

# Elections and Stability in West Africa: The Way Forward

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On September 26, 2011, the International Peace Institute (IPI) hosted a seminar entitled “Elections and Stability in West Africa: The Way Forward,” organized in partnership with the United Nations Electoral Assistance Division (EAD). This roundtable discussion followed the May 2011 regional conference on elections and stability in West Africa, which took place in Praia, Cape Verde.

While disseminating the conclusions of the Praia conference to the international community in New York, the September roundtable also elaborated on the challenges of organizing peaceful and credible elections and examined the implications of the Praia Declaration for international electoral assistance.

The meeting was attended by over fifty participants, including officials from the United Nations Security Council, the UN Secretariat, and permanent missions to the UN; representatives from UNOWA and ECOWAS; and academics and civil society organizations with expertise in elections.

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## Introduction

Two decades ago, autocratic regimes were the rule in West Africa. Today, multiparty elections are relatively routine in the region, illustrated by the large number of elections conducted in West African countries in recent years. These elections provide insights into some of the strengths and weaknesses of the electoral process. Successful transfers of power in countries such as Senegal, Guinea, and Niger—the latter two following authoritarian rule and military coups—have resulted in significant progress toward peace and stability in the region. However, despite positive trends, observers have reported irregularities in a number of recent elections in the region. Indeed, West Africa has also seen election-related crises, and election-related violence remains a concern. Coups d’état took place just before scheduled elections in Mali and Guinea-Bissau in March and April of 2012, and earlier high-profile cases of election violence in Côte d’Ivoire and Nigeria served as reminders of how elections can trigger violence, with serious implications for national and regional stability.

Periodic and genuine elections are seen as a key component for enhancing the legitimacy of a government and strengthening the social contract between citizens and their governments.<sup>1</sup> However, while critical to building democracies, elections are only one component of the democratic and legitimization process. And in the absence of other structural, institutional, and normative democratic conditions to absorb and resolve tensions that might arise during and after the electoral process, elections can present windows of vulnerability that introduce a real risk of violence. Given their competitive nature, in certain circumstances elections can increase the salience of ethnic, religious, and other societal differences, allowing actors to mobilize them for partisan purposes, triggering violence.

Since election-related violence can in turn undermine democracy by eroding people’s faith in the democratic process, electoral-assistance providers have started to make peaceful, credible, and sustainable elections a priority. A broad consensus is emerging around the idea that, in order to prevent violence, elections should be viewed as a process rather than an event. In other words, an election cannot be viewed as an end in itself, but must be part of a larger and longer-term process of democratization.

In Africa, approximately 19 to 25 percent of all electoral processes experience mid to high levels of violence according to some studies.<sup>2</sup> In many West

1 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, 1948, Article 21, para. 3.

2 Dorina Bekoe, “Trends in Electoral Violence in Sub-Saharan Africa,” Peace Brief 13, United Nations Institute of Peace, March 2010.

African states with structural and institutional weaknesses, especially those emerging from years of conflict, increasing attention is being paid to creating conditions conducive to holding elections. Ensuring that these conditions are in place when elections are conducted was the purpose of the May 2011 regional conference on elections and stability in West Africa, which took place in Praia, Cape Verde. It was organized by the United Nations Office in West Africa (UNOWA), in close collaboration with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and with the support of the International Peace Institute (IPI). The Praia conference provided the first international platform for member states and practitioners to consider best practices in the conduct of elections in West Africa, as a means of facilitating more stable and democratic societies. The resultant outcome document, the *Praia Declaration on Elections and Stability in West Africa* (henceforth, the Praia Declaration), offers a comprehensive package of conclusions and action-oriented recommendations for strengthening the conduct of elections and electoral-assistance regimes.

To follow up on the Praia conference, IPI partnered with the United Nations Electoral Assistance Division (EAD) to organize a roundtable discussion on September 26, 2011, entitled “Elections and Stability in West Africa: The Way Forward.” The meeting sought to elaborate on the challenges of organizing peaceful and credible elections and the pivotal role played by governments, regional organizations, the international community, and nonstate actors in strengthening electoral processes. Specifically, the New York roundtable provided a platform (a) to present and disseminate the conclusions and key recommendations of the Praia conference to the international community, focusing on those aspects dealing with elections as a tool for democratization, conflict prevention, and peacebuilding; and (b) to assess the implications of these findings and recommendations for international electoral assistance.

The roundtable discussion was organized into three sessions, which successively highlighted the recommendations from the Praia conference;

examined the potential for elections to consolidate peace as well as to trigger violence; and identified some best practices for conducting elections in order to strengthen the paradigm of electoral assistance.

## The Praia Declaration on Elections and Stability in West Africa

In the months preceding the regional conference convened in May 2011 in Praia, Cape Verde, presidential and legislative elections were held in Benin, Côte d’Ivoire, Guinea, Niger, and Nigeria. These electoral processes provided valuable lessons to better prepare for elections that transpired in Côte d’Ivoire, the Gambia, and Liberia between October and December 2011, as well as elections planned in the region for 2012, including those in Burkina Faso, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Mali, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo.

The Praia conference provided important insights into electoral processes in the region with a view to improving electoral assistance and strengthening national and regional stability. Adopted at the end of the conference, the Praia Declaration offers practical recommendations to ensure the conduct of free, fair, and peaceful elections in the region.<sup>3</sup> These recommendations fall into the following five categories:

### 1. Elections and Crisis Prevention

A conflict-prevention approach to electoral assistance is at the heart of the Praia Declaration. The declaration emphasizes the need to integrate political considerations into electoral-assistance efforts, alongside the fairly well established technical assistance components—a point discussed extensively at the New York roundtable. This includes the use of mediation and good offices to prevent violence. In addition, the Praia Declaration identifies the need to address grievances in order to ensure the best possible political environment for elections to take place. Greater collaboration and coordination between the UN, ECOWAS, and the AU, as well as between

<sup>3</sup> “Praia Declaration on Elections and Stability in West Africa,” adopted by the Regional Conference on Elections and Stability in Praia, Cape Verde, May 18-20, 2011. The full text of the Praia Declaration please is available at [http://unowa.unmissions.org/Portals/UNOWA/PRAIA%20DECL\\_ANG.pdf](http://unowa.unmissions.org/Portals/UNOWA/PRAIA%20DECL_ANG.pdf).

international partners and contact groups, is also highlighted as an area for increased efforts.

## 2. Electoral Assistance

Holding elections is the responsibility of state authorities, and therefore international electoral assistance should focus on long-term sustainability.<sup>4</sup> According to the Praia Declaration, electoral assistance should be designed to meet specific country requirements and needs. Ensuring that elections are sustainable requires national ownership of the electoral process. The cost of carrying out elections plays a significant role in creating ownership of the process and should be carefully considered when determining the election system. In addition, building the capacity of national stakeholders and institutions is key to successful elections.

## 3. Norms and Principles of Electoral Processes

Regional organizations play an important role in developing the normative and legal framework for free, fair, and regular elections, and for promoting good governance. Many of the concepts laid out in the Praia Declaration are embodied in the existing normative frameworks for the conduct of free, fair, and peaceful elections in West Africa. For instance, the ECOWAS *Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance*, adopted in December 2001, is an important agreement among West African states to ensure credible and regular elections in the region. The protocol is a regional commitment to address the growing challenge of election-related violence in West Africa. In addition, the adoption of the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF) in 2008 offers a regional conflict-prevention and peacebuilding strategy, which elaborates on the conduct of elections while also providing guidelines and entry points for relevant actors to engage in prevention initiatives. However, the inability of the ECOWAS protocol to effectively sanction noncompliant members was mentioned by some participants as one of its serious limitations. Some participants highlighted the failure of ECOWAS members to pressure former President Laurent Gbagbo of Côte d'Ivoire to peacefully step down after losing the November 2010 presidential

election and recommended reviewing the existing regional frameworks, namely the ECPF, to reduce the gap between agreed norms and their actual implementation.

## 4. Electoral Administration

Elections that are administered in a transparent, consistent, and fair manner are more likely to be successful. Therefore, the recommendations of the Praia Declaration include building the capacity of electoral management bodies (EMBs) to support effective elections and set up appropriate conflict-resolution mechanisms,<sup>5</sup> establishing confidence in the electoral process among the public and stakeholders, and encouraging a broad national consensus.

## 5. Cross-Cutting Issues

**Human Rights and Gender.** Respect for and adherence to human rights norms during the electoral process, including freedom of speech, assembly, association, and equality, provides the basis for free and fair elections. And the inclusion of women in the political process, both as voters and candidates, plays an important role in ensuring that elections are democratic, inclusive, and even peaceful. Women in West Africa have proven to be a powerful force in demanding democracy and accountability while advocating nonviolence. The Praia Declaration calls for empowering women in the conduct of elections and taking appropriate measures to enhance women's participation in elections. The declaration also calls for the protection of all voters and candidates, especially women. Implementation of the relevant UN Security Council resolutions, including 1325 and 1820, is highlighted.

**Security Forces.** The neutrality of the security forces is a key precondition for peaceful elections. In elections, security forces play a critical role in establishing security as well as enforcing law and order. When security forces are held accountable, are given proper oversight, and are impartial actors in the election process, their role is a positive one. However, when security forces are used to intimidate segments of the population or inject themselves politically into the elections and back a certain candidate, their role can be extremely

<sup>4</sup> For a more comprehensive summary of electoral assistance, please see the section on electoral assistance below.

<sup>5</sup> Recommendation 18 of the Praia Declaration. For more on electoral management bodies, see the section on EMBs below.

dangerous. For this reason, the Praia Declaration articulates a range of recommendations, including strengthening the national legal frameworks regulating the security forces, establishing an ad hoc election security force, and teaching security forces about respect for international norms and standards for public order in advance of elections.

**The Media.** Freedom of expression is a fundamental right. Upholding freedom of expression is critical during the electoral process. The media plays a key role in generating and disseminating information about the candidates as well as overseeing the electoral process. Therefore, the Praia Declaration recommends training the media and developing media support strategies in advance of elections. Yet, in countries where elections have triggered violence, the role of the media in inciting violence at times has become a cause for concern. For this reason, the Praia Declaration recommends codes of conduct for state-owned and private media, as well as legislation against discrimination and incitement to violence in order to hold the media accountable.

## Risk Factors for Election-Related Violence in West Africa

The Secretary-General's August 2011 report on strengthening United Nations electoral assistance notes that election-related violence can be triggered by electoral shortcomings, such as severely flawed voter lists, the misuse of incumbency, a lack of transparency, or the actual or perceived bias of election officials, which can result in real or perceived fraud. However, technical shortcomings are usually not the fundamental cause of violence or violent conflict, but merely the spark that ignites deeper-rooted social, economic, or political tensions.<sup>6</sup> Thus, if the political environment is not conducive to building confidence among stakeholders, or if one candidate refuses to accept credible election results, elections can be a trigger for violence and instability. These factors for electoral violence were discussed by participants at

the New York roundtable, building on research that has been undertaken to produce risk-assessment guides exploring the underlying drivers of violence and instability during elections.<sup>7</sup>

Every context is unique, so it is often difficult to draw broad conclusions as to why some elections are held peacefully while others tend to increase tensions and trigger violence. Further complicating the analysis of electoral violence is the fact that political violence often occurs in areas already affected by other forms of violence. In environments where criminal and political activities intersect, it can be hard to determine whether a violent incident is related to the electoral process or is simply a criminal act. Thus, while wary of generalizing, the participants discussed recurrent themes and features in countries that have experienced electoral violence, which provide insight into some of the causes of election-related violence in West Africa.

Current literature on election-related violence tends to focus on several distinct environments: countries that have experienced transitions from authoritarian or single-party rule to multiparty politics; postwar societies undergoing a transition to democracy in which elections are seen as a critical turning point; and referendums conducted to ratify peace agreements.<sup>8</sup> In these precarious environments, participants noted that “winner-takes-all” politics could increase the potential for violence since the stakes are high, particularly when the margin of victory is tight.

While electoral violence is sometimes spontaneous, politicians can also purposefully incite violence or play up societal divisions—thereby increasing the chances of conflict—if it serves their interest. For example, politicians might attempt to suppress voter turnout by employing or threatening violence, which is shown to disproportionately prevent women's participation in elections. Consequently, greater attention has been paid to the mitigating role of political party leaders, who can discourage their followers from engaging in violence and instead promote peaceful elections. In the 2007 presidential runoff in Sierra Leone, for

<sup>6</sup> United Nations Secretary-General, *Strengthening the Role of the United Nations in Enhancing the Effectiveness of the Principle of Periodic and Genuine Elections and the Promotion of Democratization*, UN Doc. A/66/314, August 19, 2011, para. 36.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Timothy D. Sisk, “Evaluating Election-Related Violence in Africa: Nigeria and Sudan in Comparative Perspective,” in Dorina Bekoe, ed., *Electoral Violence in Africa* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, forthcoming 2012).

<sup>8</sup> United Nations Development Programme, “Elections and Conflict Prevention: A Guide to Analysis, Planning and Programming,” 2007.

example, the leaders of the two major political parties signed a peace communiqué in the week prior to the elections in an effort to calm rising tensions ahead of the vote. The communiqué sent a clear message to both parties' members that they were committed to nonviolence, which is thought to have had a positive influence on the largely peaceful elections that followed.

Although election-related violence is often framed in terms of the incumbent versus the opposition, participants observed that such violence can also arise from within political parties, including within the ruling party. This has at times manifested itself as a contest between hardliners and moderates belonging to the same party. This type of intraparty violence is often overlooked by the international community and was highlighted as an area for increased attention in conflict-prevention strategies.

Participants also discussed the various motivations for engaging in electoral violence. Two overarching motivations, among others, were identified to explain the reasons individuals participate in election-related violence: greed and grievance. "Greed" as a motivator of election-related violence is shorthand for economic interests or the payoff for participating in violence. Winning an election gives a candidate access to the power and the resources of the state. Acts of "grievance" are motivated by real or perceived injustices, which are thought to stem from intergroup hatred, political exclusion and economic discrimination, and vengeance.<sup>9</sup> An intersection of greed and grievance—an overlap of economic interests and divisive social cleavages—was considered a high risk factor for electoral violence.

In conditions of scarcity, studies of election-related violence often highlight the presence of patronage politics, where politicians at the national and local levels use their access to state resources to reward individuals for their political support. However, patronage politics alone is an insufficient explanation for election-related violence, since this tactic is common in many countries that do not experience electoral violence. Participants observed that patronage politics must be looked at together

with issues of identity, such as religion and ethnicity, which often become political cleavages and form the basis of many political parties in West Africa. Thus, in countries with strong and potentially divisive social identities, and in the absence of the necessary structural conditions to mollify tensions, participants stressed the need for sustained dialogue to promote stability and reduce the potential for violence before, during, and after elections.

Factors related to a country's social structure also help to predict the risk of violence. It was noted that rapidly growing urban areas, which often have large and heterogeneous populations living in poor conditions and close quarters, can contribute to the likelihood of electoral violence in some circumstances. Other social factors, such as demographics, can also significantly influence the potential for election-related violence. The role of the youth was highlighted in particular, with research showing that risks of electoral violence increase in countries with a large youth population, especially when young males are unemployed and not enrolled in secondary school, as this demographic tends to be more susceptible to incitement to violence by political actors and other groups.<sup>10</sup> For this reason, the Praia Declaration recommends increased efforts to address the grievances of youth before holding elections.

Several participants at the roundtable observed that signs that violence might occur during elections can at times be detected as early as two years before an election actually takes place. Therefore, it is important to monitor early indicators, such as the removal of independent judges several months before the election or the promotion of discord in the media, in order to prevent an escalation into violence. Increasingly, local citizens are empowered to monitor rising tensions and early signs of potential violence. Not only are these citizens frequently more in tune with local dynamics than their international counterparts, they have already been playing a role in early detection for various electoral competitions by monitoring discussions on social media and statements made by the media and political participants.

9 Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, "Greed and Grievance in Civil War," World Bank Policy Research Working Paper No. 2355, May 2000. See also Karen Ballentine and Jake Sherman (eds.), *The Political Economy of Armed Conflict: Beyond Greed and Grievance* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2003).

10 Compare this to the notion of a "demographic dividend," which describes situations where a large youth population drives socioeconomic development, particularly following investment in education and jobs.

## Challenges to Elections in Postconflict and Fragile States

Holding transparent and credible elections is a critical component of the democratization process. Genuine elections enhance the legitimacy of the government and increase trust between the government and its people. Elections can also serve as a channel to express differences through debate. However, in fragile states, elections often represent windows of vulnerability, and the risk factors for electoral violence should be carefully analyzed, monitored, and addressed. This is especially true in postconflict contexts, in the absence of strong institutions that can effectively respond to conflicts before they become crises.

Although many West African countries do not have active conflicts, some lessons learned from providing electoral assistance in postconflict environments could be applicable to countries in the region at risk of election-related violence. Participants pointed out that in postconflict states and in states transitioning from authoritarian to civilian rule, there are often no institutionalized political parties, and building a network of political parties before elections can be a challenging task. Nonetheless, over time opposition parties may find chances to organize better, alter the balance of power, and even take office, if they have the space to operate and compete with the ruling party.

Participants also pointed out that electoral assistance in postconflict countries, and international assistance more broadly, tends to focus largely on immediate postconflict priorities, including the first elections. As a result, the first elections in the immediate aftermath of conflict often attract a significant amount of international support and financial and technical assistance. Participants agreed that the international community should view electoral assistance as a process that will require sustained attention beyond the first elections in the postconflict period. In particular, this attention should be aimed at genuine efforts to build sustainable national capacities so that the concerned country will be able to

organize its own elections in a credible and peaceful manner.

## Enhancing Electoral Processes

### ELECTORAL MANAGEMENT BODIES AND THE JUDICIARY

The potential for elections to trigger violence highlights the need for robust and transparent mechanisms to manage the electoral process and its outcome. The important role played by electoral management bodies (EMBs) to ensure national consensus as well as public and stakeholder confidence in the electoral process was stressed by all participants at the roundtable. Crucial to the effectiveness of EMBs is their credibility. Therefore, ensuring that the individuals managing the election are considered honest and capable by the voters and candidates should be paramount. Indeed, if the population and political actors have faith in the integrity of the people and institutions managing the election, they are more likely to accept the election outcome.

Participants highlighted the importance of autonomous electoral commissions in the subregion that manage their own budgets and operate independently of the executive branch. They also stressed that EMBs are more susceptible to pressure if their funding is contingent upon government allocations and their members are selected by the ruling party. In Ghana, the independence of the electoral commission is guaranteed by the Ghanaian constitution. The chairman and two deputy chairmen of the electoral commission are given the same terms and conditions as those of superior courts' justices, including permanent tenure.<sup>11</sup> National ownership of the electoral process, as highlighted in the Praia Declaration, is another critical component for ensuring the sustainability of elections. For this reason, it is especially important that EMBs be fostered as national institutions, representing the national interest rather than the interests of foreign powers. Participants specifically pointed out the sensitivity of foreign funding of these bodies, which can lead to the perception that they are more

11 Constitution of the Republic of Ghana, 1992, Chapter 7, Article 44.

accountable to foreign donors than to the local population. In addition, to ensure the continuity of the regular elections, a number of participants at the New York roundtable observed that election budgets should be included in the normal administrative state budget.

At a regional level, ECOWAS has encouraged the use of consultative bodies that incorporate the participation of representatives from the EMBs, political parties, civil society groups, and the media, as a means of troubleshooting emerging issues in the preparation of elections. Recommendation eleven of the Praia Declaration endorses this approach, advocating for the establishment of “mechanisms for regular consultation among national stakeholders.” Additionally, in order to build the capacity of EMBs, participants discussed the possibility of developing a regional network of EMBs in West Africa. This could include opportunities for EMB leadership to convene as peers and discuss best practices in managing electoral processes. It might also provide the opportunity to send EMB leadership to observe election preparation and electoral management in other countries in the region.

Though EMBs play a critical role in carrying out the electoral process and mediating any disagreement over the results, an independent and neutral judicial system to adjudicate the election outcome, if necessary, is also critical to ensuring that election outcomes are fair, and perceived by voters that way. Judicial institutions also play a role in protecting individuals’ political rights to participate in elections as either candidates or voters, while preserving freedom of speech and acting as a legal check over the government.

### SECURITY FORCES

Security forces are an important actor during electoral processes in West Africa and across the continent. Charged with establishing a safe environment where candidates and citizens can express themselves and vote without fear of retribution, security forces play a critical role in the conduct of peaceful and credible elections. Achieving this goal requires that security forces remain neutral throughout the election process. The politicization of the military in West Africa, however, has often proven to be at odds with this precondition for free and fair elections. This was

illustrated in recent military coups in Mali and Guinea-Bissau, and during the election standoff in Côte d’Ivoire, when former president Laurent Gbagbo refused to give up power despite his defeat in the 2010 presidential election.

Despite the mitigating influence of international pressure, military interventions in Guinea and Niger in 2009 and 2010 also raised concerns about undemocratic rule. To address situations where a neutral security force does not exist, the Praia Declaration recommends the establishment of an ad hoc electoral security force to address fragile institutional contexts under the supervision of an integrated and impartial electoral-security coordinating body. The Praia Declaration also recommends teaching, promoting, and respecting the international norms and standards for public order during electoral periods, including human rights norms. Such training of security forces in international human rights standards could be an entry point for regional organizations, NGOs, and other governments to assist with security reform.

### CIVIL SOCIETY

Civil society has had a long history of pushing for peace and democratic reforms in West Africa. Women’s groups, media organizations, labor unions, and human rights groups can play an important role in strengthening the electoral process by monitoring the elections and ensuring their credibility. In the 2010 presidential elections in Guinea for example, civil society, and women’s groups in particular, multiplied efforts to educate the electorate about the democratic process and to facilitate women’s participation in the elections after decades of authoritarian rule. In other countries, civil society has also been pivotal in fostering democratic, tolerant societies that are less susceptible to recruitment for violent actions by candidates or other groups during the election process. Conversely, however, civil society can also be divided by ethnic, religious, or other social cleavages, which can play a role in mobilizing groups and fomenting violence. Consequently, some participants were of the view that assistance to build the capacity of civil society, as recommended in the Praia Declaration, should include assurances that it will not inadvertently empower groups that will exacerbate tensions and encourage violence.

## GENDER AS A CROSS-CUTTING ISSUE IN THE ELECTORAL PROCESS

Participants at the meeting discussed the impact of gender-based violence on women's participation in electoral processes, both as candidates and voters. As outlined in the Praia Declaration, there was agreement on the need for greater inclusion of women in the political process, both as voters and as potential office holders. Specifically, the participation of women in EMBs was considered a useful tool to ensure an inclusive electoral process.

## Electoral Assistance, Conflict Prevention, and Peacebuilding

The UN General Assembly has stated on numerous occasions, including in its most recent resolution on UN electoral assistance,<sup>12</sup> that there is no single recipe for democracy. In the same vein, there should be no single recipe for electoral assistance. Any support provided for elections should be designed to meet specific requirements and contexts, and based on a careful and comprehensive needs assessment as opposed to the “one-size-fits-all” approach. National ownership, sustainability, and cost effectiveness are of key importance in the provision of international assistance to electoral processes.

As articulated in the Praia Declaration and underlined in biennial resolutions on elections by the UN General Assembly, elections are the responsibility of national governments. The involvement of international actors in the electoral process, particularly former colonial powers, can be a sensitive issue. Although in some cases international funding and assistance to carry out the electoral process are critical, participants stressed that the long-term goal of international actors should be to ensure that elections can be sustained by national governments without outside assistance. As such, electoral support should aim at building capacities at the national and regional level and should be designed and delivered in a way that empowers domestic actors and institutions.

The best way to deal with an electoral problem is not always to throw technical fixes at it—including

expensive and sometimes inappropriate high-tech solutions. In many cases, the problem can be better addressed by ensuring that elections are conducted in a way that engenders trust and confidence among contestants and voters, and so that the results reflect the people's will, despite possible shortcomings or controversies. In order to build national consensus, societies should be consulted on the procedures and key decisions during the process. Thus, a permanent dialogue with national and local bodies must be established, allowing for the empowerment of civil society and strengthened partnerships, and creating a better environment for stability.

Furthermore, electoral assistance should be cost-effective. Of particular concern in working toward this goal is the fact that some of the poorest countries in the world, many of which are far behind in reaching their Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), have chosen some of the most expensive electoral systems. According to the roundtable participants, high election costs could be reduced by sharing of electoral materials across the region, such as sharing ballot boxes or vehicles. Further attention should also be given to the technical solutions being promoted as essential for the conduct of credible and transparent elections. In comparison with several African countries, where emphasis is put on costly technical aspects of the electoral process, one participant noted that in some of the world's most developed countries the technical expectations are lower and simpler. For instance, in some developed countries, photo IDs are not required of the voters.

The coordination challenges posed by the multiplicity of actors involved in providing international electoral assistance was considered to be another important matter requiring attention. It was noted that despite the progress made in addressing this issue, in many cases a lack of adequate coordination among different international assistance providers still risks duplicating efforts and adversely affecting the effectiveness of assistance. Participants in the discussion reiterated the need for reinforced coordination among the international organizations involved in providing electoral assistance to avoid inconsistency, and noted that in many cases the UN can lead coordina-

12 UN General Assembly Resolution 66/163 (December 19, 2011), UN Doc. A/RES/66/163.



tion of all assistance providers' efforts and thus help ensure consistency and coherence. The need for better coordination within the UN system was also highlighted in the discussions, and the leading role of the UN focal point for electoral-assistance activities was seen as essential to ensuring system-wide coordination, consistency, and coherence in the delivery of electoral assistance by all actors in the United Nations.

Participants also suggested the need for greater collaboration between the UN and regional organizations such as the African Union and ECOWAS, as well as among these regional groupings. Specifically, the relationship between international assistance providers should seek to maximize respective comparative advantages. While the UN may be best suited to provide long-term support and overall coordination of electoral assistance, regional and subregional organizations may be more appropriate for immediate interventions. The United Nations Office in West Africa, for example has a strong record of deploying good offices with a focus on election-related crises. In Guinea, UNOWA partnered with the AU, ECOWAS, and the appointed mediator, President Blaise Compaoré of Burkina Faso, and multiplied efforts to prevent violence by building consensus and ensuring the coordination of the international contact group. Regional organizations such as the AU and subregional organizations such as ECOWAS also play an important role in developing the normative and legal framework for free, fair, and regular elections, and in promoting good governance. As discussed above, ECOWAS has adopted a protocol on democracy and good governance. In addition, AU member states have adopted the *African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance*, though this remains to be ratified by a number of West African countries.

While elections can be a means of consolidating democracy and improving governance, elections alone do not constitute democracy. Thus, increased attention should be paid to other areas, such as building government institutions and strengthening EMBs, civil society, and the media. This calls for developing greater synergies between the various policy frameworks from the peace and development fields, including peacebuilding,

statebuilding, and democracy building, which often work independently but toward similar goals. Increasingly, the UN, including UNOWA and subregional organizations such as ECOWAS, have taken a more holistic view of elections within the broader democracy-building process.

Advancing an agenda that looks at the connections between different policy areas, cuts across the various institutional mandates, and is capable of bridging gaps between norms and practice can also be done by bringing together different communities of practice. For example, the UN could deploy electoral experts in the country conducting elections as well as specialists in security, development, conflict prevention, and human rights during election processes in conflict-prone situations. Such a strategy is promoted by the Secretary-General's 2011 report on preventive diplomacy, which describes the UN's "broader approach to preventing election-related violence, by working with regional organizations and other partners to prevent election violence through a combination of mediation, good offices and electoral assistance expertise."<sup>13</sup> Efforts to integrate conflict-prevention strategies in electoral-assistance regimes, as espoused in the Praia Declaration, represent a significant development for the electoral-assistance paradigm. However, participants pointed out the still greater need for political expertise in electoral assistance in order to carry out effective conflict and needs assessments. In addition, mechanisms for monitoring indicators of election violence could be strengthened.

The roundtable participants reiterated the importance of viewing elections as a critical part of the democratization process, rather than its main event. This would ensure that elections are, in effect, a tool for peace and democracy building rather than a trigger for violence. Some participants noted that long-term observation can help build consensus and confidence in the electoral process. It was mentioned in this regard that early observation missions can help to ensure the transparency of the entire electoral process, from constituency demarcation and the establishment of electoral lists prior to the election to monitoring the conduct of the election and the announcement and acceptance of the results. Joint observer missions fielded by

13 United Nations Secretary-General, *Preventive Diplomacy: Delivering Results*, UN Doc. S/2011/552, August 26, 2011.

regional and subregional organizations such as ECOWAS and the AU would help optimize the available resources.

## Conclusion

There are positive trends, both normatively and in practice, toward improving the conduct of elections and addressing the various challenges to strengthening elections as a means of consolidating democracy in West Africa. A great deal of lessons have been learned from elections in West Africa and elsewhere, and a new paradigm may be emerging for electoral assistance—one that integrates conflict-prevention strategies, gives increased attention to the political aspects of the electoral process (in addition to the technical), and views elections as one component in a longer-term commitment to building democracy.

Increasingly, these themes are articulated by the electoral-assistance regime and policymakers who understand the significant opportunities elections offer to bring about more democratic societies, but also the risks posed for violence and a regression into authoritarian or military rule if favorable conditions are not in place when elections are held. In West Africa, where elections have for the most part become routine, there has been increased focus on strengthening the institutions that support electoral processes, including the judiciary, security forces, and election management bodies. The Praia Declaration notes the important role also played by the media, as well as by civil society and women,

and these too are becoming a more significant focus for electoral-assistance providers. While progress is noteworthy, these efforts must be increased and improved.

The Praia Declaration offers a strong entry point for ensuring that elections promote stability in the subregion. Among its recommendations, participants stressed above all the need for the international community and regional bodies to continue to improve electoral assistance by enhancing national ownership and building national consensus on the election process, as well as expanding and building conflict-prevention strategies as a critical component of electoral assistance. As a number of participants pointed out, the risk of violence is far too costly for a nation's development and the international community not to invest in and cultivate the most effective crisis-prevention techniques. Building political expertise to carry out conflict mapping and risk assessments is critical. In addition, observer missions and good offices have proven to be effective in building confidence and helping mitigate the potential for violence.

Despite the strength of its recommendations and the support it has received from states in the region, the Praia Declaration risks remaining a mere declaration of intent. To prevent this, national governments, subregional organizations, international institutions, and civil society actors—all of which have been instrumental in advocating for and raising awareness of the Praia Declaration—need to remain committed to its implementation.

# Agenda

## Elections and Stability in West Africa: The Way Forward

September 26, 2011

- 09:00–09:30      **Welcome**  
Ambassador John Hirsch, *Senior Adviser, IPI*
- Opening Remarks**  
Mr. Tayé-Brook Zerihoun, *United Nations Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs*
- 09:30–10:30      **Session 1: Highlights from the Praia Conference on Elections and Stability in West Africa**  
*What are the key lessons learned from recent electoral processes in West Africa? What positive practices can be shared regarding elections as a tool for democratization, conflict prevention, and peacebuilding? What strategies are contemplated or have been developed to implement the recommendations adopted by the Praia Conference, including the role of governments, nonstate actors, and regional and international institutions and partners?*
- Chair**  
Ambassador Said Djinnit, *United Nations Special Representative of the Secretary-General for West Africa and Head of the United Nations Office for West Africa (UNOWA)*
- Speaker**  
Dr. Abdel Fatau Musah, *Director of External Relations, Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)*
- 10:30–11:30      **Session 2: Elections in West Africa: Potential for Peace and Democracy and Risks of Violence and Instability**  
*What are the main causes of election-related violence in West Africa? What lessons can the international community draw from the post-election crisis in Côte d'Ivoire? To what extent can the prevention of election-related disputes take into account the underlying political, social, and economic grievances that tend to find expression during elections? Which institutions and practices could be strengthened before, during and after electoral processes in West Africa, with a view to making them more credible and peaceful?*
- Chair**  
Ambassador John Hirsch, *Senior Adviser, IPI*
- Speakers**  
Professor Timothy Sisk, *Josef Korbel School of International Studies, University of Denver*  
Ms. Mariama Bayard-Gamatié, *Former Minister, Former Presidential Candidate, Consultant, Niger*
- 11:30–11:45      **Coffee Break**

11:45–12:45

**Session 3: Electoral Assistance and Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding: Political Implications, Challenges, and Opportunities**

*Is there a need for a new paradigm of electoral assistance in light of the above discussions and the outcome of the Praia roundtable? What synergies can be further developed between electoral assistance and preventive diplomacy and peacebuilding?*

**Chair**

Mr. Craig Jenness, *Director, Electoral Assistance Division, United Nations Department of Political Affairs*

**Speakers**

Dr. Christiana Thorpe, *Chairperson of the Sierra Leone National Electoral Commission*

Dr. Massimo Tommasoli, *Permanent Observer to the United Nations, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA)*

Mr. Tadjoudine Ali-Diabacte, *Deputy Director, Electoral Assistance Division, United Nations Department of Political Affairs*

12:45–13:00

**Closing Remarks**

Mr. Youssef Mahmoud, *Senior Adviser, IPI*

## Participants

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