

Democracy Threatened - The Legitimacy of Elections

United States Department of State (Washington, DC)

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DOCUMENT

27 March 2008

Posted to the web 27 March 2008

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Washington, DC

The following is the text of a speech by United States Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for African Affairs Linda Thomas-Greenfield at Howard University's Ralph J. Bunche International Affairs Center on March 12, 2008.

Distinguished members of this panel, students and faculty of Howard, ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon.

It is a pleasure to come to Howard and the Ralph J. Bunche International Affairs Center to participate on this panel. My thanks to Bernadette Paolo, President and CEO of the Africa Society. She has ensured that The Africa Society serves as a major, bipartisan influence for the greater interests of U.S.-Africa engagement.

It is an honor to be joined on this panel by Congressman Donald Payne, whose interest in and support for Africa has been a constant on the Hill for so long; by Ambassador Peter Ogego; David Peterson of NED; Stephanie Blanton of IRI; Dr. Chris Fomunyoh of NDI; and Dr. Lorenzo Morris, Chair of Howard's Political Science Department.

TRIBUTE TO RALPH BUNCHE

I want to start by paying tribute to the man for whom this facility is named: Ralph Johnson Bunche. Let us remember his enormous legacy in the United Nations: his leadership of the decolonization process at a crucial time; his active role with Gunnar Myrdal in the project that produced the landmark 1944 study of American race relations, American Dilemma; and his support for the growth of African democracy. As this building testifies, his legacy is a part of Howard University, where Bunche built up the African studies program.

This year, the State Department's Bureau of African Affairs is celebrating its 50th anniversary. This anniversary is important not just for us within the Bureau, but for all Americans interested in Africa. The creation of the Africa Bureau marked a break with what had been a Eurocentric, pro-colonialist approach to Africa, and a recognition that

Africa mattered for its own sake. The new Africa Bureau was designed to deal directly with Africa and to nurture a cadre of professional Africanists.

This was the vision of Ralph Bunche, who was the State Department's lone Africa specialist when he worked in the former Bureau of Near Eastern, South Asian, and African Affairs. For his entire career, whether as an academic, a U.S. government official, or at the United Nations, his vision was of an America and an American government in partnership with an Africa free of the yoke of colonialism, sure of its place in the world, and building its own democratic institutions as the key to justice, prosperity, and stability. That ideal of partnership lies at the very heart of U.S. policy today.

U.S. SUPPORT FOR DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA

This leads me to the subject at hand, African elections.

Democracy is a universal value. It will vary in its forms and application from culture to culture and country to country, just as American democracy differs significantly from its English parent.

Support for democracy is at the center of U.S. policy in Africa. We recognize that democratic institutions, if they are to endure, must be built on and complementary to local values and traditions. The challenge in Africa has been how best to adapt democratic governance to meet the unique needs of Africans in their home countries.

Let me state the good news. Democracy is on the rise. In the past four years alone, there have been more than 50 democratic elections in Africa. Almost three-quarters of Sub-Saharan nations are now classified by Freedom House as "Free" or "Partly Free", up from less than half in 1990.

It is worth remembering that even as progress has been remarkable, movement toward fully democratic governance is not linear – it is a long and often bumpy process. Democracy is about much more than elections, although credible polls are a critical element. Elections, especially when they are not credible, can of course be a source of tension and instability, as we saw in Ethiopia in 2005; in the current political crisis in Kenya; and probably will see in Zimbabwe after it votes later this month.

Country-by-Country Summaries

KENYA

The recent elections in Kenya were seriously flawed and impacted by irregularities in vote tabulation and reporting of results, as well as by excessively high turnouts in some areas. It is worth noting that the Kenyan people turned out in record numbers to vote, and most waited patiently and peacefully in long lines to exercise their right. I commend the Kenyan voters, civil society leaders, and media outlets for their commitment to promoting democratic principles.

After the elections, we strongly supported the efforts of former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and the panel of eminent African persons to bring the parties together in a power-sharing agreement. Thanks to the dedication of Annan and his team, the parties reached an agreement on February 28th that will allow Kenya to move forward and to regain the path towards democracy, peace, and stability. We also recognize the need for promoting interethnic reconciliation and addressing underlying issues that contributed to the terrible violence in the immediate post-election period.

Assistant Secretary Jendayi Frazer spent ten days in Kenya in January meeting with leaders of both parties, men she has known for 20 years. On February 18th, at the President's request, Secretary Rice spent a day in Kenya delivering a tough message to the parties that the United States expected them to reach a compromise in the best interests of the Kenyan people. Kenyan civil society and business leaders also played an important and constructive role in making clear to their leaders that they must reach an agreement.

We are encouraged by the February 28th agreement, but recognize that much work lies ahead. Reform of the Electoral Commission of Kenya (ECK) will be a priority in assuring that future elections meet international standards. We also support an impartial investigation into the irregularities of the December elections, and a thoughtful analysis of how to prevent any recurrence of these problems in the future. In the short term, new elections (and one run-off) are needed to fill the six vacant Parliamentary seats. These elections must be conducted with scrupulous integrity. The voters deserve nothing less.

ETHIOPIA

We have systematically promoted progress toward democracy and democratic institutions in Ethiopia. As you know, the run-up to Ethiopia's May 2005 national elections was the most open, free, and genuinely competitive political campaign in Ethiopia's history. Opposition candidates enjoyed unprecedented opportunity to rally support and campaign against ruling party opponents.

Unfortunately, democracy suffered a reverse in the contentious aftermath of the 2005 vote. Nevertheless, we have chosen to remain fully engaged with the Ethiopia, a country of 80 million in the heart of the Horn of Africa.

The U.S. insistently and urgently encourages all Ethiopians to remain engaged in the democratic political process. U.S. programs bring together leaders from across the political spectrum to address critical questions of national governance and the future of the country, build the capacity of parliament, and bolster judicial independence.

We encourage Ethiopia's leadership to ensure that legitimate opposition members enjoy access to media and the ability to campaign freely in the months remaining before local elections in April 2008.

The Voice of America's Amharic broadcasts have a large listenership; the fact that the Ethiopian government has complained about a perceived pro-opposition slant is testimony to VOA's impact.

Our Embassy in Addis Ababa, in partnership with other donors, is building the capacity of the Ethiopian National Electoral Board (NEBE) and supports its training outreach to NGOs that will conduct voter education campaigns.

We continue a broad program of U.S. humanitarian and development assistance for Ethiopia. Overall, we will provide a half billion dollars in assistance to Ethiopia this year – on par with our assistance to Kenya. \$160 million in humanitarian assistance will help Ethiopia break the cycle of famine and ease the impact of drought and other natural disasters. We are providing over \$300 million to the health care system in Ethiopia, especially to help Ethiopia combat HIV/AIDS.

The Democracy and Governance (DG) Unit of USAID/Ethiopia is working in five areas to help prepare for the upcoming local elections scheduled for April 2008:

- 1) Providing technical support to the National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) through the UNDP (FY07 funding of \$130,000);
- 2) Training women candidates of all parties standing for elections through Women's Campaign International. (Funding for this activity comes from the \$450,000 allotted for parliamentary support activities);
- 3) Fostering inter-party dialogue in preparation for the elections under the auspices of the Elders' Council and the NEBE, significant because inter-party dialogue in the Parliament has stalled due to the ruling party's unwillingness to engage minority parties in discussion until they formally apologize for walking out of past discussions (funding comes from the Constructive Dialogue Initiative (CDI) Program, of which \$414,000 has been allocated for widening the political space);
- 4) Planned training in election adjudication, tentatively to be conducted by the American Bar Association at a total cost of about \$2,660,000 over three years, and;
- 5) Training for domestic civil society groups in voter education and election observation, a project awaiting the approval of the Government of Ethiopia and pending availability of funds.

Thank you for this opportunity to speak with you today.