

Book Review

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Vinthagen, Stellan & Johansen, Jørgen. (2019). Revolutionary Constructive Resistance, Benin 1989 in context and perspective. Irene Publishin. Treba da bude: Vinthagen, Stellan & Johansen, Jørgen. (2019). Revolutionary Constructive Resistance, Benin 1989 in context and perspective. Sweden: Irene Publishing

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The world has witnessed several civil society mobilization processes since the 1980s. The common characteristics of these phenomena are reflected in the challenging of these regimes and the peaceful nature of these revolutions. Vinthagen and Johansen's work on the Benin case, which addresses these kinds of changes to the ruling regimes, calls for researching and revisiting the role and nature of unarmed overturning of established regimes.

As stated above, this publication focuses on the changing nature of political revolutions and the mobilization of civil society in order to overthrow or reform ruling regimes. In the first two chapters, drawing on evolution and the crucial determinants of different cases of peaceful revolutions across the globe, the authors identify seven waves of unarmed regime changes. A comprehensive approach towards this topic results in highlighting the contextual factors that drive such revolutions. In other words, the authors focus on historical context, present context, use of active nonviolence, external actors, sources of inspiration, and relations between new leadership and the old regime. In identifying gaps in the literature on civil resistance to

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established regimes within the waves of regime changes, the Benin case comes as a logical answer.

The third chapter, “Complex and Manifold Causes”, points out the specific context of Africa, which is necessary for analyzing issues of social uprising in this continent. The authors note that “The opening of the political space in Africa was the result of a very complex interplay between external and internal actors” (2019: 12). Recognizing the importance of diverse drivers of social movements is the first step in the analysis of the Benin case. The fourth chapter, “Economy in Bad Shape”, highlights the prevalent impact of economic factors (in terms of great national debt, widespread corruption and low standard of living) behind the rallying of dissatisfied social groups. Economy, societal factors such as the exile of the well-educated population, and corruption all led to moral decay and flourishing criminal activities in the form of “parallel economy”. The authors paint a vivid picture of the spillover of dissatisfaction into the education and banking systems and others important spheres of social life, which, in turn, deepened the rift within an already divided society. By placing the Benin case in an international context and linking it with other revolutionary demands across the globe, the authors highlight the importance of international factors that enable revolution to take place in some parts of West Africa, which is discussed in the fifth chapter.

Examining the societal factors in the seventh, eighth and ninth chapters, Vinthagen and Johansen put emphasis on human rights, the establishment of a national conference and the concept of civil society in Benin. What starts out as student protest quickly escalates into mass revolt. Infringement of human rights of people opposed to the ruling regime during the initial stages of the protests, as well as the important role of external financial and political actors (primarily from France), led to the establishment and development of a national conference aimed at the country’s democratization. Very soon, this national conference became the most important political organ in Benin. The authors especially underscore the fact that



this was an exceptional and novel form of civil society's expression of dissatisfaction against a state on the African continent, coloured by a nonviolent strategy. The result was the beginning of the democratization process in Benin: "The introduction of a multi-party system in Benin was the beginning of something new" (2019: 22).

Basing the concept of civil society in Africa on "its historical meaning, including basically all organized activity outside the state domain" (with the exception of groups using armed violence (2019: 23), the authors stress the significance of the student movement and its great effort to establish a national conference and free elections in Benin: "As in many other African countries, it was mainly university students who drove the struggle that would lead to democratization" (2019: 25). Recognizing students and the clergy as the main drivers of peaceful changes, Vinthagen and Johansen point out that "they demanded a new constitution, a multi-party system, liberalization of economic policy, an end to structural rationalization, freedom of association, right to strike, increased grants for students and improvements in university infrastructure" (2019: 29). Those demands functioned as a catalyst for a number of free unions to rise against the regime.

The escalation of dissatisfaction into a massive mobilization of civil society would not have been successful without the power of media. The tenth chapter recognizes this element, especially the power of private radios and newspapers in Benin: "In other words, the communication opportunities were decisive in giving the opposition a way to organize and discuss its goals and strategies" (2019: 32). Discussing the main factors that contributed to the changes, the authors acknowledge the economic ones but do not consider them as being instrumental. Instead, diverse expectations, a tradition of showing discontent in times of trouble, and the need to "be inclusive and constructive" made the qualitative difference between armed revolutionary aspirations and efforts to act peacefully.



Stressing that “Strikes, demonstrations, boycotts and other forms of protest have a completely different effect than violent means such as guerilla warfare” (2019: 41), the authors once again call attention to the institutional conditions, heritage, and other significant contextual factors behind the revolutionary transitions. Ultimately, it is the peaceful nature of expressing dissatisfaction that is fundamental. The authors make their concluding remarks in an attempt to inspire more in-depth studies of nonviolent means of regime changes. Taking into account all the key variables, such as the increasingly important drivers throughout different phases of the revolutionary processes, an analysis of this topic could be done.

What makes this publication valuable is that it not only focuses on the Benin case, but also compares and contrasts other similar revolutionary transitions. This helps to build up a picture of the interlinked nature of such phenomena and place it into an appropriate context. The character of nonviolent social movements aimed at overturning or reforming established regimes is problematized in a straightforward manner, making the study interesting for both scientific and lay communities.



AUTHOR GUIDELINES

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