

## Book Reviews

**Mehler, Andreas/Melber, Henning/Van Walraven, Klaas (eds), *Africa Yearbook Volume 8: Politics, Economy and Society South of the Sahara in 2011*. Leiden: Brill 2012, 560 pp.**

This is the eighth annual report on sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) by the Africa-Europe Group for Interdisciplinary Studies (AEGIS). Given the nature of the commissioning entity, a European orientation to the report is to be expected, hence the special focus in chapter three on African-European relations. This bias, however, disappears when the foreign relations of the individual countries are discussed, and a balanced summary is provided of political and socio-economic developments in each of the SSA states. Despite the statement in the editors' preface that the length of individual country-specific chapters reflect on the relative weight of each country, the country reports seem to reveal more aptly the various contributors' grasp of issues and events.

The factual overview at the beginning of the book (pp XIII-XVI) which provides, inter alia, a geographical and demographical perspective on sub-Saharan Africa, reveals a geopolitical reality with significant implications: this vast region includes numerous small countries with equally small populations, and even the large countries (with the exception of the DRC, Ethiopia and Nigeria) have small populations. Two implications in particular come to mind. First is the economic viability of most of these states: unless they can benefit from regional economic cooperation, their potential for individual development is severely inhibited. Unfortunately, internecine conflicts in many of these countries make effective inter-state cooperation a mere pipe dream. Second, and related to the first, is the dearth of infrastructural development that connects the various countries. These realities demand more coordinated and sharper focused policies to plan economic development and guide investment in sub-Saharan countries.

The Yearbook confirms that many SSA countries benefit from large-scale natural resource exploitation — in particular oil. Angola, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Ghana, Nigeria, Republic of Congo, Sudan and South Sudan are examples. However, large percentages of the populations in these countries continue to live in extreme poverty as a result of the mis-

use of the revenues that are acquired. This is a direct result of rampant corruption among governing elites; a scourge that has a debilitating impact on development, and a predicament that haunts much of sub-Saharan Africa.

Going through the book country by country one begins to apprehend the common problems that demand attention: most pressingly, the prevalence of intra-state violence that involves and targets civilians. During the year under review, 2011, the two African conflicts that dominated the headlines (on account of their massive displacement of people, human toll and foreign military intervention) were of course the crises in Libya and Côte d'Ivoire, respectively. The conflict in Libya, while technically outside sub-Saharan Africa, nevertheless impacted heavily on the stability of Sahel countries in SSA. Elsewhere, numerous intractable conflicts continued, inter alia in Somalia, the DRC and Central African Republic. Coups and attempted *coups*, as in the case of Guinea Bissau, only increased the destabilisation of states and societies. An additional and worrying trend was the increase in terrorist groups operating in SSA, particularly in West Africa. The Al Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) terrorised the populations in Mali, Mauritania and Niger, and in Nigeria, Boko Haram conducted a reign of terror. In East Africa the Al Shabaab expanded its activities from Somalia to neighbouring countries. A disturbing trend, and a phenomenon that spread across West Africa, was that in many instances terrorists teamed up with criminal syndicates involved in drug trafficking and smuggling. Even more alarmingly, the gangs were in many instances supported by political elites.

On the other hand, during 2011 sub-Saharan Africa continued to witness a resurgence of multi-party politics, with elections held in Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, the Comoros, DRC, Niger, Nigeria, Sao Tome and Principe, Seychelles, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Uganda. This development — a positive trend, overall — was accompanied by a number of worrisome developments, apart from keeping in place geriatric leaders like Obiang Nguema (32 years as president in Equatorial Guinea), Biya (29 years as president in Cameroon), Dos Santos (32 years as president of Angola), Mugabe (31 years as prime minister/president of Zimbabwe) and Museveni (26 years as president of Uganda).

The first development of concern was the unabated consolidation of political family dynasties. An example of this was the Central

African Republic where the president, his wife, sister and two sons all held executive positions (p 220). (The situation was changed, of course by the recent *coup* in the CAR, during March 2013 — but once again, an intolerable situation has been replaced by even more instability). Dynastic rule is perpetuated when a president grooms his son to succeed him, as happened in Togo and Gabon and in the Republic of the Congo (where Denis Nguesso was grooming his son Denis Christel to succeed him while his other four sons were members of the party central committee) (p 236). The various Yearbook chapters found little evidence of a decline in the incidence of nepotism and the manipulation of states' political and economic systems to serve personal ends.

The second political issue of concern was the opportunism and fragmentation of opposition parties, which has led to two trends: the first is the creation of presidential-allied opposition parties whose leaders are rewarded with cabinet and other political appointments. The best example of this is the *mouvance présidentielle* in Benin (p 60) and the *alliance pour la majorité présidentielle* in the DRC (p 244). The second is the proliferation in presidential candidates and opposition parties contesting elections. During the elections that took place in the review period, there were 22 presidential candidates in Cameroon, 13 in Benin and 14 in Sao Tome and Principe. In Chad there were 100 parties contesting the elections, 44 in Burundi and 19 in Benin. Such unbridled competition, rather than stimulate democracy, seems to have fuelled conflicts on the continent: winners of elections consider themselves the sole owners of public resources, while losers resort to unconstitutional means to reverse the situation. In some cases, losers simply become co-opted through a power-sharing arrangement.

The Yearbook illustrated chapter by chapter that sub-Saharan Africa is still facing enormous socio-economic challenges to human security, including poverty, unemployment and food shortages. Given the youth 'bulge' of the population in SSA, unemployment is likely to grow even more and add to other sources of instability. Food insecurity has been exacerbated by the leasing out of huge tracts of land to foreign governments and companies — a practice that is referred to as 'land grabs' and which is becoming a contentious issue in countries like Cameroon, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Sierra Leone and Tanzania. This is a trend that demands vigilance by observers and

policy makers alike, as the displacement of peasants, often without compensation, can have devastating effects on human security — something that sub-Saharan Africa does not have in abundance.

The Africa Yearbook remains one of the most comprehensive and incisive reports on sub-Saharan Africa. As in the case of previous editions, Volume 8 is written in a very readable format without the formal jargon of footnotes and references. It offers a balanced and holistic analysis of a hugely complex region, and is a very useful source of data on individual countries. For those who need a well-presented and well-researched yet concise guide to sub-Saharan Africa, this is the ideal starting point.

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**LeFanu, Sarah, *S is for Samora: A lexical biography of Samora Machel and the Mozambican dream*. Durban: University of Kwazulu-Natal Press 2012, 244 pp.**

LeFanu recounts the life and death of Samora Machel, first president of independent Mozambique, and his dream of building a new nation after independence from Portugal in 1975. The book is written a quarter of a century after his death in a plane crash in 1986, in the Mbuzini mountains of South Africa. It remains an open question if this were an accident or an assassination.

The structure of the book is unusual for a biography, yet very accessible: it employs a 'dictionary' format, discussing themes that are organised "from A to Z". The reader can therefore start from the beginning and read it like a novel, or simply page to a specific topic of interest. Events are ordered chronologically, recreating a journey back in time, and this history is brought to life by LeFanu's characteristic narrative prose. A sense of documentary intrigue is maintained from the first page right to the end, where the dramatic contents of the Aircraft Accident Factual Report and Cockpit Voice Recorder transcripts are revealed. 'Listening' carefully one can even hear the fatal plunging of the Tupolev 134 in the mountainous Mbuzini.

LeFanu weaves a rich tapestry of the multifaceted life and career of Samora Machel by combining journalistic and academic research