



Africa

The Politics of Suffering and Smiling

Reviewed by **Philip Nel**

(Centre for Africa Studies, University of the Free State)

Patrick Chabal
UKZN Press: Scottsville;
Zed Books: London
2009. 212 pp

Circumventing the pitfalls of classical political theory, Patrick Chabal offers a fresh look at contemporary African politics. His point of departure is a socio-political theory that gives centre stage to how people live and how this affects (and is affected by) political realities and discourses: “a sense of the politics of ordinary lives in today’s Africa”.

His approach unfolds a natural development cycle. A mapping of the core dimensions of life, identity and sociability (the politics of *being*, *belonging* and *believing*) is followed by analyses of how individuals manage their political and economic opportunities and challenges (the politics of *partaking* and *striving*) and the resourcefulness of people to deal with the difficulties of everyday life in Africa (the politics of *surviving* and *suffering*).

The author explores the importance of origin and identity (including the ways people belong to multiple groups), and how these, and their underlying belief systems, impact on political realities and decision-making processes. Although morality, rationality and reciprocal obligation play a role in all political systems, the author claims that the complexity of these three factors complicates the African political scenario in ways routinely ignored by political theory.

Chabal also considers the civic nature of political participation, aspects of Africa’s political economy from the perspective of the aspirations of individuals and groups, and the ingenious ways people manage to survive, often relying on their social capital. He provides a human face to the hardships and suffering caused by politics, and shows how these inform political decisions.

By trying to understand African politics from the bottom up, Chabal provocatively challenges political theory to take a serious look at what constitutes political meaning in Africa and how the interpretation of meaning is informed by socio-cultural dimensions. Irrespective of its occasional paintbrush generalisations of African realities, this work has the potential to transform mainstream political analysis.

