

2016

Elischer, Sebastian. *Political Parties in Africa: Ethnicity and Party Formation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2013, 336 pp.

Elizabeth Miller

City of Columbia, Missouri, ebmiller2000@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <http://encompass.eku.edu/jora>

 Part of the [African Languages and Societies Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Miller, Elizabeth. "Elischer, Sebastian. *Political Parties in Africa: Ethnicity and Party Formation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2013, 336 pp.." *Journal of Retracing Africa*: Vol. 3, Issue 1 (2016): 82-83. <http://encompass.eku.edu/jora/vol3/iss1/12>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Encompass. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Retracing Africa* by an authorized editor of Encompass. For more information, please contact [Linda.Sizemore@eku.edu](mailto:Linda.Sizemore@eku.edu).

**Elischer, Sebastian.** *Political Parties in Africa: Ethnicity and Party Formation.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2013. 336 pp.

In his book *Political Parties in Africa: Ethnicity and Party Formation* Sebastian Elischer explores how ethnicity impacts political party formation in Sub-Saharan Africa. He is particularly curious about the role of ethnicity in political party formation and function in Ghana, Namibia, and Kenya. He also provides a brief overview of political party formation in Tanzania, Botswana, Senegal, Zambia, Malawi, Burkina Faso, and Benin. His research on African political party formation is the first of its kind of more than fifty years.

Elischer's fundamental view is that the comparative politics literature itself has a western bias. This shapes his research on the African political party landscape in that his goal is to turn over decades of political science scholarship. He determines that there are five major party types: the ethnic alliance, the mono-ethnic alliance, the catch-all, the programmatic, and the personalistic party. Even more importantly, he creates a new global typology that is relevant for Africa. Further he provides the reader with a sense that political party formation is highly divergent and developed in African nations and helps the reader to understand that the simple country or case studies of one African nation are no longer relevant to the political science discipline.

Elischer's study demonstrates that there is a correlation between country social structure and the party system type currently in place. Thus, countries with one core ethnic group and low ethnic fragmentation are prone to forming nonethnic parties. However, countries lacking a core ethnic group and exhibiting high ethnic fragmentation are prone to the formation of ethnic group parties. Although Elischer has a small number of countries that he is examining, he makes great strides in helping us understand African politics more fully. To provide insight into political party formation in nations with vastly different cultures, languages, histories and ethnicities is a remarkable contribution to many fields: political science, sociology, anthropology and history only to name a few.

Elischer also helps us understand in a practical, public policy sense that the bans on ethnic parties in place in many African nations today are not necessary. Rather, these bans are based on a basic misunderstanding about what leads to ethnic strife in African nations. According to Elischer, ethnic parties are not the problem, but societal ethnic fragmentation is. Ethnic parties are a symptom and not a cause. Ethnic parties, according to Elischer, do however create political polarization and can cause extreme pressure on voters to turn-out to vote, which can lead to a highly charged political atmosphere.

Importantly, Elischer helps us understand that Africa is more than a stereotype in which ethnic parties dominate. Perhaps this view has been pervasive for so long, because the intricate nature of African parties and politics has generally been hard for the western audience to understand. With so many languages and cultures, Africa has not been easy for news reporters, political scientists, sociologists, historians, or anthropologists to grasp in its entirety.

Unfortunately, in his attempts to refute western thinking, in some ways Elischer still falls into a trap: his African party conventions are too simple, case studies are too small, and the statistical questions he answers are far too few. African political parties cannot simply be boiled down to ethnic or nonethnic party types. More questions need to be answered: How do elites behave in nonethnic and ethnic party types? How do parties behave in legislative chambers? Do ethnic parties effectively form coalitional governments? How stable are Africa's nonethnic and ethnic parties? Do ethnic parties provide goods and services to nonethnic members effectively? Perhaps we must wait for a new generation of African scholars to help us truly understand the political parties of the African continent.

Elizabeth Bissell Miller  
Human Rights Commissioner  
City of Columbia, Missouri, MO