history, he determines the number of “veto players” in each year since independence in 1960 until 2007 and arrives at the conclusion that “conditions conducive for delivery of national collective goods are different from the conditions necessary to limit excess spending on local collective goods” (212). In other words, while a rise in the number of “veto players” reduces political corruption, this very same rise can impair decision-making at the national level and undermine policymakers’ ability to procure national public goods.

One of the book’s primary strengths is its skillful explication of the notion of “veto players” and its application of this concept to Nigerian history in particular. In an effort to liberate “the ‘veto’ from its association with

presidentialism and American politics” (4, 214), the author argues that in the case of Nigeria, veto powers can be embedded in various institutions, “such as the legislatures or military ruling councils, or they can emerge from alternative centres of power manifest in military factions, cohesive political parties or even broad regional coalitions” (3). This observation is important for underscoring how informal institutions (37) shape government performance, as opposed to focusing on formal institutions. Another strength of the book is its deployment of the number of “veto players” as a key independent variable, as this allows for the production of significant and convincing results that make the theory relevant to Nigeria in particular. That is, the fact that the number of “veto players” can have such an impact on development outcomes is strong evidence that LeVan’s theory has some comparative validity. The conclusion is that Nigeria possesses a “Madisonian dilemma” (29, 123), in that the conditions that promote coordination challenges at the same time encourage accountability. This astute observation has important consequences for scholars and students of international politics, governance, conflict resolution, African comparative politics, and leaders and policymakers, who are in constant search for theories that broaden their understanding of how and under what conditions such trade-offs come to be prominent and allow them to design institutions that lessen them respectively.

While the book does well to demonstrate the comparative value of LeVan’s model, his failure to fully extend or validate the “veto players” theory in Ghana and Zimbabwe as deeply as he does for Nigeria renders the concept limited in its capacity to truly to speak to “African development” broadly. To that end, it would have been interesting, for example, for LeVan to further contextualize the impact of this theory by juxtaposing it with prevailing notions of government performance in order to provide a stronger basis for his conclusions. Furthermore, LeVan focuses exclusively on the effects of his “veto players” theory to the total exclusion of other related factors, which he dismisses as inadequate. Indeed, it would have been interesting to correlate the “veto players” theory with other factors as a way of determining whether there are better or worse conditions influencing the effective emergence of “veto players” in Africa.

However, the more problematic aspect of the book is the lack of engagement with an explication of what constitutes “good governance.” Many African scholars and Africanists elsewhere have questioned the assumptions underlying the methods and concepts used to engage with this notion of “good governance” by western scholars and performance analysts (Abrahamsen, *Disciplining Democracy: Development Discourse and Good Governance in Africa* [Zed Books, 2000]; Adetula, “Measuring democracy and ‘good governance’ in Africa: A critique of assumptions and methods” in *Africa In Focus: Governance in the 21st Century* [HSRSC, 2011]; Kjaer, “From ‘Good’ to ‘Growth-Enhancing’ Governance: Emerging Research Agendas on Africa’s Political-Economy” in *Governance in Africa* [Ubiquity, 2007]; Mkandawire, “‘Good governance’: the itinerary of an idea” in *Development in*

*Practice*, 17:4–5, 679–81, 2007). Moreover, LeVan's book contributes further in this case to the assumption that development is a linear trajectory that just needs the right mechanisms to be in place in order to ensure success. Although on the basis of reading the book I would wager that this is not LeVan's aim, but the lack of an engagement with the underbelly of governance scholarship in Africa leaves very little room for such good faith. The above notwithstanding, LeVan has written an analytically and conceptually interesting book for African governance theory.

Siphiwe I. Dube  
University of the Witwatersrand  
Johannesburg, South Africa  
siphiwe.dube@wits.ac.za

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### For more reading on this subject, see:

- Hyden, Goran. 2016. "Beyond the Liberal Democracy Paradigm: A Fresh Look at Power and Institutions." *African Studies Review* 59 (3): 169–80. doi:10.1017/asr.2016.121.
- Thurston, Alexander 2018. "The Politics of Technocracy in Fourth Republic Nigeria." *African Studies Review* 61 (1): 215–38. doi:10.1017/asr.2017.99.
- Ukaegbu, Chikwendu Christian. 1997. "Indiscipline in Nigeria: Causes, Patterns, Interventions and Implications for National Development." *Issue: A Journal of Opinion* 25 (1): 63–67. doi:10.1017/S1548450500005357.