REVIEWS

How to Rig an Election by Nic Cheeseman and Brian Klaas, Yale University Press, London & New Haven, 2018, 310 pp.

Certain ways of rigging elections are as old as democracy itself and indeed continue to affect ballots in the historic cradles of republican politics. For instance, gerrymandering, the manipulation of electoral boundaries, is still routine in the United States. Nic Cheeseman and Brian Klaas suggest that in Africa, politically-biased electoral district delimitations have been especially decisive in affecting electoral outcomes in Kenya, Malawi and Zambia. In Zimbabwe, reconfiguration of constituencies in 2008 was intended to favour the incumbent administration but nonetheless failed to prevent the opposition from obtaining a majority in the parliamentary contest.

Other ways incumbent administrations try to win elections even before campaigning starts is through ensuring that the wrong kinds of voters find it difficult or impossible to register. Again, the authors suggest that this practice is not confined to newer 'counterfeit' democracies, and they cite recent American evidence to underline the point. A cruder and more obvious tactic is to prevent opposition candidates from registering, as in the Rajaonarivelo case in Madagascar in 2006. In general, though, as election management becomes more sophisticated and professional, determined riggers will do most of the necessary work well in advance.

Treating voters at rallies is another classic tactic, today used mostly in Africa, where, the authors maintain, 67% of elections between 2012 and 2016 featured gift-giving (Cheeseman & Klaas 2018, p. 65). It is inefficient, though most effective when systematic clientelism is undertaken by members of parliament between elections. Violence directed at rival parties and their supporters was evident in 38% of recent African polls (p. 96) but when this happens during the campaigning season it can discredit victors among observer groups. As Cheeseman and Klaas note, the 'holy grail' sought by more sophisticated riggers is to fix an election *and* have it endorsed by reputable external assessors (p. 195). Better to confine the violence to between elections. Indeed, memories of decades-old exemplary violence can be refreshed with more recent low-key bullying and threatening rhetoric, preferably delivered in languages foreigners are unlikely to understand.

Using social media and big data profiling to deliver individually tailored 'fake news' articles might sway voters unfairly, as recent evidence from the United States has indicated. Such efforts may have shaped the recent Kenyan contests

in 2013 and 2017 (p. 133), though large-scale lying is not normally perceived as a rigging tactic because it is common enough in many elections normally considered to be free and fair.

Cheeseman and Klaas raise the possibility of hackers altering computerised voter rolls, voting machines and results tabulation, but cite no evidence of this being done successfully. Rigging on election day and during the count, they argue, is the last resort for amateurs or dictators who simply don't care about appearances, as in the case of Paul Kagame whose re-election in 2017 was with an implausible 99% of the vote. Kagame is one of those leaders who either because of their strategic importance, or as in his case, developmental efficiency, receive a 'free pass' from Northern European allies who are generally rather more fussy about democratic protocols. Cheeseman and Klaas include a useful chapter about why even reputable monitors 'pull their punch' as in the case of Uganda in 2016 (p. 192). Western monitors have rejected the outcomes of only a fifth of elections, a much smaller proportion that the real share of rigged contests.

Except for would-be dictators, for whom this is surely a must-have guide, Cheeseman and Klaas's volume is a disheartening read. This is especially the case because their recommendations on how to stall or prevent rigging are quite perfunctory and on the whole unsupported by the vivid anecdotes that make their litany of misbehaviour so enthralling. The statistics that appear in the tables at the end appear to confirm a global setting in which 'the world is becoming less democratic' (p. 1) and more 'elections are being rigged' (p. 3).

How valid are these generalisations with respect to Africa? Is the trend pointing in the direction of democratic recession? The statistical evidence Cheeseman and Klaas cite is unclear about long term trends, and the arguments about whether post-1990 democracies are generally in recession is contested. Levitsky and Way, for example, have argued that the baseline number of democracies from the mid-1990s is too often inflated by the inclusion of what Cheeseman and Klaas would call dominant and competitive authoritarian regimes. If we confine the analysis of trends to the record of more authentic new electoral polities the record is more ambiguous, with few cases of democratic breakdown (Levitsky & Way 2015). The evidence emerging from some of the most recent African electoral contests is not quite as discouraging as the degenerate procedures depicted in this study by Cheeseman and Klaas. The crudest and most recent example of rigging in the SADC region, the outcome of the presidential and parliamentary elections in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, was clumsy and blatant because that was the only way it could be fixed, after what had been by most accounts a fairly well-conducted contest.

These elections (in the DRC) were held on 30 December 2018. This was after extensive delays which did enable the Commission to undertake what seems to

have been a genuine and effective effort to create a new voters' roll. Polling station results were posted and a parallel vote tabulation (PVT) was conducted by the Catholic Episcopal Commission. Pre-election opinion polling was undertaken. There were widespread discrepancies between polling station results collected by the 29 000 observers and tallies posted at the Local Centres for the Compilation of Results. The overall results were announced on 10 January 2019, awarding victory to Felix Tshisekedi, one of the two opposition coalitions' candidates. The electoral commission did not release disaggregated results at any stage. Results indicated an unlikely difference between parliamentary and presidential outcomes. The presidential outcome contradicted earlier opinion polling and the PVT, both of which favoured a win with a big majority by Martin Fayulu. The coalition that supported the incumbent president won the largest share of national assembly seats despite their candidate running third in the presidential contest. The Constitutional Court upheld the result without supplying any kind of reasoning based on forensic analysis. The PVT findings correlated with the spreadsheet of the Electoral Commission's electronically fed results from local centres leaked from the commission's data base, and obtained by a supporter of the losing presidential candidate Martin Fayulu. Statistical analysis of the data from this source and from the PVT suggest accurate reporting (Englebert 2019; Wilson et al. 2019). Domestic and external perceptions persist of a deal between the ruling party and one of the two main opposition presidential candidates who was accorded victory. So the fix was a last-minute affair after an election that was, by and large, honestly conducted.

Fayulu's calls for protests against Tshisekedi's 'electoral coup' elicited only modest responses. Public acquiescence to the outcome was probably a reflection of a generalised perception, common in societies traumatised by civil war, that 'peace is more important than free and fair elections' (Cheeseman & Klaas 2018, p. 258). For foreign governments any change would have been perceived as a welcome outcome. After all, another (sort of) electoral turnover could be added to the growing list of African countries with this experience. For any real future progress, though, a re-organisation of the Constitutional Court so that it becomes less susceptible to political pressure would be a crucial reform. This is likely to be resisted by supporters of the old regime who now hold key portfolios in Tshisekedi's cabinet, including the ministry of justice. In June, the Court ruled on 23 parliamentary election disputes, invalidating the victories of 23 of Fayulu's supporters and awarding the seats to members of the former ruling group. The political prospects for Congo's Democratic Republic looked pretty bleak then, though optimists might find consolation in the technical proficiency of the poll, and of course, the fact that Kabila's placeman did not win. In these respects it was an improvement on previous contests.

What about Africa's largest democracy, Nigeria? Cheeseman and Klaas cite the introduction of biometric voter registration as a key measure in ensuring 'better quality elections' that led to 'a transfer of power' in 2015. Was the 2019 poll even better? Probably not, according to the European Union's observer mission, which published its full report five months after the election. Very low voter participation in the presidential poll (34%) was probably a consequence of very late openings of polling stations as well as the discouraging effects of violence – 150 people died during the campaigning. Turnout was lower than in 2015 when 42% of the registered electorate voted, and the 2019 death-toll was three times higher (Orji 2015; Mahmud 2015). The one-week-long postponement of elections probably helped to reduce participation. Another explanation for the turnout decline was that the voter register was more inflated than in 2015 as a consequence of a growing number of deceased voters whose names had not been removed from the register – possibly as many as eight million. EU monitors witnessed plenty of efforts at vote-buying. In addition, state-owned broadcasting tended to favour incumbents, and many of the procedural shortcomings of election day and in the tabulation routines were also evident in 2015. However, a well-organised parallel vote tabulation indicated that the presidential results were in line with its own calculations. Whether these abuses and organisational inefficiencies resulted in a different outcome than would have been the case in a more efficiently managed and more civil competition is uncertain. The Electoral Commission attracted hostility (and physical attacks) from both sides, a telling indication of its political autonomy. Certainly, this was a poll flawed by what the EUEOM (2019) called systemic shortcomings, but the evidence does not suggest decisive centralised rigging.

A poll-by-poll analysis of Africa's electoral record in the last two decades might well present a similarly messy overall picture in which it is easy to identify shortcomings but less simple to discern the long-term trends identified by authors Nic Cheeseman and Brian Klaas. As a handbook, however, *How to Rig an Election* is compelling, accessible and helpful, essential reading for all electoral observers. Its arguments are at their most persuasive when they are illustrated with often darkly comical anecdotal evidence.

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