



NAVARRA CENTER
FOR **INTERNATIONAL**
DEVELOPMENT

VOTING WITH MORALITY IN AFRICA

THE MORAL ECONOMY OF ELECTIONS IN AFRICA

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BOOK REVIEW BY
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Imagine that you are right now in front of a ballot box ready to place your vote. What has made you chose this party, this candidate? You are free to choose how to make your vote, but there are a number of factors that influence your final decision. It may be that you choose a candidate because his values are close to yours, because you believe that he will develop your country better or simply because he is from your kin, speaks your language and you believe that he will better defend the interests of your community.

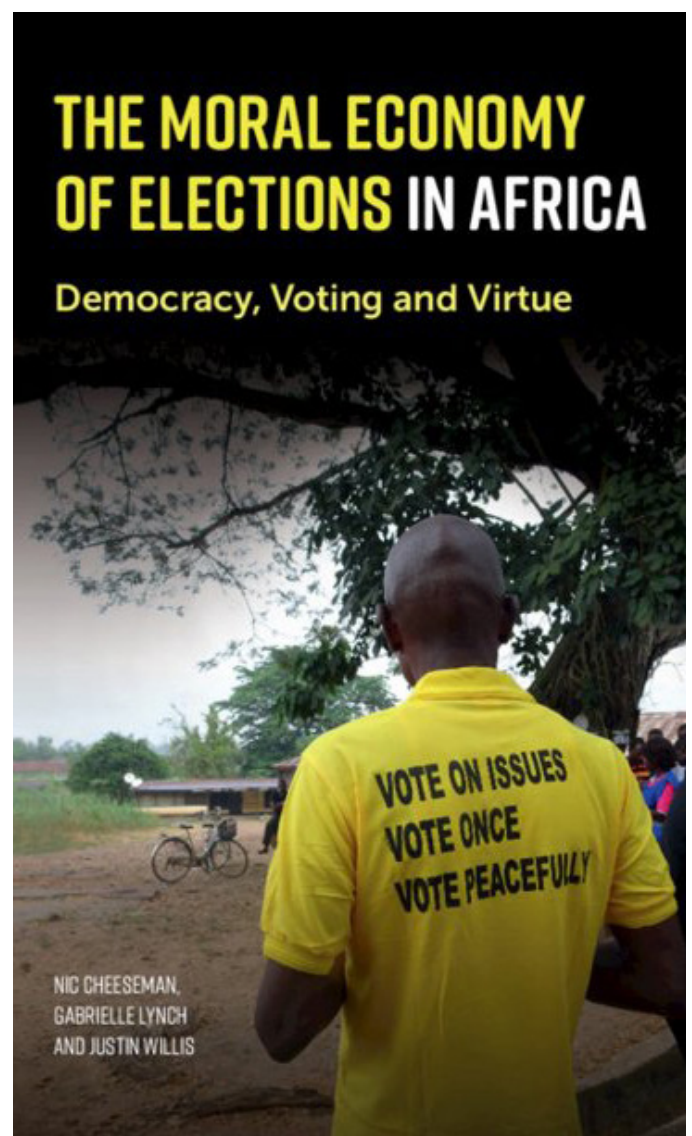
In Sub-Saharan Africa, all this occurs in a context of relatively young states in which national identity is fragmented between historically differentiated communities which were only united after europeans traced down some lines at the Berlin Conference. In many African countries, voting also occurs under a dictatorship where the level playing field is not balanced and in which elections will hardly change the situation. All mixed with a background presence of international observers, members of civil society and electoral institutions that try to educate citizens in democracy.

It is easy to then think: why should there be elections if they do not generate change? Despite all the problems associated with them in Sub-Saharan countries, the book *The Moral Economy of Elections in Africa* convinces the reader that elections are necessary in for state building. It does so with an empirical approach, based on field work with own surveys done by three British researchers who have a wide experience in the study of African politics, combining for more than fifteen books and around a hundred papers in scientific journals: Nic Cheeseman (University of Birmingham) Gabrielle Lynch (University of Warwick) and Justin Willis (University of Durham).

In this project they analyze the electoral history of Ghana, Kenya and Uganda, three countries with a British colonial past and a similar electoral system, to discover how citizens behave when faced with the vote. The book has its greatest value in its innovative question, which looks beyond the results of elections and seeks to investigate the process, es-

pecially in the relationships between the actors that are part of it and how each voter decides what it is right and wrong when it comes to voting.

On one of their field trips, a series of young Ugandans admit that they have voted on more than one occasion, using the name of a friend who was not in his hometown and could not go to vote. “We did it to kick Museveni”, they justify. Yoweri Museveni is the dictator who has ruled Uganda



since 1986. More than two-thirds of Ugandans know of no other president in a country with a median age of less than 17 years.

On another interview, a woman asks a candidate for MP to finance the school of her children: “When they see me, they only ask for money,” he says. In many African countries, the lack of strong institutions that guarantee basic services leads many politicians to finance the development of their districts out of their own pockets. What in the West could be seen as a clear case of corruption, in Africa it is not seen as such. After all, is it immoral to require public servants to take care of their citizens when the state does not?

The authors identify two main registers when casting a vote in sub-Saharan Africa: civic and patrimonial. The first would be an exemplary behaviour in a Western ideal: a free citizen who casts his vote without external pressure, who is informed and independent. The second version is in which African countries are usually placed in, an ethnic vote in which politicians buy votes from citizens.

Through surveys and personal interviews, the authors show that Kenyan, Ghanaian and Ugandan citizens are aware of their own actions and criticise international observers for coming to educate on what is right and what is wrong. They argue that an African citizen may know that it is not right to receive a campaign payment and at the same time accept it, just as an observer may know that an election has been fraudulent and give it as good, despite losing credibility. In both cases, other relevant factors are balanced in: the voter may need money to send his son to the doctor, while the international community may prefer to accept a dictator before causing possible post-electoral violence that could descend a country into instability.

The Moral Economy of Elections in Africa is a book that shows that considering elections only by their final result is a huge mistake. Each electoral cycle shows the dynamism of African societies and the recognition of an individual as a citizen who is an active part of the State. These pages make

you realise that the advancement of democracy in Africa will not come with a victory of a Western bureaucrat-style of elections with impartial citizens, but rather with a balance between the formal, transparent and free processes needed and the identity attachments and tensions that turn people into political beings.

This reading will help the reader to set aside the condescending Western view which catalogues African votes merely as tribal by showing that there are different legitimate factors that come together in elections. As the authors mention in the conclusion, the exacerbation of ethnic identity attributed to elections in Sub-Saharan Africa differs little from the racial voting pattern in the United States, the regionalist parties in Italy, or the separatist movements in Spain. In the end, we are not so different.

INFORMATION

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