



---

## BOOK REVIEW

**Alexander B. Makulilo; Eugène Ntaganda; Francis A. Away; Margaret Sekaggya & Patrick Osodo, *Election Management Bodies in East Africa: A Comparative Study of the Contribution of Electoral Commissions to the Strengthening of Democracy*. Nairobi: Open Society Foundations, 2015. 293 pages, ISBN 978-1-920677-96-1**

**Rodrick Henry, Ph.D** |ORCID.0000-0003-1420-6045  
Department of Political Science and Public Administration  
University of Dar es Salaam  
Email [henryrodrick@yahoo.com](mailto:henryrodrick@yahoo.com)

Election Management Bodies (EMBs) are critical to the conduct of elections and the consolidation of democracy. Nevertheless, there remains a scanty comprehensive analysis of EMBs in East Africa. Makulilo, Ntaganda, Away, Sekaggya, and Osodo's book ventures into that journey. Their book analyses the nature and role of EMBs in five East African countries, namely Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda, centring election management at the heart of democratisation and democratic consolidation. The book situates EMBs into a broader perspective, assuming "their status as a product of the struggle for democracy, their anchorage in the constitutional traditions of each society, their place in the history of political reform, and their interaction with the other institutions of each country" (p. viii). The book's essence draws from the reality that African elections and governance contestations primarily revolve around the management and administration of elections (p. 1). The book is organised into six chapters. The first provides a general analytic framework of the book, including the literature review. The remaining chapters are about EMBs in the five cases. Each chapter concludes with a section on recommendations for improving EMBs and election quality.

In this book, individual cases are analysed in-depth. The book employs a historical approach illumined by the position that EMBs are products and subjects of a country's political processes. This links EMBs to the broader topic of democratic consolidation. The authors present a systematic and comprehensive review of the five countries' legal frameworks and rules guiding EMBs. This aligns with the classical literature on democracy and democratisation, which places institutions central to its analysis. The book reveals that, EMBs' legal and administrative frameworks are highly challenging to free and fair elections and acceptance of electoral results by actors. The legal frameworks across the five countries confer incumbents with enormous powers to appoint and control the EMBs. The state of affairs results in partisan electoral commissions, fuelling conflicts and apathy for democracy. The book reveals that even in Kenya, where the changes to the constitution in 2010 are credited for establishing an independent electoral commission, the incumbent still holds sway in the commission's affairs and composition.

A reader can underscore the sharp differences in the origin, nature and conduct of EMBs among the five countries. EMBs result from political processes and events shaped by the country's political history and struggles for democracy (p. 5). Burundi and Rwanda's electoral commissions were conceived from bloody civil wars and ethnic conflicts. Against this

backdrop, the EMBs in the two countries are designed to prioritise dispute resolution in discharging their mandates. Except for Tanzania, the book shows that ethnic politics and divisions are critical in democratic dispensations, which adversely affect political participation and the management of elections. The authors successfully provide an in-depth account of ethnic divisions in the case studies by linking them to democratisation, elections and election management. The analysis also points to the differences between electoral commissions in Rwanda and Burundi on the one hand and Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania on the other. Elections in the two camps are guided by two different electoral systems, i.e. plurality and proportional electoral systems.

More interesting, the book takes stock of the challenges facing EMBs in the five cases. First, electoral commissions lack sufficient funds to effectively run activities in the electoral cycle. Donors remain the main funders of elections, but their support is wavering. Secondly, dispute-solving mechanisms are practically ineffective despite being in place. The existing institutions are relatively devoid of transparency, inclusiveness, impartiality, continuity and localisation. Kenya is an illustrative case as the book demonstrates how electoral disputes at the local level frequently escalate to violence despite the existence of conflict resolution mechanisms outlined in the 2010 constitution.

There are, however, some gaps in this book. The chapter on the models of EMBs is narrowly conceived. It is inconsistent with the book's title and topic. Confining the literature review of EMBs to their models leaves other critical aspects and dimensions for understanding EMBs in Africa. Research has shown that, in Africa and other Third-Wave democracies, the context in which the EMBs operate matters more than how they are designed. Informal rules and personalities often influence the conduct of EMBs and the dispensation of their mandate (Opitz et al., 2014). Similarly, the nature of the regime and electoral systems may result in varied outcomes regardless of the EMB models (Pastor, 1999). The book's narrowing of the literature review to the models of EMBs is a serious reduction. Also, although the book claims to rely on "documentary research and detailed interviews" (p. xiii), no explanation exists for how 'detailed interviews' were conducted and analysed.

Finally, the book claims to be "a comparative analysis of EMBs in the five East African countries – Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda – and their respective contribution to the quality of citizens' participation in public affairs" (p. xvii). However, that has not been accomplished. *First*, the issues analysed in each country vary among cases, making it challenging to develop a common comparative analytical framework. *Second*, there is no chapter or section in the book which details the comparative approach employed in the study. *Lastly*, there is hardly a specific chapter that provides a comparative summary or remarks from the analysis of the five cases. This is a serious omission as readers have the daunting task of establishing the similarities and differences between the case studies and the explanations of the observations, which might be misleading. Notwithstanding, I find this work well-organised and comprehensible. The book will interest a broad audience, particularly practitioners, students of politics and those who pursue knowledge of election management and democratic consolidation in Africa and beyond.

### **Funding**

This study was funded by authors of this article.

### **Disclosure Statement**

There is no conflicting interest to declare.

**References**

- Opitz, Z, Fjelde, H, & Höglund, K (2013). Including peace: the influence of Electoral Management Bodies on Electoral violence, *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 7(4):713-731.
- Pastor, R. (1999). The Role of Electoral Administration in Democratic Transitions: Implications for Policy and Research, *Democratization*, 6(4):1-27.