importance of considering the inner workings of a culture when analysing problem-solution frames, something often overlooked even by well-intentioned researchers.

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David Harris’s most recent book examines the nature of post-conflict elections as determinants of peace in the twenty-first century. Tracing the development of conflict resolution more broadly in post-Cold War Africa, but looking in particular at these two West African cases, Harris examines the role of elections as the crux of conflict termination in the contemporary era and the problematic role they have come to occupy when coupled with concepts of post-conflict justice. He probes the role of the international community in cementing the primacy of the post-conflict election and conceptions of transitional justice, notably the emergence not only of the International Criminal Court but also of ad hoc hybrid systems such as the Sierra Leone Special Court (SLSC).

Harris’s text begins with an introduction to the literature on contemporary conflict resolution more broadly, but specifically in relation to the African continent and the emergence of the ‘new war’ thesis in respect of Africa’s myriad intra-state conflicts. Harris provides a very useful overview of the thematic considerations and developments in relation to conflict in Africa, probing ideas of ethnicity and motivation, such as the ‘greed’ vs ‘grievance’ debate (pp. 1–37). Harris makes it clear that his text will focus on conflict resolution and democratization, with elections as the point at which these intertwine: ‘the intersection of local actors, international bodies and post-conflict elections’ (p. 37) is the central underpinning of the text. Harris divides the book up into eight chapters, with chapters 2 to 7 looking at the historical factors leading to conflict in both countries, the nature of the wars themselves, and the two major elections under consideration in each case (1996 and 2002 for Sierra Leone, 1997 and 2005 for Liberia). The concluding two chapters examine the role of elections more broadly, as well as transitional justice, and their utility as determinants of a new democratic dispensation.

Harris’s book is well-informed and highly readable, analysing not only the historical genesis of conflict in both cases but the electioneering and political interplay that emerged in the context of post-conflict elections; in both cases the first election proves a false dawn for peace and stability. A strength of this text is the avoidance of monocausal explanations for both conflicts: Harris examines larger contexts throughout and provides useful evidence for a wide range of opinions on certain events and actions. The author is keen throughout to analyse ‘the impact of the international discourse surrounding the elections’ (p. 185) and how certain actions, for instance the lack of international support for building up the Revolutionary
United Front (RUF) as a political force, can influence the long-term effect of an election. He finds that ‘the argument for the international funding of political parties across Africa is persuasive’ and points to the clear benefits that emerged in examples such as South Africa and Mozambique (pp. 218–19). Evidently, Harris aims to show the huge degree of variance between flawed post-conflict elections and stronger, more stable affairs where minor flaws and irregularities may arise yet the overall will of the populace emerges (interestingly, Harris states that, though Charles Taylor’s 1997 victory in Liberia was flawed, ‘electoral malpractice was consistently present, but probably not widespread enough to have significantly altered the overall result’ (p. 187)). In the Liberian context, we see the impact of a decentralization of power and alternative voting systems, with presidential, House, and Senate elections allowing for both national and local issues to emerge in voters’ considerations. Furthermore, it prevents a concentration of power in a single majority power: ‘the resulting and remarkable balance of power across the parties in the House, Senate and Executive incorporates, at the least, wide representation from across the country and the Liberian political spectrum’ (p. 207). The avoidance of a zero-sum game is surely to be welcomed.

One criticism is that it takes much of the book to establish the platform for his arguments regarding the utility of elections in both cases (and the prevalence of judicial solutions over political ones), with the final two chapters probing the difficulties of hastily convened elections where the underlying causes of conflict are papered over for short-term stability. Thus, whilst the second democratic elections in each case had their benefits, Harris notes the problematic sideling of the very issues that precipitated the emergence of armed groups in each case; he also points out that, in the Liberian case, ‘the liberal solution of justice in a post-conflict scenario is at best a potential threat to stability and at worst unworkable and dangerous’ (p. 194). Furthermore, ‘the effective criminalization of most, if not all, combatants also has the effect of delegitimizing violent change and of downplaying domestic and international causes of the conflict’ (p. 228). Constitutional engineering methods must be tackled on a case-by-case basis to try to foster political inclusion: ‘the widening of political representation, despite its potential effect on the ability of a state to effect policy and the continuance of patron–client politics, is thus on balance beneficial’ (p. 244). Another minor problem with the text is the intermittent use of the author’s own interviews and fieldwork in each case, as Harris’s direct knowledge of specific situations lends a degree of weight to certain claims; it is thus unfortunate that Harris only uses his interviews and primary source material sparingly.

These problems aside, Harris has provided a very useful introduction to the conflicts in both African states and the nature of the political support and ideologies which informed key participants in each case. Important considerations with regard to the utility of post-conflict elections, and the role of the international community in conditioning the functioning of African elections and post-conflict systems of justice and reconciliation, are also probed effectively throughout.