



African Developments: Political Trends in Recent Elections in Sub-Saharan Africa

Africa is on the move! African countries and societies are advancing along various development paths. For some, Africa is the “booming continent” of our times. For others, it is home to the majority of the “bottom billion”. In the DIE’s Briefing Paper series on African Developments, researchers from Europe and Africa regularly examine the African agenda and analyse African trends with a view to taking stock and identifying the challenges that will face the continent in the years to come.

Summary

Multiparty elections have become frequent events in almost all countries of sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). But in 2010 and 2011 an exceptionally high number of elections have been held. By mid-2011¹ presidential and/or parliamentary elections had taken place in 20 countries. While voting has become a regular occurrence in many of these countries, has it been accompanied by an improvement in democratic quality?

An analysis of recent elections and trends since the last round of voting produces an ambiguous picture. On the positive side, the relative stability of democracies in several small island states, such as Mauritius, has been confirmed. There have also been encouraging signs in the competitiveness and fairness of elections in a few countries with hybrid regimes, such as Nigeria; others, such as Guinea and Côte d’Ivoire, have (re)introduced voting after ruptures. Yet these slight improvements have often been accompanied by violence. Furthermore, many regimes restrict political freedom and competition and use elections more as a façade for their continuing rule, as in the Central African Republic (CAR) and Rwanda. In fact, almost half of the 20 countries that have recently held elections are showing a worrying tendency to maintain or even step up authoritarian measures and political exclusion.

Compared to the 1980s, democratic quality has generally improved in SSA, but change has slowed or not been consolidated in many countries. A wave of upheavals and revolutions as in the Arab world remains unlikely in SSA in the near future. The strategies and instruments applied by international actors therefore need to be adapted to the varying speeds and stages of democratisation within the region. Where basic respect for the rules of the game and political freedoms have been established, electoral assistance remains a key tool. But where such authoritarian practices as the harassment of civil society or restrictions of the freedom of the press prevail, greater emphasis must be placed on the need for a level political playing field and meaningful institutional reforms. Economic and security considerations remain important for EU and US actors, but reluctance to pay more than lip service to the effective promotion of democratisation may be a serious miscalculation. All too often in the past, political repression and exclusion have sown the seeds for subsequent instability and conflict. As patterns in West Africa and Central/East Africa differ, external actors also need to adopt stronger regional approaches, and African regional organisations should play a growing role in regime transformation.

1 This Policy Brief refers to all general elections between 1 January 2010 and 30 June 2011.

| | Uncontested | Contested | Highly contested |
|------------------------------------|---|---|---|
| No change of power/majority | Cape Verde (parl.); Mauritius (parl.) | <u>Benin</u> (parl.+pres./53); Burkina Faso (pres./80); <u>Burundi</u> * (parl.+pres./91); Central African Republic* (parl.+pres./66); Chad* (parl.+pres./89); Djibouti* (pres./79); Ethiopia* (parl.); Rwanda* (pres./93); Sudan* (parl.+pres./68); Tanzania (parl.+pres./61); <u>Uganda</u> * (parl.+pres./68) | <u>Nigeria</u> * (parl.+pres./59); <u>Togo</u> (pres./61) ³ |
| Change of power/majority | Niger* (parl.+pres./58) ² ; São Tomé and Príncipe (parl.) | Comoros (pres./61) ¹ ; | <u>Côte d'Ivoire</u> * (pres./54); <u>Guinea</u> * (pres./52) ² |

In brackets: type of election/majority vote in presidential elections in per cent (rounded off).
Underlined: countries with downward security trend in month of election.
Categorization of elections based on assessment of second/decisive round

* Countries with a history of armed conflict during last decade.

- 1 Change due to presidency rotating between islands.
- 2 Transfer from military to civilian rule.
- 3 Two months after election, government of "national reconstruction".

Source: Author's own compilation; main sources: IFES Election Guide: <http://www.electionguide.org/>; EISA Election Calendar 2010-2011: <http://www.eisa.org.za/WEP/calendar.htm>; CrisisWatch (International Crisis Group): <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/publication-type/crisiswatch.aspx>; UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Datasets: <http://www.prio.no/CSCW/Datasets/Armed-Conflict/UCDP-PRIO>

Elections and democracy in SSA

All countries in sub-Saharan Africa with the exception of Eritrea and Somalia have held general elections since 2005. Yet democracy's track record in the region remains unclear. Several African regimes are commonly described as hybrid or semi-authoritarian. In fact, according to the Polity IV Project (2009), the largest number of countries is in this grey area. Even though almost all the (semi)authoritarian regimes in SSA hold multiparty elections, democratic consolidation seems either to be on hold or to have failed. It has been argued, however, that regular elections, even if flawed and imperfect, improve democratic quality over time (Lindberg 2006). So what political trends do recent African elections indicate, and what regime patterns have emerged since the last round of elections across different subregions?

Continuity and contested outcomes of elections

In 2010 and the first half of 2011 there was an exceptional wave of polls in sub-Saharan Africa, with 29 presidential and national legislative elections in 20 countries. While this group of countries is not representative of the whole region, it is diverse enough in terms of levels of economic and political development to provide some helpful insights beyond individual cases. As in the general ranking, most of the 20 regimes fall into the semi-authoritarian or hybrid category, relatively few being ranked as democracies.

More important than the sheer number of recent elections is their regularity. In this regard, the recent wave of elec-

tions has underlined the trend indicated earlier that voting has become a frequent exercise in SSA. For all 20 countries except Côte d'Ivoire, Sudan, Niger and Guinea the recent elections were at least their second in succession. The developments in Niger and Guinea demonstrate that coups are no longer simply accepted: the military leaders who seized power (as in Madagascar and Mauritania after 2008) immediately came under international and regional pressure to hold credible elections. Côte d'Ivoire and Sudan held elections after a period of civil war and negotiations, though in both cases voting had previously taken place in 2000. The regularity of elections shows that the practice of voting, once introduced, is not easily repealed. However, this does not necessarily indicate a move towards greater democracy.

Of the 16 countries which have regularly held elections, 14 did not experience a change of power after recent polls, meaning that ruling presidents or parties maintained their position. The two cases in which power did change hands were small island states, namely São Tomé and Príncipe and the Comoros. This high number of election victories for ruling leaders or parties was a common feature of earlier waves of elections. But only in combination with the many disputes over recent election results – mostly where there was no change of power – does this indicate deficiencies in the political process. Only in Cape Verde and Mauritius did the main opposition party leaders immediately accept defeat. In all other cases, the opposition claimed irregularities and vote-rigging followed by occasional demonstrations and possibly minor violence (contested),

or by larger protests and violent confrontations, which prevailed even after the final results had been confirmed (highly contested).

Contested elections may be an expression of unresolved conflicts and an unlevel political playing field. The decisive rounds of presidential elections in Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Nigeria and Togo were accompanied by violence and serious protests. The background in Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea was an already tense transition after political ruptures while Nigeria and Togo both had a history of electoral violence. The situation was consequently far more uncertain in the run-up to the elections, despite the governments' efforts to control the process.

Those contested elections where disputes persisted at lower levels were held in countries whose governments retained or imposed a strong control over the state. While vote-rigging and fraud have occasionally occurred, authoritarian practices before election day have usually secured victory for the incumbent or his party. The degree to which elections are contested may thus reveal the opposition's room for manoeuvre, which is very limited in most of these countries. Elections have been boycotted by the opposition in those contested cases where authoritarian practices have increased in recent years, as in Burundi, the Central African Republic (CAR), Chad and Djibouti. Where the political space was already tightly controlled, as in Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Rwanda and Uganda, opponents were either already outside the process or used other means to protest.

An improvement in democratic quality has also been called into question by electoral violence and insecurity. Insecurity still seems to be commonly associated with voting in SSA, with eight of the 20 countries witnessing downward security trends in the context of recent elections. Most of these countries have experienced armed conflict in the last 10 years. Naturally, the cases with major downward security trends at election time were also those where contention was high, with Côte d'Ivoire declining into armed conflict. But even in less contentious cases – Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda, for example – such violence as (grenade) attacks and killings has also occurred on a smaller scale.

The lack of change at the top, contentious election results and frequent electoral violence may cast doubt on the advance of democratisation in several states. But more general trends can be assessed only over a longer period, in this instance since the last round of elections.

Where is democracy heading? Trends across elections and regions

The cases of (highly) contentious elections in 2010 and the first half of 2011 were mostly characterised by a violent transformation process, with the outcome unclear, or by limited political space, with the ruling elites resorting to authoritarian practices and securing control of the state's

resources. Despite this seemingly bleak status quo, progress may still have been made since the last round of elections.

Positive developments are indeed visible in some of the 20 countries. Democracy has been further consolidated in some small island states. One reason for this first trend (see box) being weak in 2010 and so far in 2011 is that many of the larger advanced democracies, such as Ghana, Namibia and South Africa, have not held elections during this period.

The second trend included some improvement in a few hybrid systems, most visibly in Nigeria and Tanzania. Even though conditions were still a long way from being genuinely free and fair, the opposition in both cases was able to challenge the ruling parties and leaders for the first time since the (re)introduction of elections. This is also evident from the decline in the number of votes cast for the incumbent since the last presidential elections in both countries. The move away from highly disproportionate shares of the vote for ruling leaders may indicate that elections are coming closer to their intended function of giving voters a real choice and guaranteeing representativeness. In Niger, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire, where elections were first held after military coups or civil war, it is not yet possible to identify broader trends, but there is at least an opportunity for gradual change. In all these cases, elections may act as a catalyst for a more profound transformation process, but political development remains very unpredictable, often because of unresolved tensions and conflicts.

Box 1: Trends in sub-Saharan countries where elections have recently been held (2010 and first half of 2011)

TREND 1 – Elections as consolidation: strengthening of established democracies (e.g. Mauritius).

TREND 2 – Elections as catalyst of political change: gradual improvement of democratic quality in a hybrid system (e.g. Nigeria) or window of opportunity (e.g. Côte d'Ivoire): gradual transformation of system, but high uncertainty and likelihood of violence.

TREND 3 – Elections as façade: persistent or increased electoral authoritarianism (e.g. Rwanda and CAR): poor openness and representativeness, but strong control and predictability of election outcome.

Source: own compilation

Recent results in most other countries where presidential elections have repeatedly been held paint a rather worrying picture of democracy. In Burkina Faso, Burundi, the CAR, Chad, Rwanda, Togo and Uganda, the percentage vote won by the incumbent either remained about the same or even rose. Furthermore, the general political evolution between the last two recent elections in countries where the ruling leader and party exercise tight control over the state reveals a third trend: electoral authoritarianism. In those cases, there are clearly few signs that holding regular elections has led to a gradual improvement in democratic quality. Rather, elections are mainly a means of enabling

leaders to remain in power and retain control of state resources with a façade of legitimacy.

All these developments are bound together in a regional pattern. In Central and East Africa, including the Horn of Africa, elections have shown that the political space is often closely controlled by the ruling class, which makes election victories largely predictable. In contrast, most West African elections have led to political change from military to civilian rule, greater credibility of the process and an (enforced) change of leadership. On the negative side, these steps have been accompanied by higher levels of violence. Not all countries where elections have recently been held fit this picture, of course, but a regional pattern is nonetheless visible, practically all countries where political rights and/or civil liberties have been rated lower in 2011 than at the time of the last elections or change of government (see Freedom House Index) being located in Central and East Africa (Burundi, the CAR, Chad, Djibouti, Ethiopia). Moreover, in almost all Central and East African countries where elections have recently been held former rebel or military leaders remain in power, while the picture in West Africa is far more diverse, despite its history of fierce armed conflict.

Adapting to trends: international engagement

The role played by international actors in recent sub-Saharan African elections displays some familiar tendencies. From statements by EU, US and UN representatives on the 2010 and 2011 elections it is clear that an election in which votes are cast peacefully for the most part, voter turn-out is high and no serious fraud is detected is still seen as a success, particularly in areas with a history of armed conflict. In the initial transitional period, these are valid benchmarks, but most countries in SSA have now held a number of general elections.

When engaging in electoral assistance, including support for voter registration, the promotion of an independent electoral commission and the assignment of observer missions even in politically unfavourable conditions, international actors try to apply at least some basic standards. The hope is that elections will eventually stimulate gradual change. But an analysis of recent trends has shown that a more differentiated approach is necessary. Where successive elections have not produced any visible signs of improvements or even indicate a decline in the openness and representativeness of the political process, electoral assistance runs the risk of coming too late or even thwarting its own intentions. Considerable importance should be attached in this context to institutional checks and balances, particularly the independence of the judiciary, and to the political playing field between elections.

However, in countries where the quality of elections and democracy is improving or a window of opportunity exists electoral assistance continues to be a key tool. In general, it can, where necessary, support consolidation in advanced democracies following the first trend in the box. For second-trend cases it is also relevant, but needs to be accompanied by conflict management and confidence-building measures. Once contention has reached a certain level, solutions become very costly and difficult, as the case of Côte d'Ivoire has shown. Especially as the strong international engagement in this case is unlikely to be repeated elsewhere in SSA any time soon, dealing with persistent tensions well ahead of elections is crucial. Transparency and fairness throughout the process, including the campaign period, are particularly important in this regard. There may often be a trade-off between democracy and peace, but concerns for stability should not lead international actors to accept political exclusion or a lack of checks and balances.

Literature

Freedom House (2011): *Freedom in the World*; online: <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=363&year=2011> (accessed 23 June 2011)

Lindberg, Staffan I. (2006): *Democracy and elections in Africa*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Marshall, Monty G. / Keith Jagers (2009): *Polity IV Country Reports 2009*; online: <http://www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity06.htm#ssaf> (accessed 23 June 2011)



Guest author:

Dr. Judith Vorrath

TAPIR Fellow

European Union Institute for Security Studies, Paris