Reviews

Arbitrary States: social control and modern authoritarianism in Museveni's Uganda
by Rebecca Tapscott
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. Pp. 256. $100 (hbk).

How should one read political and historical literature on modern authoritarianism, neopatrimonialism and state formation in Africa from a Ugandan vantage point? This is the central theoretical question that Rebecca Tapscott asks in this new study on the postcolonial state in Uganda. In eight chapters, Tapscott navigates the 'micro-dynamics of governance in Uganda', in which she identifies a variety of modern authoritarianism thought to be peculiar to Museveni's Uganda: 'institutionalised arbitrariness'. Based on four years of fieldwork in the Gulu, Moroto, Soroti and Mbarara areas of Uganda between 2014 and 2018, Tapscott claims that unlike with typical African 'neopatrimonial states', where power is projected through 'patron-client relations', the main objective in Uganda's institutionalised arbitrariness is to undermine 'threats to its authority' (3). The point is to 'embed the regime not just in the state but also in society' (200).

The book presents and analyses four major oppositions salient to institutionalised arbitrariness: the use of lawful vs. exceptional violence; the state's jurisdictional claims vs. lack thereof; state presence vs. its absence; and fragmentation vs. consolidation (11*f*, 199). These are discussed throughout the book. After the Introduction, Chapters 2 and 3 respectively explore theoretical and historical aspects of institutionalised arbitrariness in Uganda. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 deal with cases of Uganda police, vigilantes and crime preventers respectively, and their relationship to the build-up of institutionalised arbitrariness. In turn, Chapter 7 explores the varieties of arbitrary governance in the four Ugandan contexts that Tapscott studied (Gulu, Soroti, Moroto and Mbarara), while in the last chapter, Tapscott aims at stretching her theory of institutionalised arbitrariness to other African contexts, starting with Ethiopia, Rwanda and Zimbabwe. It is this latter attempt that seems to distinguish Tapscott's institutionalised arbitrariness as a typically African phenomenon.

In the study of Africa, this book makes a contribution to literature on neopatrimonialism. Its major claim is that the character of the state in Museveni's Uganda does not fit into the blueprint of mainstream neopatrimonialist literature – thus Tapscott's coinage of 'institutionalised arbitrariness'. This internal critique of neopatrimonialism and literature on state formation in Africa, however, does not meaningfully engage literature that critiques the theoretical certitudes that inform knowledge produced by neopatrimonialist thinkers. At times, this exclusive, closed intra-engagement, critical as it is, leads the author to read radical critics of neopatrimonialism as also part of the neopatrimonialism school – to use Thandika Mkandawire's notion. The most notable example is that of Mahmood Mamdani, who the author pairs with the likes of Jean-François Bayart while reviewing literature (16). Thus, where Mamdani (*Citizen and Subject*, Princeton University Press, 1996)

talks of the legacy of late-colonial political modernity, Tapscott reads 'legacies of neopatrimonialism', and where Mamdani talks of the colonial bifurcated state, Tapscott reads postcolonial neopatrimonial bifurcated state (49f). Wittingly or otherwise, the tendency here is to flatten the diversity of literature on the post-colonial state, and to suppose that all are varieties of neopatrimonialism.

Early in the book, Tapscott rightly notes that 'arbitrary governance is indeed tied to historical factors, such as the postcolonial nature of the state' (10). The book's histor-ical chapter (Chapter 3), however, surprisingly locks the debate to the postcolonial period. If the distinctive feature of the state in Africa is its postcolonial nature, what is the place of colonial political modernity in the emergence of institutionalised arbi-trariness? Asking such a question would definitely imply approaching this book's research object differently, and questioning knowledge produced through a concep-tion of postcolonial temporality as the beginning of time. Overall, if this book's major downside is its limited historicisation of the state in Uganda, its strength is in its detailed engagement with various manifestations of state power in contemporary Uganda. In the latter, Tapscott makes an important contribution.

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Constraining Dictatorship: from personalized rule to institutionalized regimes by ANNE MENG
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. Pp. 278. $105 (hbk).

Why do some dictatorships last much longer than others? Recent scholarship sug-gests that formal, pseudo-democratic institutions – such as ruling parties, legislatures and elections – produce more durable autocracies. However, most dictatorships have these institutions, yet we still observe wide variation in rates of regime survival. Enter Anne Meng's book, *Constraining Dictatorship*, which offers a useful corrective to the existing institutionalist take while highlighting often-overlooked variation in elite dynamics across African dictatorships.

Using formal theory, case studies and cross-national data from Sub-Saharan Africa, the book builds on past institutionalist scholarship but persuasively argues that the presence of party or legislative institutions fails to predict leader turnover or regime survival under autocracy. Many authoritarian parties are inherited by leaders, rather than strategically designed, and most fail to outlast the founding leader's departure. A better predictor of autocratic stability, the book contends, is the pres-ence of 'explicit executive constraints' (formal succession policies, term limits and cabinet appointments). Counterintuitively, initially weak autocrats produce stronger regimes because their vulnerable position dictates that they adopt constraints that transfer power and resources to other elites, producing credible commitments that stabilise the dictatorship over the long run. Strong leaders, by contrast, have little need to compromise, but the absence of power sharing weakens the regime after

* The views expressed are the author's own and do not necessarily represent the views of the US Government.