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SCHOLARLY REVIEW ESSAY

Electoral Politics and Struggles for Accountability

Noah L. Nathan. ***Electoral Politics and Africa's Urban Transition: Class and Ethnicity in Ghana***. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. 364 pp. $34.99. Paper. ISBN: 978-1108468183.

Wale Adebanwi and Rogers Orock, eds. ***Elites and the Politics of Accountability in Africa***. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021. xii + 385 pp. Index. £31.95. Paper. ISBN: 978-0-472-05481-7.

This review essay focuses on electoral politics and the African accountability struggle, which has gained interest and scholarly attention following the third wave of democratization. Before the Namibia Constituent Assembly elections in November 1989, many would agree that elections were neither acknowledged nor considered appropriate for selecting governmental and national leaders. However, the democratic wave in the early 1990s marked a substantial political shift in Africa. Elections, once rare, are now frequent, serving as a crucial tool for both development and accountability. In this new era, citizens have a rare opportunity to hold their leaders accountable and exert control over their behavior. This review specifically addresses two volumes: *Electoral Politics and Africa's Urban Transition: Class and Ethnicity in Ghana* by Noah L. Nathan and *Elites and the Politics of Accountability in Africa,* edited by Wale Adebanwi and Rogers Orock. Specifically, these volumes delve into topics concerning electoral politics and Africa's challenges in achieving accountability.

However, before exploring the specific accountability issues discussed in the reviewed volumes, examining the meaning of accountability and its connection to electoral politics is essential. Accountability has become a widely used term, especially in the last decade, popularized by financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In the liberal context of democratic, electoral, and multiparty politics, accountability implies a connection between those in positions of power and the citizens to whom they are responsible (Orock & Adebanwi 2021:8–11). This implies that accountability can be viewed as a relationship in which agents (such as political leaders or elites) must explain and justify their conduct to principals, in this case, the citizens or civil society. Specifically, the expectation is that citizens can compel officials or elites to be responsive toward governmental power, public expenditure, and/or popular needs, especially those relating to economic issues. Still, this raises the question of how this works. The books reviewed here both explore the

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issue of accountability in Africa. The contribution of each to this discussion differs by approach, outcomes, and geographical coverage (one deals with a single country, while the other deals with single cases from different regions across the continent, albeit providing cross-country/regional comparison in some instances). Still, all are concerned with electoral politics and the struggle for accountability in Africa.

Nathan's book lays the foundation for understanding the intricate nature of electoral politics and the demand for accountability in Africa amid the continent's rapid urbanization and transition. Nathan examines the intersection of class and ethnicity in urban Ghana, Greater Accra. His book adopts an approachable style, blending theory with extensive data analyses. Nathan's compelling argument and findings hold significance, attracting the attention both of those interested in African urban growth and political dynamics and of those interested in understanding their connection to electoral and democratic competition and political accountability. The book's central argument is that rapid urbanization and growth in the urban population in sub-Saharan Africa should spark a demand for political change and greater accountability. Working with an original survey conducted with residents of Greater Ghana and various data sources (such as interviews with parliamentary candidates/local leaders and party manifestos), Nathan set about interrogating a number of relevant issues and demonstrating several important points. First, we learn that members of the middle class have different preferences (notably, they are prone to demand programmatic policies) than the poor, generally placing different demands on their elected leaders. The question then arises: how does this impact accountability? This could significantly impact political accountability, as politicians would likely realize that retaining political power hinges on their performance, particularly in meeting the programmatic demands of middle-class voters. Instead, as Nathan shows, the rise in urban population and middle class and their demand for programmatic goods has not been accompanied by the greater accountability one would have expected.

This finding has huge implications for electoral competition and the need for greater accountability. As Nathan demonstrates, in Greater Accra, members of the middle class are more likely to opt out from the electoral process, not only because politicians do not meet their demand for programmatic goods but also because they are less likely to be mobilized to participate. In context, electoral competition remains dominated by the voters who are most susceptible to patronage-based appeals and, therefore, helps perpetuate incentives for politicians to under-supply policy-based competition relative to the demand for it in the population (106). In sum, the demand for programmatic goods by many middle-class voters in Greater Accra is not creating a shift toward programmatic competition or greater accountability. Instead, politicians tend to ignore middle-class voters during their campaigns and concentrate more on the poor. While I admit that much of Nathan's thesis constitutes a contemporary revival of the political effects of the growing middle class in Africa and the transformation that is supposed to follow through, Nathan still does something that previous studies did not, which is to take account of intra-urban variation that has often been ignored. Among the more striking findings, he claims that in some

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neighborhoods ethnicity and vote choice are essentially uncorrelated, such that knowing the voter's ethnicity provides little information about how she is likely to vote (150). The neighborhood variation in ethnicity voting that existing theories of voting behavior cannot account for is a surprise.

However, in trying to evaluate these claims amid the plethora of fascinating results, one might wonder at the preference and measurement of the middle class based on education and occupation, since the measurement, as Nathan suggests, mainly distinguishes between poor and non-poor. In this line, one wonders why not use an alternative measure, such as material wealth, which measures how often people go without necessities such as food, income, fuel, water, and medical care. Using socioeconomic status measured by material wealth would have been an appropriate indicator of the middle class, as it would have captured both objective material resources, particularly income, and a broader, subjective perception of well-being. Similarly, Nathan's measure of class using housing assets (meeting minimum standards such as electricity, running water, and flush toilets) also ignores the fact that in most African societies, especially in Ghana, it is not uncommon for individuals across the continent to profit from the traditional ties of family, kinship, and community, which have often been assumed to provide individuals with resources, thereby protecting people from lapsing into poverty. For instance, due to the flow of remittances, it is possible to find people living in better housing conditions, which might not be directly linked to their level of education, employment, or occupational status. This remittance might increase individual income and reduce dependence on the government for material prosperity, while it might equally increase or improve the living conditions and/or housing conditions of the recipients. Even so, the overall consistency in the direction of findings leaves little room for doubt about the nature of politicians' class, ethnicity, and electoral strategies and the struggle for accountability.

Moving away from Nathan's work, which focuses on the case of a single country, and following the consolidation of institutional and behavioral patterns resulting from almost three decades of experience with electoral politics across most African countries, the demand for accountability is strong and expected. As previously mentioned, not only are competitive elections considered necessary for keeping political leaders in line, but they also create a relationship of formal accountability between leaders, elites, ordinary citizens, and civil society organizations. Therefore, it is crucial to comprehend the intricate connection between electoral politics and accountability among elites, citizens, and civil society organizations, not only within individual African countries but also across the continent as a whole. *Elites and the Politics of Accountability in Africa*, edited by Adebanwi and Orock, successfully achieves this objective. This volume focuses on the pivotal role of elites and accountability and the implication for state-society relations in Africa. Specifically, drawing on historical and more recent examples, this volume not only illustrates citizens' collective aspiration and struggle for accountability but also throws light on how different societal actors (citizens and civil society) interact with African ruling elites from whom they expect some degree of political as well as economic accountability.

This volume draws on case studies from ten countries in Central, East, North, Southern, and West Africa and the Indian Ocean and is structured in four parts.

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The initial five chapters, by Danny Hoffman, Yasmine Berriane, Anja Osie, Alex K. D. Frempong and Emmanuel K. Siaw, and Michael C. Lambert, address interrelated issues spanning from the predominance of men in elite formation to the increasing presence of women in elected representative and legislative bodies. These chapters also explore how political elites engage with other elites, such as those in business, culture, civil society, and the military. These chapters highlight the intricate relationships among the economic elite, the masses, and the political elite across various elite formations.

Next, in Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight, authors Roger Southall, Timothy Gibbs, and Ramola Ramtohul and Roukaya Kasenally concentrate on the intersections of elites, race, and class. These chapters explore the connections between race and inequality and their manifestations in accountability discourses. Additionally, the chapters delve into the aspect of class, examining its role in determining who gains access to political power and other privileges.

Chapters Nine, Ten, and Eleven by Rogers Orock, Godwin Onuoha, and Wale Adebanwi concentrate on two distinct yet comparable countries, Nigeria and Cameroon. These chapters examine the impact of ethnoregional competition, particularly the power struggles among political elites, in relation to the pursuit of accountability by the masses in Africa. This dynamic often escalates into violence. Finally, Chapters Twelve and Thirteen by Naomi Pendle and Jennifer Pekkinen center on the cases of Sudan and South Sudan, both post-conflict nations. These chapters scrutinize how elites can employ violence to either ensure or disregard accountability.

There is much to appreciate in the collective efforts of the various authors in this edited volume to enhance our understanding of how accountability is manifested in diverse African contexts. However, a few caveats deserve mention. First, there is a lack of clarity and justification for the selection of cases that the authors in the volume choose to focus on. While this doesn't detract from the central theme and argument of this much-needed book, some justification and thoughtful consideration for the African countries that constitute the primary focus of the volume would have been beneficial. Were there normative or theoretical justifications for selecting these cases? Indeed, a thorough discussion of the rationale behind the selection of cases would have been relevant. This discussion could provide insights into the extent to which the results and findings can be extrapolated to other African countries that were not the primary focus of the volume. Second, while acknowledging the efforts made to identify various types of elites, especially recognizing the importance of business elites and their relationship to accountability in diverse contexts, a significant question arises. For those familiar with the continent, it prompts a nuanced discussion on whether political elites significantly differ from economic or business elites and how this distinction relates to the demand and struggle for accountability. Finally, I would have liked to see the volume conclude by combining the findings of all the chapters in a comprehensive synthesis. For instance, most chapters underscore the need to enhance accountability across the African region. How can this be achieved in the current context, where most African countries are experiencing democratic erosion, restrictions on press freedom, media issues, and the shrinking civil society space? Such a conclusion

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would have been vital in reiterating key results and recommendations while also suggesting new avenues for further exploration.

In sum, both *Electoral Politics and Africa's Urban Transition: Class and Ethnicity in Ghana* and *Elites and the Politics of Accountability in Africa* contribute significantly to the scholarly literature on African politics. Nathan's work offers insight into electoral politics and accountability in Ghana's Greater Accra region amid rapid urbanization. While the focus is on Ghana, the central themes in the book resonate with many other African countries experiencing similar urban transitions. Adebanwi and Orock's edited volume draws on diverse case studies and perspectives, enriching our understanding of the connections between elites, citizens, civil society organizations, and accountability mechanisms. These works deepen our understanding of electoral politics and accountability dynamics in Africa, making significant contributions to academic discourse and offering valuable insights for policymakers, politicians, and political entrepreneurs in the region.

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