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Review of "Maureen Covell: Madagascar : politics, economics and society"

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Madagascar: Politics, Economics and Society



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Madagascar: Politics, Economics and Society, by Maureen Covell. Francis Pinter, London, 1987. xxii + 187 pp. £24.50 hardback, £7.95 paperback. ISBN 0 86187 426 9 and 0 86187 427 7.

This is the most comprehensive available introduction to modern Malagasy politics. Dr Covell's book is clear and concise and, within the framework set out by the editors of this series on Marxist regimes, it makes due allowance for the idiosyncracies of Malagasy politics. For, although Madagascar's current government bills itself as Marxist, and although it was born in the revolutionary years of 1974-75, there is little specifically Marxist about it. Like many African governments, it tries hardest of all to survive.

Dr Covell divides her book into eight chapters, starting with historical background and moving on to a historical account of the Tsiranana government of 1960-72 before looking at the Second Republic and examining its institutions. Dr Covell is aware that Madagascar's rich, and highly original, political history has endowed it with certain vital forces which hardly fall within the scope of mainstream political science, and she pays due attention, for example, to the role of extended political families, the urban mob, and the bizarre history of the kung-fu gangs.

If there is an omission in the book, it is perhaps on the religious tradition in politics. In her introduction, Dr Covell says that the Malagasy term *fanjakana* represents state power in all its manifestations, as indeed it does, but suggests that the Malagasy notion of ideal rule rejects 'state structures external to the local community' (p. 7). This is not quite accurate and does not do justice to the continuing power of the religious aspects of politics. The kung-fu gangs which contested power at the national level in the early 1980s, for example, and which have now reformed, make deliberate use of Merina royal rituals and hold meetings in the sacred places of Imerina. The new presidential palace, built apparently in full consciousness of astrological tradition and often mocked by the people of Antananarivo on that score, is another modern example. All this runs deep in Malagasy politics and is still vital to the Republic of Madagascar.

That said, Dr Covell has produced the standard introduction to modern Malagasy history and policy.

Africa Confidential, London

STEPHEN ELLIS

Apartheid's Rebels: Inside South Africa's Hidden War, by Stephen M. Davies. Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1987. xviii + 238 pp. £19.95 hardback, £6.95 paperback. ISBN 0 300 03991 3 and 0 300 03992 1.

Legitimizing the Illegitimate: States, Markets and Resistance in South Africa, by Stanley B. Greenberg. University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1987. xxiii + 251 pp. \$35.00 hardback, \$12.95 paperback. ISBN 0 520 06010 5 and 0 520 06011 3.

The Crisis in South Africa, by John S. Saul and Stephen Gelb. Zed Books, London, 1986. 245 pp. £21.95 hardback, £6.95 paperback. ISBN 0 86232 692 3 and 0 86232 693 1.

Is a book only as good as its worst review? This question was prompted when re-reading Saul and Gelb's analysis of South Africa's crisis, for undoubtedly one of the authors believes this to be the case. This second edition reprints unamended the entire first edition as chapter two, and contains a new introduction and conclusion written by John Saul. Half of the introduction is devoted to defending the original analysis against critical reviewers. But Saul is very eager to establish his credibility