

# Book Review

***Illiberal Practices: Territorial Variance within Large Federal Democracies***, by Jacqueline Behrend and Laurence Whitehead. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016, 330 pp., \$49.95 paperback

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While scholarship on subnational regimes in democracies has grown considerably over the past decade, its focus has remained somewhat narrow. Concretely, existing works predominantly focus on the conditions that facilitate the rise and fall of subnational *authoritarian* regimes in *federal* democracies. In other words, this literature does not take into account that a broad range of subnational regime types may exist, not all of them fully authoritarian. Furthermore, there is almost no scholarship that explicitly focuses on subnational regimes in decentralized *unitary* states.

A new volume edited by Jacqueline Behrend and Laurence Whitehead addresses some of these gaps in the literature. Examining subnational regimes in the world's six largest federal democracies, namely Argentina, Brazil, India, Mexico, Russia, and the United States, the main argument put forward in this volume is that subnational regime types may be more diverse than previous scholarship was ready to acknowledge. Most subnational regimes are neither fully authoritarian nor fully democratic but constitute hybrid regimes. Political elites populating such subnational hybrid regimes rely on a combination of democratic and undemocratic tools to remain in power that are best described as "illiberal practices." Such practices are largely peaceful and include the use of family connections, control over the local media landscape, infiltrating the local judiciary, clientelistic service delivery or the promotion of local patriotism. In short, while the existing literature on subnational authoritarian regimes in federal democracies focuses largely on violent forms of oppression as well as formal practices such as the manipulation of budgets and electoral, fiscal, and legal frameworks, this volume concentrates on the role informal practices play in the rise and fall of subnational political regimes.

Since "[t]he illiberal structures and practices that most effectively distort or suppress citizen autonomy are durable and persistent" (p. 11), such practices are best uncovered and studied in a comparative historical perspective. The first part of the book then contains two chapters on subnational political regime trajectories in the United States and India over time. With regard to the United States, Edward Gibson and Desmond King argue, much like in previous works,<sup>1</sup> that subnational democratization in the country can only be understood when institutional changes at the national level are taken into account. Maya Tudor and Adam Ziegfeld show that variance in subnational democratization in India aligns with

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patterns of local resistance and opposition during the colonial period but is amplified by post-independence national government intervention. The second part of the book focuses on the diverse origins of illiberal practices in Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico. Jacqueline Behrend examines three Argentinian provinces that have experienced federal intervention since the country's transition toward democracy in 1983. She asks if, and if so, how, subnational regimes can democratize through external shocks. She concludes that national intervention may dismantle repressive local state structures, contain state-led violence, and trigger elite turnover that may subsequently usher in newly competitive politics. However, her study also suggests that national-level intervention may simply replace one local political family with another and therefore not actually weaken state capture and collusion between local government branches. Carlos Gervasoni focuses on Argentina too. Based on an original dataset collected through an expert survey on democratization across provinces, he shows that hybrid, not authoritarian regimes, dominate the country's political landscape. He concludes that subnational incumbents in national democracies prefer, whenever possible, relatively peaceful strategies to stay in power over outright coercion and repression. The next two chapters turn to subnational political regime variance in Brazil. André Borges examines the role of political parties as agents of subnational democratization. He hypothesizes that party nationalization, the increasing congruence between national and local party systems, may undermine local-level despotism by transferring national norms and political cleavages to the local level. However, Borges then finds no empirical evidence that party nationalization triggered local-level democratization in Brazil. Celina Souza has a close look at politics in the Brazilian state of Bahia. She finds that re-democratization in the state took longer than elsewhere in the country after the collapse of military rule at the national level. Critically engaging with Gibson's theory of "Boundary Control," Souza shows that the interaction between national and local institutions cannot explain why Bahia eventually became more democratic. Rather, national social policies changed the preferences of voters and turned them away from the local oligarchy. In short, policy change induced by the national-level, not institutional change transformed the political trajectory of Bahia. In his chapter on Mexico, Julián Durazo Herrmann looks at Puebla and Oaxaca. Again challenging Gibson's emphasis on institutional conditions for local illiberal regime survival, he argues that local conditions determined the political trajectory of the two states. In both Puebla and Oaxaca, socioeconomic conditions and forms of neo-patrimonialism that emerge from it explain regime longevity in the two areas better than institutional changes. The third part of the book consists of only one chapter, which examines subnational regime variability in Russia. Inga A.-L. Saikkonen shows that Russia's re-centralization and growing authoritarianism at the national level under Putin was greatly facilitated by the existence of numerous subnational authoritarian enclaves that had survived the collapse of the Soviet Union. The integration of these enclaves into national politics and the national party system explains Putin's rise to power. This shows that in order to understand national-level political developments, subnational regime variance needs to be taken into account. In the last chapter of the book, Laurence Whitehead and Jacqueline Behrend summarize the book's main findings and map out avenues for future research on subnational political regimes.

The main contributions of this volume are the following: First, hybrid regimes are likely the common subnational regime type in countries that have recently seen national-level democratization. Second, local incumbents employ a broad range of tactics when trying to stay in power. These strategies can rely on formal or informal bases of power such as institutions or family networks. Third, conditions intrinsic to localities are important, including socioeconomic conditions shaping voter preferences; local power dynamics that

arise from societal cleavages as well as path-dependent local developments that shape sources of illiberal structures over time.

Overall then, the edited volume calls for a broader conceptualization of subnational regime types and a shift in perspective away from formal institutions and inter-institutional dynamics that has dominated recent research. Instead, local conditions need to be considered as potential explanatory variables shaping subnational political regimes. With regard to these findings, it would have been helpful if the authors had provided a classification of potential hybrid local regimes. Furthermore, as the volume downplays the importance of formal institutions in shaping subnational regime types, more could have been said about the conditions that shape subnational political regimes in decentralized *unitary* states, where there are fewer opportunities to manipulate local institutions to begin with than in federal democracies. How do subnational regime dynamics in decentralized unitary states inform our understanding of federal democracies? Finally, while authors throughout the chapter make frequent reference to the importance of structural conditions exogenous to local institutions and how they shape the rise and fall of local political machines, a more systematic comparison of such conditions both within and across the countries examined in this volume would have been helpful. Overall, however, this book is a timely contribution to the growing literature on subnational political regimes in democracies around the world, which scholars of comparative democratization, subnational politics, and local governance will find equally interesting.

## Notes

- 1 Gibson's (2012) book was reviewed by Michael Buehler in *Publius* (Spring 2014) 44 (2).

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