Book review

The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, War and the Business of Power by Alex de Waal. London: Polity Press, 2015.Paperback: 220pp.

Mossa Hussen Negash

Department of Political Science and International Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, Bahir Dar University, P.O. Box 79, Bahir Dar, Ethiopia.Email: mossahsn@gmail.com

Received 6 April, 2023; Accepted 27 May, 2023

DOI:

Alex de Waal's book, *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa*, provides new insight into how politics is conducted in the volatile Horn of Africa (HoA). The book consists of twelve chapters with detailed case analyses (seven chapters) of the core HoA states. His book explores men's who conduct politics in the HoA. The book's central thesis is the concept of a "political market," in which the HoA's hegemonic masculine political and security elites engage in pathological and voracious "real politics." He contends that the 'political marketplace' shapes the political entrepreneur's behavior. De Waal successfully adopted this concept from business management to politicians in the political marketplace, where money, war, and power are intricately connected. 'Political marketplace' is defined as the contemporary governance system in which politics is conducted through the exchange of political services or loyalty for payment or license (p. 16). Political entrepreneurs operate in the political marketplace using money and violence as mediums of exchange. Every politician needs a 'political budget': money (gained from debt, revenue from the operation, rent, etc.) that he can use at his discretion without having to report or account for it to buy support. In contrast, 'the public budget is secondary.' In such a circumstance, politicians must play the political marketplace game or they will lose power. As a result, the behavior of political leaders and other political entrepreneurs is more like that of gangsters than civil governments.

De Waal identifies four conditions necessary for the formation of advanced political marketplace systems (p. 19): political finance is in the hands of individuals; control over violence is dispersed or contested; political disputes are not resolved by institutions; and the countries are integrated into the global political-economic order in a subordinate position. These conditions are suitable for relatively weak and impoverished HoA states. In his case study, De Waal explores formerly three states broken into six de facto republics—Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia, and Somaliland—as sites for political markets in seven chapters. These states have cross-cultural and ethnic cleavages, so localized problems have regional and global implications manifested by cross-border loyalties and international patronage. The Darfur insurgency (Chapter 4) illustrates how local grievances, if not properly answered, invite regional and global actors as central players in the conflict and the peace process, and loyalty is weighed in terms of monetary rewards from sponsors and adversaries (loyalty is auctioned). In South Sudan (Chapter 6), the local political settlement was built on an oil-based patronage system that proved unsustainable. After the 2005 peace agreement, Salva Kiir adopted a political-business plan of massive loyalty building using oil money to prop up pro-independence loyalists. In Somalia (Chapter 7), a major reason for the failure of the peace processes was that a closed, rent-driven negotiating formula by neighboring states and international bodies could not match the open, business- and kinship-centered political economy. Somaliland demonstrates that a working government is possible in a clan-based society. Its origins are a profit-sharing agreement among livestock traders. Eritrea adopted a repressive political-business strategy to keep the president in power by extracting political finance from illicit activities (mostly transnational) and using that money for the army. But the author saw Ethiopia as at least a partial exception to the repulsive reality of the political marketplace.

The case studies demonstrate that the HoA is a highly integrated patronage system in which political loyalties are "instrumentalized and dollarized" (p. 174). Everyone is seen as a rent-seeker; religious institutions, lawyers, judges, civil society leaders, and regional and international organizations have all been absorbed into the political market. In his book De Waal cites the African Union's (AU) most active department, Peace and Security, as an example to illustrate how mechanisms for resolving African conflicts based on negotiation principles are being replaced by security-sector rent-seeking (p. 186). He also articulated that troop-contributing states for peacekeeping are primarily motivated by domestic interests to subsidize military budgets and expand political budgets. They even prioritize which organization or funder sponsors them. They prefer the UN because it ‘pays in a more timely and reliable way’. Ethiopia insisted that its Abye mission should fall under the UN and not the AU (p. 192). The author concludes the book with some conclusions and suggestions: The monetization of global politics will not easily be reversed, but its trajectory must be altered before it destroys the social order in the world's poorest and weakest countries (p. 216). He suggests two measures to create a more humane political order: one would involve taking money out of international politics, and the other would involve rewarding people who show integrity amid the turbulence of the political marketplace.

The book has several strong points. To begin with, there is an unquestionable novelty value in this book as the concept of ‘political marketplace’ is a consequential, yet untouched area of politics in the HoA. Though concepts such as "neopatrimonialism," which emphasizes the vertical distribution of resources between patrons and clients (Francisco, 2010), are commonly used to explain the African political landscape, the political marketplace involves both vertical and horizontal integration of political entrepreneurs. Methodologically, the work is rigorous and empirically grounded, largely based on elite interviews. Having amassed an over three decades of experience as a researcher, observer, and attendee at crucial meetings and peace talks in the sub-region, the author attempts to enrich our understanding of the political dynamics of the HoA. This experience is reflected in his coherent writing in which the multiple case analyses are beautifully structured in the book. His close ties to key political and security elites allow him easy access to vital first-hand information. His ethnographic research design contributes to his detailed and insightful work. He collected immense primary data from the region's power elites, which is largely inaccessible to locals. The book succinctly integrates economic interests into political analysis. The political economy analysis of the real politics of the Horn provides the basis for developing the political marketplace framework. The book gives an insider's perspective on the business of politics in the Horn and how elite alliances operate across borders. His work is original in that it develops a theory based on extensive primary data and a close examination of Horn's politics. The book is well-articulated and thought-provoking and intelligibly written. Some positive aspects of the political marketplace are indicated (a reduction in mass killings, a decline in coups, stability in Somaliland, etc.). In a region where violent conflicts are frequently associated with identity, viewing political actors as rent-seekers transcends identity politics. The author achieved his objective of proving that money plays a central role in regulating or exacerbating conflicts.

The book provides an insight into the consequences of the real politics in the HoA, but it doesn't mean that it is free from any limitations. The limitations include: Economic determinism—the narrow economic analysis that reduces every conflict to monetary terms—cannot explain the Horn's complex and multi-cause nature. The work also reflects a Eurocentric bias towards Africa and the Horn. Genuine grievances (discrimination) might be wrongly translated into monetization or commoditization and ignore the root causes. The study could have been much more powerful if he had used concepts and theories like political exchange and rational choice theory. Considering every politician and insurgent a rent-seeker is also problematic. Though not explicit, the author's theoretical stance is grounded in classic realist theory. He also failed to show us why HoA states exhibit such predatory behavior. It gives the wrong impression that the goal of acquiring resources is most often political; as long as you have the money, you can buy or maintain the loyalty of competitors and followers. Ethiopia's exception in the regional political marketplace is not convincing. He appears to be too lenient in critiquing Ethiopian domestic politics. Rampant corruption and institutionalized patronage are significant concerns and sources of popular discontent. Hagmann (2016) exposes his Ethiopian bias as a reductionist. Ethiopia's reality after 2018 suggests otherwise. Thus, Ethiopia is not an exception, but more of the same. The political marketplace is more prominent in conflict-prone states than in stable societies.

De Waal's Marketplace evokes Huntington's argument in the article Political Development and Political Decay (1965, p. 407), justifying the necessity of tolerating corruption in Africa's development. As the work explains that the limited violence witnessed from Congo to Somalia results from the political marketplace, it risks normalizing the abnormal. Similarly, North et al. (2009) echoed his idea and argued that the limited access order or natural state resolves the problem of violence through the transactions of dominant elites. This is done by protecting the privileges of the dominant members. The political system of a natural state manipulates the economic system to produce rents that secure political order (p. 18). For them, this situation characterizes most societies today, not just Africans. But their analysis is historical and less empirical than political market analysis, which is deeply empirical and ethnographic in its approach. As far as the HoA's leadership behavior is concerned, it is hard to refute De Waal's core argument. The political marketplace continues to resonate on the ground in the region, with Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy (since late December 2022) and his officials repeatedly using it. In his article Re-Introducing the Political Market to Ethiopia, published online on February 8, 2023, De Waal admitted Ethiopia just matched the political market. Of course, this is a tragic but unsettling reality of De Waal's influence. However, while the political market may be an aggravating factor, identity politics/ethnic nationalism have remained the overarching foundation of the region's conflict system. Overall, the book is highly recommended for students, academics, researchers, policymakers, and other stakeholders interested in peace and state-building in the fragile Horn. Particularly, the author's use of simplified language makes it easy to understand the text for experts and non-experts alike. It is an excellent avenue for other researchers, as the author himself acknowledges that the book raises more questions than answers.

References

Francisco, A. H. (2010). Neopatrimonialism in contemporary African politics. *E-International Relations*, *24*, 1-3.

Hagmann, T. (2016).The Commodification of African Politics1 (Review). The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, War and the Business of Power (2015). By Alex De Waal.

Huntington, S. P. (1965). Political development and political decay. *World politics*, *17*(3), 386-430.

North, D. et al. (2009). *Violence and social orders: A conceptual framework for interpreting recorded human history*. Cambridge University Press.

Verhoeven, H. (2016). The real politics of the Horn of Africa.By Alex De Waal.