

Book Review – “The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa” by Alex de Waal

Duncan Green says key message of this book is a powerful one and a must read for those interest in the Horn of Africa

There’s a balance to be struck in writing any non-fiction book. Narrative v information. How often do you return to the overarching storyline, the message of the book, the thing you want the reader to take away? How much information – facts, names, dates, events – do you include? Too much storyline, and the book feels flimsy. Too much information and the reader gets lost in the detail.

Alex de Waal struggles with this in *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa*, not least because he knows so much – for decades he’s been both observer and participant in what he calls ‘the Horn of Africa’s cornucopia of violence and destruction’; he’s been in the room during the big peace talks, interviewing and befriending the region’s Big Men. The result is indigestible but brilliant. I read the overview sections, but skipped the case study chapters (Darfur, Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia, Somaliland, Eritrea and Ethiopia) – hey, I was on holiday……. Anyone who knows the Horn will get a huge amount from reading it.

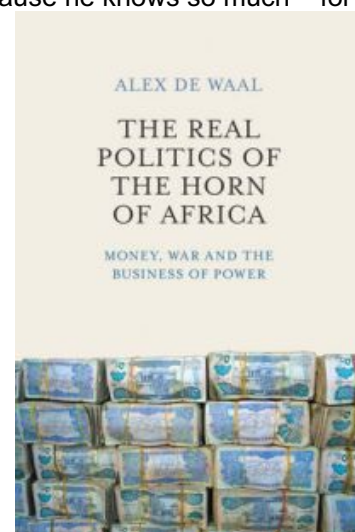
The overall message is a powerful one – the category of ‘fragile and conflict-affected states’ is largely useless, a description of what is missing to the eyes of a traditional Western view of development (institutions, stability, rule of law) not what is actually going on – how decisions are made, the ‘political circuitry’, and accumulation and loss of power, the use of violence.

De Waal’s unblinking gaze seeks to describe that reality, warts and all. His big idea is that politics in the Horn is best understood as a marketplace, where the currency is money and violence. ‘States’ are largely imaginary constructs. What matters in politics is accumulating as large a ‘political budget’ as possible – the discretionary funds that any leader can spend on buying support, both in votes and guns. In contrast, ‘the public budget is a sideshow’. In the hierarchy of the political marketplace, everyone is both a buyer of smaller players, and a seller to bigger ones. ‘Violence is a means of bargaining and signalling value within the marketplace.’

The political marketplace is not some dwindling vestige of patronage politics, quietly making way for democracies of political parties and programmes. Quite the opposite – ‘political markets are becoming dominant while state-building fades’. Whatever their instincts, leaders either have to play by the rules of the political marketplace, or be cast out. ‘Most members of the political elites of north-east Africa have come to resemble gangsters rather than civic political leaders.’ Along the way, state boundaries have largely dissolved as political entrepreneurs compete across the region in a form of brutal Darwinism.

De Waal argues that political marketplace systems arise where four conditions exist: political finance is in the hands of individuals; control over violence is dispersed or contested; political disputes are not resolved by institutions like the Law and the countries are integrated into the global political and economic order in a subordinate position.

He stretches the marketplace analogy as far as it will go, and then some, analysing the actions of violent warlords as entrepreneurs, suppliers, buyers, producers of goods and services.





South Sudan army (SPLA) soldiers talk on December 25, 2013 at Bor airport after they re-captured the town from rebels . The rebels retook the town on Tuesday, but on Thursday, the army said they were advancing again to push them back. AFP PHOTO/SAMIR BOLSAMIR BOL/AFP/Getty Images

How did this happen? Here’s where de Waal’s encyclopaedic knowledge of the region really shows, a masterly synthesis of a sequence of events that destroyed the ‘modernizing project’ of building states in the region: economic crisis and the retreat of the state in the 1980s, the opening of arms markets, the increasing number of potential patrons in the Middle East and elsewhere, the rise of political Islamism, and the new security agenda, post 9/11. Would be political entrepreneurs are swimming in sources of cash – aid is increasingly petty cash compared to the potential income from oil and mining, counter-terrorism and peacekeeping and crime (eg piracy and arms/human trafficking).

De Waal admits to ‘finding this political system fascinating and repugnant’ and the book makes for jaundiced, depressing reading. Everyone is on the make – politicians, lawyers, judges, civil society leaders (when they occasionally get a mention). International bodies like the African Union merely service the money circus. Politics is reduced to ‘who, whom and how much’. Aid just rearranges the incentives a bit.

A more positive finding is that by some measures, the political marketplace works rather better than what went before. Despite the threat of violence dispersed political markets and the constant negotiations and accommodations produce a kind of bounded volatility where fewer people are killed than in the previous era (the regional body count peaked in 1988). It’s analogous to the creative destruction of the market, compared to the spectacular booms and busts of Central Planning.

Any reasons to be cheerful? Not many, I’m afraid. De Waal clutches at a few fairly standard straws – urbanization, mass higher education, an emerging middle class and ICT. The message to the international community is even feeble – ‘take the money out of politics’, which is well-nigh impossible according to his own analysis, and a vague appeal to human morality.

My conclusion? Read this book for its in-depth knowledge and brave iconoclasm, but don’t expect to come away with some big new narrative, still less any optimism for the future of the Horn.

To read more from Duncan visit his blog [From Poverty to Power](#)

This blog was first published in the [LSE International Development blog](#).

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