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## Review of Authoritarian Africa: Repression, Resistance, and the Power of Ideas

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***Authoritarian Africa: Repression, Resistance, and the Power of Ideas.* Nic Cheeseman and Jonathan Fisher. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Paper, 144 pp. ISBN 9780190279653.**

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In the early 1990s, one of the international journalists working out of Chester House in Nairobi, Kenya, had a large poster showing the heads of state of each African country. Each time an authoritarian leader was forced out of office by one means or another, he drew a big X over their photo. The Xs became more and more numerous.

Today, some three decades later, on the annual maps of Africa by Freedom House, only a handful of countries are listed as ‘free.’ In their excellent book, *Authoritarian Africa: Repression, Resistance, and the Power of Ideas*, Nic Cheeseman and Jonathan Fisher write (p. 120), “there is nothing inevitable about the rise of democracy.” They add an even more pessimistic note (p. 109): “the continent’s future is likely to see a continuation of the struggles of the past thirty years.

The struggles today, as they have always been, are not only about the type of regime. They are about having enough food to feed a family, clean drinking water, education for children, and safety. For millions of Africans, life has improved over the past several decades. Yet high levels of unemployment and poverty, continue, the authors note. Support for democracy remains overwhelming, with an eye to a better life, they point out, citing surveys by Afrobarometer.

So why have civilians generally shown popular support for the military in three coups in the past two years in West Africa: Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea? In all three countries, military interventions came not as a surprise but on the back of long-ignored systemic failures and growing societal discontent. And it could signal a trend. “Citizens in Mali, Burkina Faso and Guinea are punishing corrupt political elites who have long ruled their countries by ascribing legitimacy to military juntas” (Aina & Al-bakri Nyei, 2022).

The greater part of Cheeseman and Fisher’ book is focused on the history of authoritarianism in sub-Saharan Africa, starting with the colonial legacy and the suppression of democracy in the early years of independence. They highlight such repression by authoritarian leaders including in Kenya, where pro-democracy advocates were sometimes met with imprisonment and torture. They examine the role of natural resources wealth and how such wealth worked to strengthen authoritarian rule where it raised standards of living and tended to fail where it did not.

In one chapter, the authors focus on the role of international aid. Though China is mentioned, its role is not developed in detail, despite China’s major investment in many African countries, surpassing that of the West (p. 127) and China’s lack of concern about human rights in client nations. (Other authors have raised concerns that China’s growing influence, not only in Africa but other regions, can lead to undue political influence on the recipient nations.) Cheeseman and Fisher note that the relationship of African authoritarian leaders with foreign donors has been a “double-edged sword” (p. 79). It has helped prop up some authoritarian regimes; but it has proved to be inconsistent and undermines them when it ends. Meanwhile western donors such as the US have “lost the urge to advocate for democracy in Africa” (p. 127).

The authors' study concludes with a slightly more optimistic outlook than their otherwise pessimistic overview and evidence would indicate. They note the often-cited material progress in Africa in recent decades in terms of education, health, the spread of mobile phone usage and access to information. They cite "the potential for urbanization and the expansion of the middle class to generate more economically dependent and politically critical citizens" (p. 129). But no study can cover all bases. A close-up study of Kenya, for example, would show that the middle class demonstrates little interest in expanding democratic freedoms and more interest in hanging on to what they have.

This study lacks the freshness of on-the-ground interviews and offers little up-close sense of the strength of pro-democracy movements or insights into military strategies. But it provides a professionally solid look at the interplay between authoritarianism and democratic forces in Africa, past and present, and leaves open the question of which side, if either, will prevail.

### **Reference**

Aina, F. & Al-bakri Nyei, I. (2022). Why have civilians welcomed the recent coups in West Africa? Aljazeera <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2022/2/11/why-have-civilians-welcomed-the-recent-coups-in-west-africa>