

Reviews of books

Sara Rich Dorman, *Understanding Zimbabwe: from liberation to authoritarianism*. London: Hurst Publishers (hb £65 – 978 1 84904 582 7; pb £17.99 – 978 1 84904 583 4). 2016, vii + 347 pp.

In *Understanding Zimbabwe*, Sara Rich Dorman has written an extremely important and historically grounded investigative monograph on Zimbabwe's contemporary politics. Other reviewers of this book have already noted that Dorman's book goes beyond familiar explanations of African authoritarianism. Rather, Dorman unpacks the complex roots of authoritarianism and does not seek to promote the narrative of Zimbabwe's exceptionalism.

The goal of this book is to provide historical context to Zimbabwe's modern political successes, failures and challenges. As with any book that seeks to explain a country's politics in its entirety, Dorman's book faces its own challenges. Dorman introduces us to important historical turning points such as the early split in ZANU prior to independence but does not go into greater detail on the nuances of the leadership crisis that continues to haunt Zimbabwe's modern politics to this day. The book only gives cursory attention to Zimbabwe's relationship with Great Britain but Zimbabwean contemporary politics will forever be shaped by the country's colonial legacy. For example, the British response to Zimbabwe's request for land reparations significantly strained relations between the two countries. That said, the greatest strength of this book is Dorman's exploration and subsequent explanation of Zimbabwe's understudied urban politics. Sara Dorman has provided future scholars with an important base on which to work.

The majority of scholarly analysis on contemporary Zimbabwean politics tends to focus narrowly on the important and yet dysfunctional relationship between ZANU-PF and rural voters. In this book, Dorman brings to the fore the intricate dynamics of early urban politics that eventually led to the formation of Zimbabwe's most viable opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in the late 1990s. Dorman traces urban politics back to the 1940s and suggests that, while urban workers had been the pioneers of nationalist movements, the move from urban to rural areas by the struggle for practical reasons diminished urban participation. Unlike in rural areas, where the nationalist message easily unified voters, in urban areas ideological and personality struggles weakened the movement. As she does throughout the book, Dorman is meticulous in drawing evidence from historical and political analysis from the pre-independence time period. This book suggests that urban expansion increased the complexity of urban politics. The result was that no single party was ever able to fully dominate the urban political space before or after independence.

Dorman does an excellent job of providing context to the 1983 Ghukurahundi massacre as a result of ZANU-PF's struggle and failure to create a more united and inclusive rainbow nation. ZANU-PF's failed attempts in the 1980s to build a broad-based coalition of peasants, workers, businesses, churches and others resulted in bad policies that were neither fully socialist nor capitalist. By the 1990s, the ZANU-PF government had failed to fully include, serve or satisfy any single constituency. As the government recognized its failures and both urban and rural voters began to raise their complaints, the government defaulted to the politics of exclusion.

Students of contemporary Zimbabwean politics and African politics more broadly will appreciate Dorman's detailed exploration of the urban frustration

of the 1990s. In the section on politics of durability, Dorman goes into great detail on both the formation of organizations that enabled ZANU-PF to hold on to power and the emergence of new organizations that would eventually challenge that durability. Dorman's analysis argues that urban professionals did not begin their activism in the late post-1999 era, as suggested by most scholars, but rather that trade unions and other civil organizations formed in response to demands by ordinary citizens immediately after independence.

In writing about the Zimbabwean economic crisis, scholars often point to the 1997 war veterans' payouts as the critical point that sparked the country's economic woes. Dorman gives important context to the challenges faced by war veterans and the formation of organizations that advocated against corruption. This historical context is particularly important as more time passes since independence and the liberation struggle. Dorman goes into greater detail on the issues that resulted in the prevailing toxic relationship between war veterans and the government. ZANU-PF's push for land reform was not motivated by the need to provide for war veterans; instead, the party recognized that its position of power in both urban and rural constituencies had weakened. And thus land reform is about the politics of party durability. From 1980 until the mid-1990s, the major democratic institutions, such as courts and civil society, operated with relative freedom, but as ZANU-PF sensed that it was losing control, its nationalistic politics became more extreme and violent. Finally, scholars of African feminism will appreciate Dorman's in-depth exploration of the central role that women such as Margret Dongo continue to play in shaping Zimbabwe's contemporary politics.

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Charles Laurie, *The Land Reform Deception: political opportunism in Zimbabwe's land seizure era*. New York NY: Oxford University Press (hb US\$105/£75 – 978 0 19 939829 4; pb US\$36.95/£26.49 – 978 0 19 068052 7). 2016, 398 pp.

In *The Land Reform Deception*, Charles Laurie debates the impact and authenticity of the Zimbabwean land seizures that took place between 2000 and 2008. Laurie argues that Mugabe was a reluctant champion of the seizures, that his hand was forced by the war veterans (Chapter 2), and that he had to respond to the emergence and rising support for the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) (Chapter 3). In this respect, Laurie argues that rhetoric around the redress of historical land imbalances was a deceptive red herring, which the ruling party (ZANU-PF) was forced to embrace on a scale it had not anticipated.

Laurie concludes that the Mugabe government did not premeditate Zimbabwe's land seizures, and initially allowed them on only a small scale (five farms per district) to placate the wishes of the liberation war veterans, before eventually capitulating to them. According to Laurie, ZANU-PF's intentions had been: to disrupt the MDC's organization in rural areas; to sanction farmers and their workers, signalling the consequences of supporting the opposition (p. 284); and to make the international community aware of the consequences of not financing land reform. Laurie argues that Mugabe foresaw the debilitating economic effects of disorganized land reform on a large scale and initially opposed the seizures, but