

## BOOK REVIEW

**Vera Schattan P. Coelho and Bettina Von Lieres (eds.), *Mobilizing For Democracy: Citizen Action and the Politics of Public Participation*, London: Zed Books, 2010, 287 pp.**

*Mobilizing for Democracy* is the last in the series on Claiming Citizenship, published by Zed Books in collaboration with the Citizenship Development Research Centre (CDRC) between 2005 and 2010. Edited by Coelho and von Lieres, the work introduces eleven empirical case studies from the Southern context on how different forms of citizen mobilization have resulted in democratic outcomes. Covering cases such as Angola, Bangladesh, Brazil, India, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa, it is an impressive volume that has a broad focus, both in terms of its geographical coverage and the diversity of issues discussed.

Thus far, scholarship on democracy has long been dominated by mostly Western scholars. In this context, the current work provides a fresh approach, as it is one of the few volumes that feature non-Western scholars, with contributions from social activists as well. The eleven case studies contribute various viewpoints on how ordinary citizens and their organizations are able to mobilize people to deepen democracy. The case studies further demonstrate how different forms of political mobilization have been able to engage with local formal institutions in ways that have been central to the development of democratic politics. These cases shed light on the contribution of citizen mobilization to the progress of democratization and the building of state institutions. At the same time, they also reveal the uneasy relationship between citizens and institutions.

It emphasizes that citizen mobilization is an active process of ongoing engagement and action, in contrast with a democratic process that is confined by periodic elections. Furthermore, citizen mobilization does not only signify participation in community associations or involvement in social movements to obtain rights and justice, but also participation in formal governance processes.

This work is divided into four major topics namely associational mobilization, social movements, citizen involvement in political institutions, as well as where and how citizens participate. Each case study brings forth examples of citizen mobilization that has democratic outcomes in a political context that vary significantly in terms of constitutional and legal frameworks.

In the first section on “Associational Mobilization: Constructing Citizenship”, both survey methods and grassroots approaches are applied into the case studies from Kenya, Bangladesh and Angola, in order to examine the impact of different civil society organizations (CSOs) focusing on accessing rights, political empowerment and developing local communities. These chapters show that despite socio-economic inequalities and lack of political accountability in these centrally-dominated states, CSOs make a difference in promoting positive civic virtues and building democratic

citizenship. Furthermore, the nature of a CSO matters to the democratic outcomes they can achieve due to the links between the political vision and values that an organization upholds and the different capacities they promote. However, the findings also suggest the limited capacity of associational mobilization to influence the broader democratization process and public policies. As a result, political participation in these countries tends to be scattered and with limited effectiveness.

In the second section on “Social Movements: Contesting Political Authority and Building States Responsiveness”, each case study analyzes citizen mobilization led by social movements. It showcases how the role of CSOs vary depending on the state of democracy in the country, through case studies of indigenous peoples’ movements in Brazil, the ‘anti-third term’ campaign in Nigeria and the South African Homeless People’s Federation (SAHPF). Although all three case studies do display positive democratic outcomes on broader political agendas, including state responsiveness and access to public policies, outcomes in other areas are uneven due to two reasons. First, democratic outcomes are shaped by the culture and practices of political authority. Second, it is also influenced by the choice of methods and strategies adopted by the social movements.

The third section of this book addresses the issue of participatory democracy under the topic of “Citizen Involvement in Formal Governance Mechanisms”. It features case studies on the *dalits* or low caste groups in India, citizen participation in the governance of local health councils in Brazil and the entry of civil society actors into formal politics in Kenya. These case studies highlight the challenges faced by citizens to participate in formal political institutions and in policy-making processes.

The final section of the volume explores how different contexts of mobilization shape citizen’s styles of activism and their choices of strategies for mobilization. Both case studies of passive and protesting groups in South Africa and local organizations in Brazil respectively, present an overview of diverse approaches of participation by evaluating their impact on social participation. The cases manifest how a diversity of connections and networks can enhance citizens’ opportunities for mobilization.

While the eleven case studies stipulate persuasive arguments in emphasizing the bottom-up approach in realizing democratic ideals, some however, are not idealistic. While the work highlights the significance of associations and the importance of citizen engagement in deepening democracy, it challenges the perception that these are always good for democracy. On this, the work argues that of equal importance is to examine the nature and activities of the associations and social movements themselves. Some underlying concerns are the risks of elite capture, manipulation and uses of citizen mobilization for non-democratic ends.

Nonetheless, the volume does provide a platform for debate on the strategies in building and deepening democracy. Needless to say, political institutions or development interventions alone are not enough. Instead, it is crucial to emphasize the role of citizen mobilization and the politics of public participation. In doing so, the chapters lay out strong attestations on the ability of some associations in building citizenship, of social movements that successfully grasp state responsiveness, and of engagement in formal governance processes to contribute to the building of

accountable policy-making processes.

However, the work still lacks in overall cohesion between the cases, with individual chapters perhaps being more useful for scholars interested in specific cases. Nevertheless, it is a work worth reading as it calls attention to the role of citizens and their mobilization from a uniquely non-Western perspective. It reveals that there can be a form of symbiosis between CSAs and policy-makers in order to achieve positive democratic outcomes. The goals, methods and ideological orientations in this book serve as an eye opener that could be applied to democratization efforts in other countries, especially in the Southeast Asia region. This is because many civil society actors in the region face similar limited political opportunities in pursuing their advocacy work. It also opens up more room to further dialogue on democracy building and the importance of citizen mobilization in formal governance processes.

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