

# BOOK REVIEW

**Philip Roessler. *Ethnic Politics and State Power in Africa. The Logic of the Coup-Civil War Trap*.** Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. 389 pp. Maps. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. \$110.00. Cloth. ISBN: 978-1107176072.

Why do heads of African states often exclude leaders of other ethnic groups from political power, knowing that this strategy can lead to large-scale political violence? Philip Roessler's *Ethnic Politics and State Power in Africa* answers this question and offers readers an elegant and insightful discussion of coups, civil war, and ethnic politics. Roessler's persuasive analysis points to problems rooted in the informal institution of power-sharing. He walks readers through the dilemma faced by African executives in weak bureaucratic states: the coup-civil war tradeoff. A leader can share governing roles with leaders from other ethnic groups, which enables him to gain access to those rivals' political networks. Lacking formal institutions to monitor and control the population beyond the capital, this alliance provides the regime with greater societal control and state reach. However, it also opens the possibility that these rivals may accumulate enough power to remove the leader in a coup.

Conversely, a leader can choose to exclude leaders of rival groups and their networks, but this strategy risks making the regime more vulnerable to the threat of insurgency. This vulnerability stems not only from the grievances of marginalized co-ethnics, but also from the weakened "counterinsurgency capability" of the state (55). Without brokers embedded in these excluded networks, regimes have limited information or social control to prevent insurgency in these areas. Roessler argues, "Civil wars are the manifestation of the political strategies rulers choose to coup-proof their regimes from rival networks of violence specialists and consolidate their hold on sovereign power" (19).

The author adopts a nested research design, which combines interviews tracing political decision-making with quantitative analysis to test the generalizability of his strategic theory of civil war. First, Roessler leverages interviews with different political actors from the Darfur region of Sudan to describe political events in the region between 1989 and 2003. He details how Omar al-Bashir and Ali Osman Taha's fear that Hassan al-Turabi's network would take over central government led to a regime split along ethno-regional lines (149). As a result, the regime lost a network of brokers

capable of thwarting violence as they had employed in the First Darfur Rebellion (146). Roessler uses this case to build his hypotheses, which describe leaders' motivations for ethnic exclusion and the consequences of these decisions. Then he draws on the Ethnic Power Relations dataset in conjunction with original data on the ethnicity of coup conspirators to test for generalizability across thirty-five African countries. This analysis identifies the outbreak of Africa's Great War as a "typical case" of the bargaining failure between co-conspirators. Roessler conducted interviews with political elites from all relevant factions in DRC and Rwanda to test his theory against economic drivers of conflict and illustrate the mechanisms consistent with his argument.

Roessler concludes the book by looking at variations in leaders' treatment of the coup-civil war trap: why have some countries achieved an "ethnic peace," while others are plagued by patterns of large-scale political violence? He draws on his co-authored work with David Ohls to argue that rulers' choices are "a function of a country's ethnic geography and ethnic rivals' ... ability to effectively mobilize and capture the central government" in the context of political exclusion (271). He analyzes data related to the "balance of threat capabilities" and shows when capabilities of both the government and the challengers are high, we can expect more power-sharing, lower probability of a rebellion, and a higher risk of coup (278).

This book is essential reading for students of African politics and political violence. It provides a cogent synthesis of the literature on civil war, coups, ethnic politics, and international relations. Throughout each step, Roessler is theoretically nuanced and transparent about his assumptions and methodologies. The book concludes by suggesting exciting avenues for future research, including the tradeoffs between intra-ethnic and inter-ethnic bargaining as well as the impact of political and technological changes on the continent and beyond on leaders' incentives and constraints. I am confident this book will join the political science canon for years to come.

Jaimie Bleck

*The University of Notre Dame*

*South Bend, Indiana*

*jbleck@nd.edu*

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### **For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:**

Jok, Jok Madut, and Sharon Elaine Hutchinson. 1999. "Sudan's Prolonged Second Civil War and The Militarization of Nuer and Dinka Ethnic Identities." *African Studies Review* 42 (2): 125–45. doi:10.2307/525368.

Whitehouse, Bruce. 2017. "Political Participation and Mobilization after Mali's 2012 Coup." *African Studies Review* 60 (1): 15–35. doi:10.1017/asr.2017.9.