The end of Portuguese colonialism ignited the dormant liberation struggles in South Africa and in neighbouring Namibia. Cuba was, as Piero Gleijeses argues in this important exposition on the topic, the catalyst for the transformation of the region from one dominated by white settler minority rule to single party constitutional democracies led by the former liberation movements. The author’s careful use of archival material and interviews from the three main protagonists – Cuba, the United States and South Africa – is the key distinguishing feature of this authoritative account. Covering one and a half decades, the book describes in great detail the policy initiatives, debates and reactions as the three capitals sought to shape the political orientation. The book puts paid to the author’s claim that the state expropriated only pockets of land, perhaps due to the population density in those areas. The Eritrean state, like many other post-colonial states in Africa has failed to restore land appropriated by the colonial state back to its rightful owners. Instead, it promulgated a land reform proclamation, which transferred control of all land to the state. Despite the proclamation, however, land use rights in the highlands largely remain in the hands of villagers while in the lowlands the state has used some formerly demesnial land for expansion of commercial farming and for settlement of returning refugees, inferring on the customary use-rights of pastoralists in the lowlands. There is little doubt that there prevails inherited injustice with respect to land in the lowlands and it needs serious attention. However, the authors fail to give this historical perspective of the land tenure problem in the lowlands, including the Kunama areas. They also do not provide any data on how much land has been alienated from the Kunama relative to those from other ethnic identities in the Gash Barka and Semhar regions of the country, where the land was brought under state control by the colonial state.

Similarly, the authors give little historical background on how the Jeberti (Mosllem minorities in the Christian dominated highlands) came to be denied access to land in Highland Eritrea. Historically land in the highlands is generally under the control of villages or kinship groups. In order to get access to use-rights of land one has to be native to the village or a member of the kinship that controls a parcel of land. Villages hardly have the authority to deny any native person access to land for changing one’s religion. It is also not customary for villages or kinship group to give land to non-natives or non-members regardless of how long they live in the villages. It would have been a useful contribution for the authors to clarify how the Jeberti came to be denied access to land in the highlands. In any case, landlessness of the Jeberti precedes the Eritrean state.

Another important omission by the book is that it does not explain why the Eritrean population has failed to prevent the emergence of such a repressive regime or why the regime continues to garner support from segments of the Eritrean population, including those in the diaspora, despite its record of repression. The factors may be several; however, the regime has ably exploited the existing ‘no-peace-no-war’ situation with Ethiopia to divert attention away from domestic repression. It is likely that the country’s security risk is viewed by many to be a greater concern than domestic repression even though domestic repression also puts the country’s security at risk.

Despite the identified limitations the book makes a valuable contribution in explaining Eritrea’s political structures and their repercussions. It provides readers with meticulous documentation of Eritrea’s dismal human rights record. Readers will obtain a clear understanding of why so many young Eritreans leave their country fleeing the open-ended compulsory national service that forces them to provide free labor in the firms controlled by the PFDJ. The government claims that the refugees are economic migrants leaving the country for better economic opportunities but miscalculating the fact that open-ended compulsory service denies the refugees the opportunity to work and lead normal life during their productive years.

Cuba in Africa

Chris Alden


The end of Portuguese colonialism ignited the dormant liberation struggles in South Africa and in neighbouring Namibia. Cuba was, as Piero Gleijeses argues in this important exposition on the topic, the catalyst for the transformation of the region from one dominated by white settler minority rule to single party constitutional democracies led by the former liberation movements. The author’s careful use of archival material and interviews from the three main protagonists – Cuba, the United States and South Africa – is the key distinguishing feature of this authoritative account. Covering one and a half decades, the book describes in great detail the policy initiatives, debates and reactions as the three capitals sought to shape the political orientation. The book puts paid to the author’s claim that the state expropriated only pockets of land, perhaps due to the population density in those areas. The Eritrean state, like many other post-colonial states in Africa has failed to restore land appropriated by the colonial state back to its rightful owners. Instead, it promulgated a land reform proclamation, which transferred control of all land to the state. Despite the proclamation, however, land use rights in the highlands largely remain in the hands of villagers while in the lowlands the state has used some formerly demesnial land for expansion of commercial farming and for settlement of returning refugees, inferring on the customary use-rights of pastoralists in the lowlands. There is little doubt that there prevails inherited injustice with respect to land in the lowlands and it needs serious attention. However, the authors fail to give this historical perspective of the land tenure problem in the lowlands, including the Kunama areas. They also do not provide any data on how much land has been alienated from the Kunama relative to those from other ethnic identities in the Gash Barka and Semhar regions of the country, where the land was brought under state control by the colonial state.

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normalisation such as discussions held by President Jimmy Carter that were ultimately thwarted by Cuban intervention in Angola – and the part that it played in determining official reactions to events in Southern Africa and his integration of this neglected dimension is an important addition to our understanding of Washington’s policy towards Southern Africa. Negotiating a withdrawal of Cuban forces from Angola thus became the linchpin for regional change for Washington, combining all key aspects of US concerns that shaped its approach towards Southern Africa at the global, regional and even domestic levels.

Perhaps one of the most arresting findings of the book is the policy debates in Havana and the ancillary discussions in Pretoria on a possible Cuban military incursion into Namibia. Weighing in on the controversial claims of South African military apologists that the battle of protracted campaign at Cuito Canda was a victory, Gleijeses presents compelling evidence that all parties understood that, whatever their interpretation of the specific event, it was a barbinger of a strategic shift in the overall nature of the conflict against apartheid South African interests. The South African Defence Forces’ (SADF) hubris, reflected in the official statements and local media reports at the time, disguised deep disquiet at the loss of air superiority, spiralling costs in white soldiers’ lives and equipment that a robust defence of northern Namibia would require. Cuba’s willingness, however, to engage spiralling costs in white soldiers’ lives and Africa’s Defence Forces’ (SADF) hubris, reflects the fact that the South Africans would be compelled to use their nuclear device to halt the drive, makes for sobering reflection.

There are unanswered questions and analytical inferences that come out of this study. For instance, the trial and execution of the senior Cuban General Arnaldo Ochoa in the immediate aftermath of the draw down of Cuba’s military presence in Angola, is perplexing. As Gleijeses himself notes, the actual reported acts of corruption he was accused of were relatively minor in scale and would imply a less drastic official reaction to someone who was a national war hero. Were there other reasons that Castro had to undermine Ochoa?

Another intriguing fact that Gleijeses hints at is that the withdrawal of Cuban advisors in Angola corresponded with the rise of rent-seeking conduct on the part of the MPLA elite. Was this a necessary step to remove Cubans (and other outsiders) in order to assert national control over policy making and implementation or was it the glimmering of financial opportunities the more important impulse? It would be interesting to explore this transitional moment in greater detail to see just how decision making at the top may have laid the foundation for the corrupted Angolan petrostate. Finally, as the commentary above all implies, the author’s decision to focus on external powers (plus South Africa’s National Party government) inevitably serves to diminish the significance of African agency in this context.

There is another dimension worth mentioning with respect to Gleijeses’s book. In the contemporary technology-induced narcissistic climate that celebrates the uncritical use of the internet as a self-sufficient research resource, there are worrying signs that academia’s next generation of students appear to be fast losing the skills and drive necessary to do genuine archival research. Gleijeses reminds us that the hard work of trawling the archives and corroborating perspectives and events through interviews is a requisite process needed to make tangible gains in our understanding of history. The author even goes so far as to supplement his key sources with an examination of archives in countries as diverse as Zambia and Canada, effectively triangulating evidence and opening up other perspectives on the ongoing struggle in the region. (The latter source contained, in Gleijeses’s succinct judgment, ‘little of relevance to this book’, but the point is he took the trouble to find out). This determination to get to the ‘truths’ as understood by the protagonists allows the reader to hear, in their own words, the contemporary assessment of challenges and possibilities for action, and it should be applauded.

Finally, as the actual participants of that transformative period die and their experiences fade for the Southern African public, the supplanting of historical memory by official liberation narratives in Angola, Namibia and South Africa, which elevate the role of the party and liberation icons in the transformation of regional politics, is underway. Gleijeses’s account reminds us that the liberation movements, not only the MPLA but also the military wings of SWAPO and the ANC, were highly dependent on financial and logistical support from foreign backers. Indeed, the conclusion one is left with after reading Visions of Freedom is that they would not have succeeded without the sustained military involvement of Cuba and its leader. If one considers that the South Africa’s destabilisation campaign in the early 1980s was successful in neutralising the ANC in Mozambique (and to a large degree in Zimbabwe), it would not be stretching the imagination too far to think that, without Cuban military support, Angola too would have gone the way of compromise with Pretoria. How this would have affected the eventual outcome of South Africa’s liberation struggle is interesting to speculate. In all these respects, Gleijeses’s monograph makes a serious and lasting contribution to our understanding of this period in Southern African history and his findings stand out as a testimony to the vital necessity of such work.

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Violences basées sur le genre

Etat des lieux de la recherche

Sous la direction de Fatou Sall

Les mécanismes de lutte contre les VBG sont plus basés sur des principes que sur des pratiques. Il y a peu d’actions et plus de théories sur la vulnérabilité, le genre, les rôles sociaux et économiques des femmes, les systèmes de protection sociale, la promotion de la femme, entre autres axes d’intervention, etc. Actuellement, les VBG et les stratégies déployées de part et d’autre pour y faire face apparaissent sous des formes multiples. Si ces stratégies pour contrer les VBG ont connu des évolutions, c’est parce que les types et formes de violences n’ont cessé de proliférer. Certaines catégories de VGB remontent à des périodes historiques parfois très lointaines. Face à l’ampleur et à la recrudescence des VBG, relatée presque chaque jour dans les médias, la communauté internationale s’est mobilisée en raison des violeurs non seulement à l’échelle internationale mais aussi à des niveaux locaux et nationaux. Face à la diversité des formes de violences, il est essentiel de comprendre comment les femmes s’organisent pour résister et lutter contre ces violences. Cela passe par l’analyse des mécanismes de lutte contre les VBG et les dynamiques qui les favorisent. En outre, il identifie les principaux leviers et les acteurs sur lesquels on peut s’appuyer pour mieux combattre ces violences dans la sauvegarde de la dignité et de la personne humaine.

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