Untapped: The Scramble for Africa’s Oil

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examine the individual regional states: Malawi, Zambia, Botswana, Mozambique, Angola, Zimbabwe, Namibia, and South Africa. Subsequent chapters are devoted to regionwide issues of AIDS, women and politics, and “southern Africa’s international relations.” A final chapter presents research conclusions and predictions for the future.

This approach is sound, and the book’s scholarship is commendable. Each chapter is well written, carefully organized, and packed with pertinent factual data and strong analysis. All this makes the volume a useful addition to the lay reader and scholar alike.

While Politics in Southern Africa contributes to a deeper understanding of regional issues and forces, the book is also surprising. For the reader, after finding it easy to agree with the potential benefits of using a regional approach, is ready, even eager, for a parade of success stories and analyses that offer a counterbalance to the somber predictions and gloomy assessments of the Afripessimists. Alas, this is not what follows. Rather than a book of successes, this is a book of “ifs.” For example, it is argued that if Botswana can gain control of its AIDS epidemic, and if its diamond mines do not run dry before the country can diversify, a stunning success will ensue. In a similar vein, the book maintains that if South Africa can control its endemic crime wave and if the country can avoid a political system dominated by one party (the ANC), serious progress can be made. Similar conditional stipulations can be found in every chapter.

The editors also point out that the region is at a crossroads. There are potentially positive trends, such as the undeniable, if sometimes glacial, growth of civil society and of ecological awareness, and these trends potentially bode well. The fact that they are observable, if only faintly, in such dysfunctional states as Zimbabwe should not be dismissed. This brings up the matter of the editors’ conclusions.

In an act of courage, Bauer and Taylor do not shy away from conclusions about the fate of southern Africa, and they deserve credit for that. However, in this process they enter the realm of rose-tinted optimism. They choose to see the southern African glass as half-full, arguing the region will see a vibrant civil society, a culture of constitutionalism, converging economies, and democratic stability. Still, that Bauer and Taylor would edge out on this predictive limb is perhaps one of the book’s strongest selling points, as their conclusions serve as both an invitation to readers for debate and a challenge to learn more about the region.

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John Ghazvinian, who has a doctorate in history from Oxford University and currently is a visiting fellow at the University of Pennsylvania, was born in Iran and raised in Los Angeles and London. He is a skilled journalist who takes the reader on an extensive journey in Africa to better know “more about where our oil will be coming from.” His bottom line is that “oil, far from being a blessing to African countries, is a curse. Without exception, every developing country where oil has been discovered.
has seen its standard of living decline and its people suffer.”

Why the scramble for African oil? Because African oil is of high quality and therefore relatively cheap to refine. Africa is surrounded by water, so access to the sea and less expensive maritime transport further reduces costs (in comparison to Central Asia, which must ship by pipeline), and there is increasing global demand, in which Africa represents a larger percentage of new discoveries and production. In addition, newly discovered offshore reserves coupled with new ultra-deepwater drilling technology and transshipment directly from oil platforms avoids the usual onshore problems.

Ghazvinian’s field work is based on wide-ranging interviews with politicians, economists, warlords, diplomats, aid workers, oil-company executives, activists, priests, crude-oil bandits, soldiers, bureaucrats, technocrats, scientists, historians, oil-rig workers, lawyers, bankers, old men, and boys, among others. He provides comprehensive assessments on Nigeria, Gabon, Cameroon, Congo, Angola, Equatorial Guinea, Sao Tome and Principe, Chad, and Sudan. Ghazvinian is quick to point out that each country differs in terms of the dynamics of the complex factors at work. A few examples in his words:

“Nigeria, it is simply the doomsday scenario, an amalgamation of all the worst oil has to offer Africa: corruption, ethnic hatred, Dutch disease, and rentierism, organized crime, militant rebellion, hostage taking, and sabotage of industry activity, and a country held together tenuously.”

“Gabon is the golden child ruled by a self-interested French puppet who forgot to prepare his country for life after oil and has left it with a castrated economy.”

“Cameroon and Congo are much the same story, but in the latter country, oil has fueled a bloody civil war that has left the population traumatized and afraid to speak out against the country’s high-level corruption.”

“Angola is the sleeping giant where billions of dollars have disappeared and where government maintains deep distrust of and distance from the international community.”

Ghazvinian concludes with a discussion of the U.S. military’s increasing interest in Africa, such as in the Gulf of Guinea and the establishment of a new Africa Command. He also details China’s long-term strategy of gaining access to oil by providing patient capital for oil infrastructure in riskier areas coupled with considerable development aid without the typical Western conditionality.

The reader will find this informative, comprehensive, fast-paced journey to Africa invaluable in better understanding the challenges and complexities of the “curse of oil.”

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