

[Mocheregwa on Harkness, 'When Soldiers Rebel: Ethnic Armies and Political Instability in Africa'](#)

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Kristen A. Harkness. *When Soldiers Rebel: Ethnic Armies and Political Instability in Africa.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Illustrations, tables. 278 pp. \$100.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-108-42247-5.

Reviewed by Bafumiki Mocheregwa (University of Calgary) **Published on** H-War (February, 2021) **Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air University)

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The main argument of Kristen A. Harkness's study centers on the tendency of African militaries to have deep-rooted institutions of recruiting personnel along ethnic lines. Ethnic patronage in militaries is difficult to dismantle and has resulted in coups across the continent. "Focusing on the narrow empirical context of African militaries and when soldiers rebel against the state on ethnic grounds, I argue that when leaders attempt to build ethnic armies, or dismantle those created by their predecessors, they provoke violent resistance from military officers" (p. 10). This is the premise from which Harkness's thoughtful work on the shape and identity of ethnically charged militaries in sub-Saharan Africa departs. She provides a refreshing view of how these heavily ingrained institutions have been an obstacle to democratization in Africa.

In her view, different ethnic groups that make up the majority of militaries tend to rebel or launch coups whenever they feel threatened by efforts to implement democratic models. This line of thinking rightly builds on earlier work by Lars-Erik Cederman, Kristina Skrede-Gledistch, and Halvard Bahaug, which argues that coups are likely to be initiated by those who were recently deposed.

Harkness's dealing with colonial military practices in chapter 1 is a fundamental departure point for this book. It provides a thorough contextual and historical background for the many instances of coups in Africa since the independence era. She rightly points out that the culture of ethnically biased militaries is a colonial construct that created "a ready model for ensuring loyalty through racial and ethnic manipulations" (p. 38). Harkness uses various examples to illustrate that the recruitment and promotion practices within colonial forces fostered the idea that ethnic patronage, which continued in the postcolonial era, was a normal occurrence.

In chapter 2, Harkness uses original statistical data to provide descriptive evidence of the argument that coups in Africa, particularly following attempts at democratization, were the result of attempts to dismantle long-standing ethnic privilege within militaries. Ethnically biased militaries, according to Harkness, rebelled by a margin of 66.7-72.2 percent of the time whenever a new political leader who did not share the same ethnic lineage was installed by electoral processes. This case-by-case empirical analysis of leadership changes between 1950 and 2012 provides a clear pattern of the causes of political instability. Countries where political leaders chose to establish ethnically stacked armies experienced three times more coup attempts than other nations.

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Chapters 3 and 4 take the argument further by comparing political instability from countries with ethnically stacked armies Cameroon and Sierra Leone versus Senegal and Ghana, both of which tried to establish inclusive militaries following independence. Unlike Ghana, which still suffered a series of coups despite Kwame Nkrumah's attempts to build an ethnically diverse military after independence, Senegal fared significantly better. Harkness sees Leopold Senghor's efforts at balancing the ethnic composition of the army and Senegal's long history of ethnic inclusivity that fostered a stable political climate in the country as key to Senegal's situation.

When Soldiers Rebel would best serve students interested in African studies and African military history. Because of its empirical nature, those taking political science or studying civil-military relations in Africa might also find it incredibly useful. Perhaps the only limitation of the book is the narrow scope of the case studies as there are more examples to argue that indeed most of the political instability in postcolonial Africa is the result of ethnically stacked militaries. In the early chapters of the book, she rightly points out examples of coups in Uganda under Milton Obote and later Idi Amin but does not expand on these as she does for the West African cases studies. A much more nuanced analysis on this would have strengthened and widened the focus of the book. However, this small issue should not take away from the fact that this is an excellent and highly welcomed addition to the literature of democratization across postcolonial Africa. It is a great contribution to the discussion around the roles played by militaries in undoing the democratic processes in some African states.

The style and structure of the book are also clear and concise, which make the book easy to understand. Harkness should be given credit for the balance of primary and secondary sources as well as the various databases she cross-referenced when conducting this study. The result is a coherent and well put together historical narrative and, to an extent, a cautionary tale about the nature of some postcolonial militaries in Africa.

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