

Review: Anika Becher, Explaining Ethnic and Election Violence: Kenya and Malawi in Comparison (2016)

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Anika Becher (2016), *Explaining Ethnic and Election Violence: Kenya and Malawi in Comparison*, Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, ISBN 9783848733903, 557 pp.

In recent years, conflict research has branched out from a focus on interstate and civil war to embrace a more nuanced understanding of violent conflict. Anika Becher's book forms part of this trend and contains a systematic, multimethod analysis that charts patterns of ethnic and electoral violence and identifies its causes in two African countries: Kenya and Malawi. The basic rationale for probing deep into these two countries is that Kenya has experienced significant ethnic and electoral violence, while Malawi has encountered similar kinds of violence on a much lower scale. With the analysis of Kenya, Becher shows with rigour and detail how persistent violence can be a feature of societies without it taking the shape of civil war and how violence tends to not only fluctuate over time but also cluster in specific areas. The Malawi case illustrates how a country can experience electoral violence without it being driven by ethnic violence or directly connected to it.

The book spans two interconnected research fields that have been gaining ground in recent years. While the study of ethnic violence is not new, comparative research has been held back by a lack of cross-case micro-level data that would enable comparisons over time and space. While more systematic research has been spurred by recent developments on the data front, the type of paired and more detailed comparisons that form the core of this study remain rare. Similarly, research on electoral violence has grown and developed into a subfield of its own in recent years. But country-focused research on electoral violence has a tendency to give prime focus to certain hotspots, often overlooking the less affected countries. Especially noteworthy in this regard is this book's focus on the presence and absence of violence in Malawi. While electoral and ethnic violence is well documented in Kenya, patterns of violence in Malawi are much less covered. By including a "non-case" in the analysis, the study demonstrates through its findings how political and socio-economic conditions prevalent in very violent cases may exist in countries with far less violence.

A major strength of the book lies in its comparative approach and Becher's effort to chart patterns of violence across time and space. In an attempt to remedy weaknesses of existing data, the author has compiled her own dataset on ethnic and electoral violence in Kenya and Malawi. It is a major undertaking, drawing on a large set of sources. The data set is used to explore patterns and trends in both countries, but in exploring

the causes of the violence, each case analysis weaves together quantitative analysis with qualitative evidence and illustrative examples.

The book also contains a detailed inventory of existing civil war literature whose comprehensiveness is impressive. Based on the literature review, several hypotheses relating to political and socio-economic factors are identified, including the competitiveness of elections, the inclusion or exclusion of political parties and politically mobilized ethnic groups, issues related to land and in-migration, poverty and education, and horizontal inequalities. These factors are subsequently assessed in relation to observed patterns of violence in each of the countries over a 20-year period. This ambitious theoretical approach generates some interesting findings; in particular, socio-economic factors seem to matter for both forms of violence, but in different ways (485): On the one hand, widespread poverty and low education levels cannot be identified as drivers of ethnic violence in Malawi, while in Kenya violence is more prevalent in areas with such characteristics. On the other hand, the analysis suggests that electoral violence in both countries was more common in more educated and wealthy areas.

Overall, the book's contributions could have been sharper if the volume had focused either just on ethnic or just on electoral violence. Apart from losing in conceptual and empirical focus, the approach raises questions about the interconnectedness of different forms of violence, a topic on which the book does not provide satisfactory answers. In addition, related terms – such as political violence – are introduced in the case analysis without any deeper explanation or discussion of how different forms of violence relate to each other. For instance, to what extent are patterns of ethnic versus electoral violence artefacts of how the violence is labelled in different contexts and in different countries? The author could have leveraged a deeper discussion around such questions and thus offered further important insights into both ethnic and electoral violence.

■ Kristine Höglund