

## Why Elections Matter in Africa

### “Democracy Threatened: The Legitimacy of Elections in Africa”

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It is understandable and healthy that the unexpected failure of Kenya’s recent national elections, following on the heels of Nigeria’s deeply flawed elections in April 2007, should stimulate a reassessment of the role of elections in African political development. There were three questions that were posed to us that I will answer at the outset, but the focus of my remarks this afternoon will be on making the case for African elections.

- 1.) **The role of foreign observers and their effectiveness.** Having been an official and informal observer of quite a few African elections, I should acknowledge my lack of objectivity, but really, I think in many situations foreign observers can be very useful, especially if the observation is done correctly. Long-term observers, coordination with domestic monitoring groups and other international groups, and effective training and deployment using the guidelines that have been established for international observers can insure this. International observers lend additional seriousness and credibility to the process, if deserved, or reinforce negative assessments if the elections are flawed. In situations where a government is keen to establish its legitimacy and the opposition is expressing doubts about the fairness of the process, this can be especially helpful. But international observations can be expensive, and so there needs to be a cost-benefit analysis. In most African countries these days, elections have become routine, and international observation missions are no longer considered so important. However, where the international community perceives some stake in the credibility of a process, such as in a post-conflict environment in which considerable resources have gone for peacekeeping and rebuilding, the international presence in elections may be deemed necessary. Even in Kenya, the American observation was relatively modest; serious problems were not expected. In other countries, the observation may just be a small group of embassy staff.
- 2.) **The appropriateness of Western definitions of democracy.** Of course there are many definitions of democracy, even within the “west,” and Africans may borrow some of these, or come up with their own, as they see fit. There has been relatively little copying of the American system, at least. Africans have introduced various democratic innovations, including the establishment of independent electoral commissions, incorporation of traditional authorities in government, and an emphasis on consensual decision-making,

especially at the local level. Polling by the Afrobarometer has found that Africans have a better conceptual understanding and greater support (62 percent average) for democracy than people from most other parts of the world, and that there is relatively little interest in returning to military government or other forms of dictatorship. According to the polling, 80 percent of Africans believe that “regular, open and honest elections” are the only way to choose their country’s leaders, and 75 percent say democracy is preferable to any other system.

- 3.) **Elections as a factor of the evolution of democracy, or symbolic of deeper unresolved internal issues.** The recent work of Staffan Lindberg makes a compelling case for the utility of African elections in carving out greater political freedom. He has shown that not only does the quality of most African elections tend to improve over time, but the level of civil and political liberties also expands. But of course elections may also exacerbate ethnic tensions or land grievances if politicians are tempted to use ethnicity or other issues in a negative way to mobilize for support, as occurred in Kenya. Even in America, considerable political mobilization occurs around “unresolved internal issues” such as ethnicity, gender, class, religion, age, and any number of factors, in addition to ideology, policy, and simple charisma. Elections can serve as a conflict resolution tool, providing a means of addressing latent conflicts if they are perceived to be organized in a fair and transparent manner. If the elections are rigged, then they can be the trigger for violence, as in Kenya, or disaffection, as in Nigeria.

It is always necessary to take a long view of political progress in Africa, and in so doing, the trend is consistently more positive than recent events might suggest. Who could seriously fault South Africa’s 1994 elections, Ghana’s steady improvements, Benin’s series of political alternations, and the post-conflict breakthroughs made in Mozambique, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and DRC? Even looking at other elections this past year, although the failures such as Kenya and Nigeria stand out, there are many counter-examples such as Benin, Mali, Sierra Leone, Togo and Mauritania that demonstrate the potential of elections to alternate political power, overcome national divisions, and restore stability. The case of Kenya, despite the loss of more than a thousand lives and the immense destruction and displacement that took place, has nevertheless had a salutary effect on the rest of the continent; everywhere you go in Africa, one hears the comment, “we cannot let our elections turn out the way theirs did.” Kenya’s elections should recommend more commitment to the electoral process, not less. They should underscore the danger of rigged elections, and the need for free and fair ones. Some have attributed the violence in Kenya to the citizens’ frustration. Kenyans wanted democracy, and had come to expect that elections could deliver it. In Nigeria, on the other hand, although the elections were much more corrupt, expectations were much lower, and there was no violence. Nevertheless, in Kenya

itself, the mediation by Koffi Annan, the sustained diplomatic pressure, and the resilience of Kenya's political institutions and civil society have shown how such conflict can be overcome. Likewise Nigeria, for all its failings, has nevertheless succeeded in judicially overturning some of the most egregious fraud, the legislature has become increasingly independent and powerful, and the press and civil society continue to thrive in a reasonably liberal political environment that I would assess as being more democratic than not.

I will not minimize the problems with elections. There have been plenty of bad ones, plenty that have been and will continue to be manipulated by the regime in place. There will be rigging and violence, apathy and backsliding. Ethiopia has yet to recover from the fallout of its elections several years ago. Presidents Museveni and Biya have recently joined the ending of term limits club. Zimbabwe's upcoming elections are not likely to be very pretty. Nor are elections a panacea. Often, it may be more prudent to postpone them, to make sure the preparations are completed and the structures are in place to allow the maximum possibility for success. The inability of democratically-elected governments to make dramatic economic progress or solve other social problems will temper popular enthusiasm. In addition, as we are always reminding, democracy is much more than just elections. It means an independent judiciary and legislature, free press and respect for human rights, a strong civil society and government accountability among other things. Elections are important, not simply for producing and legitimizing a ruling group, but for creating a kind of enabling environment that allows and stimulates free debate on policies and alternatives, that forces the need for freedom of movement and assembly if the elections are to be deemed credible, that educates the citizenry on their rights and obligations, that empowers civil society to get involved in the political process, emboldens the press to challenge the status quo, and that gives citizens dignity and a stake in their country's future.

Having made this brief assessment, I would urge a more concentrated focus on the future. There remain many important elections that will be coming up later this year and well into the future that will have a decisive impact on the continent's future. African elections are here to stay, however imperfect and problematic. Cote d'Ivoire's elections coming up probably by the end of this year could be critical in beginning to heal that country's north-south divide. Togo's legislative elections began a process that will continue with legislative and presidential elections that could finally resolve that country's long-standing political crisis. Guinea should have elections by the end of the year that could advance that country's transition from dictatorship. Zimbabwe's elections in just a couple weeks may resolve nothing, but they may hold some surprises and some potential to change course. The elections in Sudan in 2009 will be momentous in determining the political structure of that nation and in addressing that nation's deep conflicts and cleavages. Long-postponed elections in Angola will take place later this year, and should serve as a means to increase political space.

It is important for friends in the United States and the “west” in general to respect Africans’ choices. We have to be ready to help when requested, but as a rule, I would contend that the ability of outsiders to influence the success or outcome of African elections is modest. The political will of African leaders and citizens is the decisive factor. Even countries with relatively small means or little outside help such as Benin can hold democratic, peaceful elections. Somaliland has had a series of democratic elections with relatively little international support, while Somalia to the south struggles in anarchy despite the hundreds of millions of dollars poured into it. Congo’s elections were enormously expensive, and although genuine political progress was made, conflict in the east and the same old governance problems remain. This is not to say the DRC elections were not worth the international community’s investment, but there needs to be sustained follow-up if the country is not to degenerate back into war and corruption. Sometimes America’s commercial and strategic interests can get in the way of promoting democracy in Africa, which should be guarded against. On the other hand, resources these days are limited, and other worthy priorities may be competing, such as the fight against HIV/AIDS and humanitarian relief. Yet, getting the political environment right, insuring that citizens have a voice and that their government is accountable is a prerequisite for any other form of development, social, economic, or otherwise. That is why the legitimacy of African elections must be preserved and strengthened.