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Review


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The contributors to this volume highlight political issues and processes in parts of Southern Africa since the end of white-minority and colonial rule. Most focus particular attention on the post-independence records of governance of the Namibian and Zimbabwean liberation movements. They tend to argue that, recast as political parties, ZANU PF and SWAPO have since independence sought an overwhelming if not monopoly predominance in both the political arena as well as within state and parastatal structures. They argue too, that they have largely prevailed while also securing the capacity to shape public political discourses to suit their ends.

In the process of the above, the contributors argue, ZANU PF in particular and SWAPO have developed into authoritarian and corrupt regimes of varying degrees of repression. By contrast, it is noted that the ruling groups in Botswana and Lesotho, which attained independence by negotiation and without mass mobilisation, have developed into multiparty democracies. The contributors are particularly interested in why this has happened, why did SWAPO and ZANU PF deviate from their originally-declared democratic aims, as well as largely abandoning their goal of socio-economic transformation. The authors argue that this has stemmed in part from the fact that while these organisations were waging war on systems of institutionalised injustice, they did not themselves always display a sensitivity to human rights issues and democratic values. Nor did it prevent them from falling prey to authoritarian patterns of rule and undemocratic practices towards real or imagined dissidents within their ranks.
The main argument of the contributors is that the political change that has occurred in those Southern African states shaped by settler colonialism should be characterised as a transition from controlled change to changed control. A new political elite has ascended the commanding heights and, employing selective narratives and memories relating to their liberation wars, has constructed a new set of traditions to establish an exclusive post-colonial legitimacy under the sole authority of one particular agency of social forces.

Mystification of the liberators has played an essential role in this fabrication. What these elites have also done is to develop militant notions of inclusion or exclusion as key factors in shaping their post-colonial national identities. The boundaries between party and government have been blurred and replaced by a growing equation of party and government. Opposition or dissent has sometimes been branded ‘an enemy of the people’.

Coinciding with this tendency to autocratic rule and the subordination of the state to the party, a reward system of social and material favours in return for loyalty has emerged. Self-enrichment by way of a system of rent- or sinecure-capitalism has become the order of the day. The term ‘national interest’ has been appropriated and now means solely what the post-colonial ruling elite decides that it means. It is used to justify all kinds of authoritarian practices while the terms ‘anti-colonial’ or ‘unpatriotic’ are applied to any group that resists the power of the ruling elite of the day. These selective mechanisms for the exercise and retention of post-colonial independence power are not too dissimilar from the commandist notions that operated during the days of the liberation struggle in exile. For the essayists in this book, the ruling elites of Southern Africa have shown that their chief concerns are with self-interest and retention of power and that constitutionalism counts for little.

This book is an important contribution to an overdue debate. It serves as a point of departure for evaluating the actions of two of the premier liberation movements in this region and of their ruling elites in the post-colonial era. Both Zimbabwe and Namibia and, to a certain extent, other governments in the region like Swaziland and Angola claim to be the fathers of democracy and the liberation struggle. They claim to be democratic yet their actions reflect authoritarianism. They are nepotic, corrupt, politically intolerant, and unaccountable, violate human rights and, more often, dominate and dictate the constitutional institutions supporting democracy.
I think Melber is correct to argue that ‘there remains much in the way of unfinished business in regard to consolidating democracy in post-colonial Southern Africa’ (2003:xx). For Melber this applies not only to the political process but also to our analytic understanding of the dynamics of the process. I think the essays represent a start to a grappling of the issues in Southern African states. They form the foundation on which future evaluations and assessments of Southern African liberation movements of the past, of today, and of tomorrow can be built, and towards consideration of whether they represent the designated aims of democracy and its institutions. Recognition that the model of liberation democracy as developed in Namibia and Zimbabwe is inherently elitist and potentially authoritarian is a significant step forward in the debate. Such a debate needs be taken on and developed further.