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978-1-107-08114-7 - Dictators and Democracy in African Development: The Political Economy of Good Governance in Nigeria

A. Carl LeVan

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Dictators and Democracy in African Development

What are the conditions for good governance in Africa, and why do many democracies still struggle with persistent poverty? Drawing on a historical study of Nigeria since independence, this book argues that the structure of the policy-making process explains variations in government performance better than other commonly cited factors, such as oil, colonialism, ethnic diversity, foreign debt, and dictatorships. The author links the political structure of the policy process to patterns of government performance over half a century to show that the key factor is not simply the status of the regime as a dictatorship or a democracy, but rather it is the structure of the policy-making process by which different policy demands are included or excluded. By identifying political actors with the leverage to prevent policy change and extract concessions, empirical tests demonstrate how these “veto players” systematically affect the performance of two broad categories of public policy. But the number of veto players impacts these categories in different ways, generating a Madisonian dilemma that has important implications for African countries struggling with the institutional trade-offs presented by different regimes.

A. Carl LeVan is Assistant Professor in the School of International Service at American University in Washington, D.C.

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For Monisola, my muse

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Preface

After more than sixteen years of dictatorship and instability, Nigeria transitioned back to democracy in 1999, electing a new president, legislature, and governors. The new constitution closely resembled the founding document of the failed Second Republic (1979–1983) in that it established a bicameral legislature, a strong president, and a federal political system. Within months of the government's taking office, ethnic riots shook the northern city of Kano, rebels in the Niger Delta took oil workers hostage, and communal clashes rocked the commercial capital of Lagos. Security forces responded to the kidnapping of police officers in the state of Bayelsa by razing the village of Odi with bombs and heavy artillery. The disproportionate response raised questions about whether civilians really controlled the military, and human rights organizations accused the government of genocide.

The new government's plans to promote school construction, macro-economic stability, and poverty reduction suddenly seemed secondary to the question of whether the country could hold together. Equally unclear was whether the National Assembly could provide an adequate check on the power of the new president, former military dictator Olusegun Obasanjo. The legislature deadlocked with the executive over the federal budget and a sweeping anticorruption bill. It fumbled its response to the provocative decision by a dozen state legislatures to implement Islamic criminal codes, and it was paralyzed by debates over a national fuel subsidy and a federal minimum wage. Nigeria's two previous failed attempts at democracy loomed large in the national memory.

One early morning in June 2000, it seemed as though history was about to repeat itself. A member of the National Assembly called me at

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home in a panic because President Obasanjo had ordered the police to surround the home of Senate President Chuba Okadigbo with armored vehicles. Over the previous week, Obasanjo and the Senate had bickered over a supplemental appropriations bill and a proposal to form a Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), a government agency to coordinate development efforts in the country's oil-producing region. The Senate president infuriated Obasanjo by adjourning the Senate for a scheduled recess and taking the mace – the ceremonial staff symbolizing the parliamentary sovereignty that was needed to convene the Senate – home with him. Obasanjo's supporters unsuccessfully tried to convene the Senate without Okadigbo.¹ When Senator Okadigbo formally reconvened the upper chamber a week later, he led votes to override Obasanjo's veto on the NDDC legislation (due to concerns about its funding mechanism) and demand additional details about the president's supplemental spending plans.

Reflecting on that incident, and the decade since Nigeria's tumultuous transition to democracy, a former top adviser to Senator Okadigbo told me there has been a "significant transformation" and a shift toward "genuine democratic governance." Now–Deputy Speaker of the House of Representatives Emeka Ihedioha said, "The separation of powers doctrine today is observed. The executive tries of course to encroach upon the functions of the legislature, but it is met this time with civilized resistance."² His comment stands out for its institutional imagery: The balance of authority is granted by the constitution but actualized only through its use; rules by themselves do not guarantee the capacity to exercise authority.

This book draws upon interviews, newspapers, government documents, and information gathered during field research that began in 2003 and continued with recurring visits since then. I trace fifty years of Nigeria's history from independence in 1960 to the end of President Obasanjo's second term in 2007, linking changes in political authority to public policy performance. For readers unfamiliar with Nigeria, this political narrative also provides an introduction to Africa's most populous country and one of the world's biggest oil producers. Though constitutions and formalities provide a road map to Nigeria's "veto players," I see them as institutional expressions of social and historical conditions

¹ Sufuyan Ojeifo, "The Deal, the Plot That Nailed Okadigbo," *Vanguard*, August 12, 2000.

² Interview with Emeka Ihedioha, March 17, 2010. Abuja.

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that acquire meaning through recurring behavior and norms. To put it in Honorable Ihedioha's terms, the Federal Constitution of 1999 designated the legislature as a separate institution, but it is "civilized resistance" to executive overreach that actually makes the National Assembly an independent body capable of exercising power.

I use the concept of veto players to show how a variety of political actors successfully (or unsuccessfully) assert such authority. This concept from political science transcends the American origins of the term "veto." I demonstrate through a mixed-methods analysis that the number of veto players reliably predicts government performance in Nigeria between 1961 and 2007. But their effects on local and national collective goods are different, meaning there is no simple answer regarding the optimal number of veto players. This analysis recasts the conditions for good governance in Africa as a dilemma shaped by the structure of policy making. Influential traditional chiefs, stubborn military officials, ambitious civilian politicians, and principled democratic activists are all part of what makes these structures real. I explore their preferences and capabilities for collective action and argue for their ability to shape and enforce political institutions. This offers a new basis for comparative thinking about Africa. But I also hope that readers will see in this casual story an appreciation for the Nigerian people's struggle for dignity and development, and an insistence that any resolution of the nation's policy performance dilemmas ultimately reside with them.

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