

Turning elections into a development asset in Africa

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ISS Paper 163 • June 2008

Price: R15.00

Introduction

It is only when the basic needs such as food, clothing and adequate shelter are satisfied for each person in the continent, that Africa would have acquired the fundamental requisites for a deep-rooted culture of peace and security. The same goes for having predictable, periodic and credible national elections within the individual countries. Indeed, election crises have been raging in some parts of Africa. That elections are emerging as a new source of tension, disputes, disruption and violence is a worrisome trend with far reaching implications for political stability and normalcy in the continent. It now appears that the hope that came about with the return to political pluralism in the continent more than a decade ago, the assumption that elections would help in fostering peace, stability, harmony and sound developmental policy choices, is fading away.

It was timely and useful that Africa's highest collective political authority, the Assembly of the African Union (AU), pronounced itself articulately with respect to the eruption of the post-election crisis in Kenya that followed the 27 December 2007 national elections. In decision Assembly/AU/Dec.187 (X) adopted by the 10th Ordinary Session of the Assembly of the Union, held in Addis Ababa, from 31 January to 2 February 2008, the Assembly stressed, inter-alia, 'the need to initiate a collective reflection on the challenges linked to the tension and disputes that often characterize electoral processes in Africa, including the strengthening of the African capacity at national, regional and continental levels to observe and monitor elections'¹.

In some respects Africa is fortunate. It has a vast endowment in natural resources as compared to other continents. Coupled with this is the continent's expanding youthful human resource base. Only appropriate statesmanship in political and economic terms is needed to bring about a marriage between

these two decisive resource bases to give a real chance to the continent and its people to blossom. Historically, Africa is the only continent to have contributed on a large scale to the upward socio-economic development of other continents (Europe, America and to some extent parts of Asia) through an involuntary supply of unpaid for human resources (labour) and raw materials to those continents. Nothing in real terms, thus far, has come back to Africa from these other continents in a manner adapted to help uplift living conditions of African peoples.

Elections must act as a mechanism for an orderly access to power or exit from it, not a recipe for chaos

If the above facts are indisputable as they just are, Africa must get everything right today. Elections constitute one major area in which Africa needs to put issues on the correct track. African countries must turn elections into a developmental asset that would add its weight to the much awaited and much-needed convergence of Africa's two decisive resource bases. Elections must act as a mechanism for an orderly access to power or exit from it, not a recipe for chaos. Pre-occupied by some of the trends in Africa, Rene Dumont once noted that 'l'Afrique est mal partie (Africa has made a false departure)².

This contribution seeks to highlight the fact that properly conducted elections (based on genuine and effective functioning electoral machinery and respect for the will and choices of the people with respect to those who seek to govern them) in any African country would be a major contribution to Africa's social and material development. With no pretence of exhausting the issues covered, it belabours the various factors bedevilling elections in Africa and the lessons to be learnt from past election crises. It dwells on how such factors could be addressed with a view to bringing about a productive electoral landscape in Africa. The contribution departs from a brief conceptual overview of how democracy, as the base frame for elections, evolved in different parts of the world. The central thesis in this work is that



Africa and its people stand to benefit tremendously if African countries turn elections into assets (tools) for development. In so doing, these countries would also be preventing conflicts and achieving increased national self-confidence and self-empowerment *vis-à-vis* the global politico-economic and strategic environment. Turning elections into a real asset necessarily demands effective developmental decentralisation – overall empowerment of local communities within a rationalised national dispensation.

Brief conceptual overview

Numerous studies have been conducted regarding the concept and practice of modern democracy, including the key aspect of elections. However, few substantive studies have been made on election-related disputes and conflicts in Africa. Election-related conflict is a recent phenomenon in the continent and the underlying causes are still to be accorded deep investigation.

C.W.B. Macpherson's notion of democracy and his account on how it emerged and expanded in different parts of the world is quite inspiring as presented in his maiden work 'The Real World of Democracy'. He asserted that 'liberal democracy', as embraced in the western societies, only emerged and took root when these societies had attained a significantly higher level of economic development propelled by private entrepreneurship (free enterprise) (Macpherson (1966). This advanced level of economic development brought with it not only new goods, services and wealth, but also inequalities and social discontent. Hence the need felt by the dominant social groups to forge political and social mechanisms for preventing or managing the risk of social explosion. Hereupon came the system of democracy, with its inbuilt machinery of representative government and periodic elections. So did also arrive the system of government-led welfare. These mechanisms evolved to complement one another in moderating the potential of ill-feeling and revolt among the masses. In asserting that 'over his body and mind, the individual is sovereign'³, J.S. Mill, in his very influential work 'On Liberty' (1868), indisputably laid down the foundational tenets of liberal democracy.

Notably, western societies have, since the 19th century, done relatively well in sustaining both the free enterprise economic system and socio-political democracy. Because of this sustenance, an assumption grew in those societies that their variant of democracy and electioneering was better suited for other parts of the world. But Samuel Huntington, in his work on 'The

Clash of Civilisations (1993)' seems to have made well the point that it is not axiomatic that socio-political arrangements that work well in a society in one part of the world would also work well in a different society situated in another part of the world. However, what is indisputable is the fact that democracy has an irresistible cross-cultural appeal across the world. It is also popular enough with political change seekers who often use it as a campaign banner.

Furthermore, as Macpherson (1966) asserted, there were the 'proletarian democracies' that arose following the communist upsurge, especially in parts of Europe in the late 19th century and also thereafter, in other parts of the world, as influenced by the ideas of the 19th century German thinker, Karl Marx. This variant of democracy rejected the exploitation of the workers by the industrial owners (bourgeoisie) and promised a more egalitarian society, all with a moral obligation to labour and an adequate access to the means of livelihood, living in a communist society. It promised a collective representative government. The legacy of communist movements, as seen in China today, tend to be a cross breed of political centralism and guided free enterprise.

Citizens use elections to keep governments up to the task of providing for basic societal needs and pursuing unrelenting improvement of the country

It was commonly assumed by a certain generation of African political thinkers and leaders such as Julius K. Nyerere and Kenneth Kaunda, that pre-colonial African societies were based on equality, freedom, communal ownership and common welfare. But these societies supposedly collapsed under the weight of west European colonization during the 19th and 20th centuries. One of the purported objectives of anti-colonial liberation was the recovery of this 'ideal' society. The agency of the recovery of this lost democracy was the liberation

movement, which, once independence was attained, transformed itself into a governing party with a protracted political lifespan. Macpherson argued that democracy that came in this way contributes to the creation of a new post-colonial society, but one based on the search for restitution of the primary variant of democracy integrating equality, freedom, collective responsibility and the common good.

In a modern political system in which political activity, in all its forms and contexts, has grown beyond the traditional social structures of tribe, clan and ethnic group, elections come as an asset for development. Through the mechanism of elections, citizens seek to improve their lives by listening to views and policy options offered by political candidates on vital issues of national life and making weighted choices among them. Citizens use elections to keep governments up to the task of providing for basic societal needs and pursuing unrelenting improvement of the country. This



is how properly conducted elections play a role as a developmental asset in any given country.

Africa cannot be an exception to this kind of electoral life. It is needless to argue whether or not modern political organization exists on the continent. It does exist. However, it is the incidence of flawed elections, some of them accompanied by terrifying violence against life and property, that is such a frightening spectre on the African electoral landscape today. Thus, a means must be found to arrest this trend in which elections cannot play a role that makes them a developmental asset.

Factors negatively affecting national elections in Africa

Through electoral disputes, conflicts are triggered adding themselves to a frightening complex of threats and problems long haunting Africa and its peoples: armed conflict, poverty driven strife, tribal, ethnic, religious, sectarian and environmental crises; terrorism and arms trafficking, as well as epidemics and pandemics. Adding to this ugly scenario is the fact that Africa is standing on the receiving side of the 'negative effects of globalisation'⁴.

This does not augur well for the grand projects that are currently being debated within the continent, such as continental economic and political integration⁵ and the setting up of a Union Government⁶. These projects cannot be fruitfully pursued in Africa in the absence of firm arrangements for the conduct of periodic, credible and manipulation-proof elections.

Politics – a privileged sector for economic opportunities

Full-fledged market economies are still emerging in Africa. In a developed economy, the private sector is normally a major factor in employment creation, generation of income for employees and provision of tax to the State, as well as in making contributions to research foundations and humanitarian organisations. The private sector is a leading locomotive in the creation of wealth. At the present stage, Africa is not yet in that situation. In reality, government and the public sector represent the single point of attraction for the largest part of the population. For power incumbents and those closest to them, doing politics means everything in terms of access to a privileged status:

- Access to State resources
- Access to credit lines
- Ability to influence bureaucratic choices and actions
- Opportunities for fast track accumulation of personal or own family-owned property
- Possibility for finding jobs for relatives and friends, etc

- Protection against prosecution for abuse of office/misuse of public resources, etc

In this kind of situation, and without which the alternative to leaving politics is tantamount to reversion to poverty and lack of influence, power incumbents and top level bureaucrats may not easily vacate a powerful high office – the office becomes a place of long-term occupation and place for deferred retirement. This holding fast and hard to political office by power incumbents inevitably contaminates the entire system in the country as:

- Lack of new ideas and methods come up to erode the economy and social conditions
- Population loses confidence in the government owing to its failure to provide for basic needs
- Opposition politicians emerge to a closed political space and have to struggle to the last drop of sweat to enter that space
- Bureaucracy increasingly becomes ineffective and parasitic on a visibly weak economy
- A cycle of social, economic and political incertitude and instability creeps in
- The country becomes charged with tension that affects vital national issues (elections become one of immediate victims)

Existence of a dominant party political system

The existence of dominant party political system is most evident in countries whereby the attainment of independence was brought about by an armed struggle or a prolonged non-violent campaign. This background, coupled with the drive to consolidate independence and cement a new nation, places the liberation movement-turned governing party into a position of unchallengeable strength and dominance on the political landscape:

- Exclusive control of the legislative process
- Watertight party structure interspersed with all social, economic and political structures and processes in the country
- A partisan army
- Full control of media
- Control of youth organisations
- Party intrusion into national economic enterprises
- Lack of a clear-cut distinction between institutions, processes and properties of the State from those of the party

In this situation, free public opinion faces bottlenecks to emerge and exert impact. Opposition political parties also confront obstacles in seeking to influence public opinion and the political direction of a country. The obstacles, which are often difficult to surmount, include lack of financial resources; denial of access to the media; restricted space for carrying out electoral campaigns, denial of facilities for party meetings, etc.

In simple terms, a dominant party political system, though short in essence of being a one-party system, operates in a manner that is incongruent with the norms and practices relevant for having credible, free and fair elections. In some cases, the emergence of a dominant party system has been followed by the advent of civil war or prolonged civil strife.

Stampede/rush for power by opposition parties

The road to power is seldom smooth. It requires hard work to elaborate a good political programme, with economic goals fine-tuned to public interest. It is something that requires well thought out preparation and well forged tactics and modes of organisation. It needs deep knowledge of political conditions within and beyond the country and solid organisational experience. In Africa, the early post-independence era (1960s -1970s), saw the dominance of the one-party system in some cases and the dominant party in others, in the context of the Cold War, which did not foster an environment conducive for opposition political activity to emerge and mature. What happened from the late-1980s onwards was that changes in the international system, brought about by an end to the Cold War, created opportunities for the mushrooming of opposition political activities and parties in the continent. But these parties were mostly unprepared to compete effectively and systematically for power. They tended to be driven by the search for power for itself, rather than the ability to present an alternative attractive national programme to the population. This stampede to reach power often brought up serious reactions from the incumbent ruling party, leading to consequences such as acrimony, divisions and instability in the country. Chaos and violence around elections became inevitable.

Resistance to timely succession

By and large, the culture of organised and timely succession in African political parties remains problematic. Party leaders stay on, feasting on retrospective or poorly assessed popularity. Over time the rank and file of the party gets frustrated. Debate gets stifled. The net result is the failure of the party to rejuvenate itself and adjust to changing circumstances. When it becomes so obvious that the top party leadership has to be replaced, the situation would have worsened to such a higher degree, both within the party and in the country. In effect, at that stage, replacing the top party leadership brings up the risk of party divisions, if not disintegration. Experience has shown that, more often, there are no easy exits out of this dilemma. This dilemma has mostly affected former liberation movements and nationalist parties in Africa, which became governing dominant parties for long durations after independence. It was Julius Nyerere who, whilst calling on his contemporary, Kenneth

Kaunda, not to contest the general elections of 2000 in Zambia, who said that 'You and I have had our time; it is time for others to carry on from where we left'⁷. However, this advice to leave it to others to carry on the task is often not taken seriously in many situations.

Lack of public confidence in the electoral machinery

When the overall political environment is not conducive for the pursuit of public needs, it becomes difficult to inspire confidence in the public relative to the integrity, transparency and modus operandi of electoral institutions. It also becomes difficult to put effective lawful measures in place to prevent pre-election, intra-election and post-election violence. In reality, forceful measures will see the day. It is this situation of mistrust, if it gets prolonged and deepened, that will foment ill feeling and discontent among some sections of the electorate, if not the whole of it.

Mono-ethnic domination within a political party

Political parties are supposed to have a national profile and ethos. This implies that the party should have, at least, some of the following features:

- National values and interest in mind;
- National priorities;
- Membership reflecting the entire mix of the country's population;
- Strict adherence to national constitutional arrangements;
- Tolerance of other political entities/parties;
- Potential to form a government reflecting the popular character and spirit of the country.

Although this is a desirable order, many political parties in Africa still show strong tendencies towards patterns of hard-core mono-ethnic dominance. The top decision-making level of the party is usually occupied by personalities largely from the same ethnic group. Yet this becomes a thorn in the flesh for those members from different ethnic groups who feel marginalized from the policy making core of the party. Being excluded from the core also means little or no influence on who succeeds who, within the political party. Mono-ethnic domination in a party has the tendency of over spilling into the government and the State. The net result is resistance to progressive change, which inevitably generates frustration and tension in the country. It is in this kind of setting that the conditions towards conflict are activated. In his days of incumbency as President of the Republic of Zambia, Kenneth Kaunda tried to deal with the ethnic question in both the party and in government, through the concept and practice of "ethnic balancing" – posting political and administrative actors from different ethnic groups and regions in both the party structures and the State structures"⁸.

One party/one person forged electoral arrangements/institutions

When the governing party dominates electoral institutions, it often possesses wide-ranging powers, if not exclusive ones, to appoint members of the electoral commission and to determine how they operate. In many cases, such members are either political favourites or loyal supporters of the incumbents in power, which does not go well with opposition political parties and even some sections of the public. In such a situation, the electoral institutions operate in a way that tends to favour the status quo. In effect, electoral victories by parties other than the governing party become a remote possibility. In this scenario, it is electoral institutions and arrangements dominated by the ruling party and/or the authoritarian leader that presents the greatest potential for the outbreak of pre-election, intra-election and post-election violence. It is also a contributory factor to the erosion of public confidence in the electoral machinery.

Long incumbency in electoral institutions

Generally, corruption and the abuse of power, either in government or in the private sector, or other spheres of activity, are not usually committed by new entrants/employees. It is often those people who have been in an institution for a considerable length of time, who, by virtue of their knowledge of the inherent loopholes, and the advantage extractable from those loopholes, will commit acts of corruption and manipulation. Electoral institutions are no exception to this corruptibility. It is often worse when the personnel in these institutions happen to hold the view that any change of government would translate into loss of advantage and privilege for them. Thus, they tend to manage the electoral process in a manner that prolongs the lifespan in office of the governing party of the day.

Domestic under-funding

Although donor funding has been/continues to fill gaps in the funding of some electoral institutions and processes on the continent, this support, in itself, is no guarantee for the proper functioning, or improvement, of electoral institutions. This kind of funding only helps to find event related solutions, but not long-term ones. Also, external funding brings other issues and pressures that may not necessarily have things go the way that they should normally go. The long-term solution to under-resourcedness of an electoral institution should necessarily be the expansion of the domestic income base of a country. When elections and their managerial mechanisms are funded from domestic sources, it is one effective way of engendering responsibility among

politicians and awareness within the electorate. Because everything comes from its money (tax), the electorate would be more vigilant and exigent for having a good operation of electoral institutions and overall good governance on the part of the government.

Insights and lessons derived from past election crises

One way of going about improving the electoral landscape in Africa is to draw wisdom from the lessons inherent in past election crises. The crises provide some teaching. They are a source of corrective ideas and techniques that could be used to usher in a new ethos of elections in the continent. Here are some of those insights and lessons:

Long gestation of election related tension

Election tension and explosion into violence are events that grow out of a period of gestation. There is usually very little that is spontaneous about it. The outbreak of violence during elections or in reaction to an announced outcome should be seen as a symptom of deep-rooted centrifugal factors ingrained in society. It is a result of long neglected but very important issues. In fact, election-related violence is a product of protracted political mismanagement, which then induces economic mismanagement in a country – whether that involves tyranny, dictatorship, lack of accountability and corruption, etc.

Wake up call for holistic self-scrutiny

It must not come as a surprise that sections of the electorate plunge into violence towards an election or over an election outcome. That behaviour is an expression of anger and frustration over fundamental issues. The anger stems from the way in which people, or a section of people, are denied access to the means of decent existence and failure to effect due economic justice or restitution of material property. Therefore, an outbreak of election-fuelled violence is a wake up call for a country to engage in self-scrutiny to find out what is not correctly functioning and why, and to find practical remedies.

No single individual has a monopoly of wisdom

It took eminent Africans from outside Kenya and the Kenyan personalities themselves to put heads together and find an exit out of the post-election crisis. If the advantage of collective wisdom had been embraced during the counting and tallying of votes, some of the problems that befell the country could have been prevented. Thus, collective solution searching should

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always be embraced by the Africans to prevent or resolve a crisis in whichever area in manifests itself.

Winner-takes-all elections are recipe for disaster

Any politician may seek to make elections a winner-takes all game. But this approach is laden with huge risks in African conditions or else where. There is a lot of diversity requiring careful management. Only a broad power sharing arrangement bringing on board all those who would have made a visible impact on the election in terms winning votes promotes post-election stability. To ignore, or exclude such politicians breeds uncertainty into a post-election dispensation.

No amount of force can resolve election-centred disputes

Any election-centred crisis has the effect of contaminating the entire population, including the security and military forces. It also contaminates the country's external image and relations. The fact that an election dispute does spread turmoil to the very institutions responsible for the country's security and defence implies that the use of force is not the right option. It complicates further the situation. Even if force is used to arrest an election crisis as an event, the unintended effect of that usage of force is to further entrench the roots of election related problems and to postpone those problems into the future, where they might explode with even a greater magnitude. Political debate and discussion of controversial issues among the concerned political actors and stakeholders is the constructive option.

Forging African grown and applied solutions

To make and apply own solutions means that the Africans would have clearly understood their problems and how to avoid them henceforth. When an African house is on fire, the Africans are expected to know better why the fire broke out in the house. That knowledge is a critical investment in the efforts to find an effective solution. The stakes are often much higher for Africans than for outsiders whenever a crisis erupts in any part of continent. Applying genuine African solutions requires an investment by Africans themselves to objectively diagnose a problem in all its dimensions and to find appropriate solutions addressing those dimensions.

Regulatory legal arrangements are no quick fix for problems

Even if there were stringent legal arrangements regulating elections in Africa, there is often a time lag

between the acceptance and signature of an instrument and the point at which the stipulated ratifications are effected for the instrument to enter into force. Still, there is a problem that comes with a given country not having ratified a given instrument and by implication, may not be bound by its provisions. If a crisis erupts in such country, there is little that can be done using an instrument containing provisions that would apply to dealing with such a crisis. In fact, it is more of a culture of compliance with set norms, practices and standards that can serve better the purpose, not the mere existence of domestic and international legal texts.

Predatory long incumbency

A pre-determined optimal period for holding political power does not exist. But the term limits do not necessarily mean an optimal period for a person to lead a country. Rather, it is an arrangement based on political preference and pragmatism. Politicians in different countries hold power for different durations as determined by the factors at play. Whether an incumbency of high political office is to be considered

fairly short or too long, is an issue to be judged based on the pace and quality of general improvement in the social, political and economic conditions in a country. A political leader who implements policies that bring up real time tangible improvements in public life is more likely not to be scrutinized by the public on the basis of the amount of time he/she has spent in office. The reverse becomes true. When a leader stays in office for a prolonged period and the effect of prolongation of incumbency is no more than deterioration in the country's situation, such incidence becomes predatory long incumbency. It is predatory because of

Prolongation of incumbency is no more than deterioration in the country's situation

the inevitable impact in terms of the well being of the population suffering regressive trends. Consequently, agitation to change the situation begins to simmer. But this agitation may push things too far and bring up instability.

The challenge of improving political mismanagement – a task at hand in Africa

The problem of the occurrence of election crises need to be viewed in a broader perspective of the bigger issue of how to improve political management or inversely said, how to treat the disease of political mismanagement. It is a fact that when one mismanages an economic enterprise, it is bound to face problems of failure and even collapse. It is no less true that if one mismanages the political space and dynamics of a country, the country will inevitably be confronted by serious problems. Essentially, to improve political management in



Africa implies a number of steps to be taken at different levels of political activity and organisation in Africa. The AU, Regional Economic Communities (RECs) and individual countries each have a part to play in this enterprise. So does the citizenry in each country. How each of them would contribute to improving political management is not so easy to establish. But some proposals are made below:

Facing the political human factor dilemma

The phrase 'political human factor' is being used in this context to refer to fundamental attributes and characteristics that must be acquired by both those who vie for and acquire political power to lead a human community and those to be led. In both cases, there must be possession at the individual level of the following:

- Personal integrity
- Personal moral conscience
- Honesty and trustworthiness
- Sense of common good
- Fear of violent death
- Respect for reason
- Sense of innovation
- Fear of erosion of freedom of oneself and of others
- Antipathy to deprivation of necessities of life

When deficiency in these attributes and characteristics affect those who govern or those who are governed, the task of improving political management becomes a mammoth one. In fact, it may happen that political decay will begin to creep into that society. Under conditions of political decay, it is almost impossible to make progress. Democracy itself, and its inherent engine of elections, thrives most wherever these attributes and characteristics dominate the social, economic and political climate of a human community. Every person, naturally, has the capacity to acquire these features. And that acquisition is the start up point in improving political management where ever it could be.

Expectations upon the African Union

The AU's promise to African peoples in the areas of peace and security, economic and political integration, as well as in creation of prosperity in Africa and in making the continent a robust actor in global affairs, places the Organisation in a difficult position where everybody looks up at it to deliver on the key issues affecting Africa. Africans and the world at large look at and expect the AU to address and solve the problems facing the continent. Indeed, the AU has the potential to be a locomotive force for assisting member States in improving both the conditions under which elections

take place and the systemic/institutional set up within which elections are conducted. Notably, the AU has conducted several successful elections for various policy organs since 2003. This is a positive trend that could be a source of improvements in the conduct of national elections in the member States.

But somehow, too much seems to be expected of the AU. It is often forgotten that this organization is still in its infancy, and relatively fragile from a financial resources viewpoint. There are no supra-national competencies among the AU policy organs as yet. The Organisation still needs to acquire the requisite weight to be able to fully bear upon one or another of its member States to attain a desired conduct of elections, or to manifest the necessary level of compliance with a system of values, rules and practices. It is for this reason that some have argued that 'supra-nationalism should be injected into some of the AU policy organs', possibly the Commission, if such weight is to be realized.

In the first place, the AU can deliver on any given issue to the extent that its membership enables it to do so. This is not unique to it, but is a major feature of any inter-governmental organization. Inter-governmental organizations are, by their very origin and nature, a reflection of the dynamics and culture within the membership. Whenever there is a high degree of value consensus and cultural convergence among the constituent members, an inter-governmental organization has naturally more possibility to take initiatives in line with the desires of the members.

Regional and continental organisations cannot be better than constituent member States

Regional and continental organisations cannot be better than the constituent member States. When member States possess good political and ethical attributes (rich and enabling human factor features), these same attributes will naturally get absorbed into and be reflected in the architecture and texture of organisations that are established. Also, in the absence of a super state/supra-national standing, an inter-governmental organisation cannot act as a final political referee. If a non-supra-national inter-governmental organisation enters the field to play such a role, there is some risk that it would be made weaker as the affected member States would take recourse to their sovereign attributes. Even if such an organization has a legal mandate relating to elections, it has to conduct that mandate very cautiously and it has to harness the support of a sufficient quota of member States to fully assume that mandate. An example is the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which has a mandate in the domain of elections. But in practical terms, the effect of that mandate in any election within the OSCE membership depends on political leverage



provided by the leading democratic countries among the members.

Furthermore, as long as the constituent member States remain effective sovereign entities, there is a limit to which other non-State entities could go in sanctioning an election. In this context, the real significance of an inter-governmental organisation resides in it being a pool of political and public opinion that weighs heavily enough not to be ignored by a country going through an election. Somehow, the sentiments of the Organisation will bear upon the political authorities and actors in the concerned country.

The above said, it remains vital to keep in mind that the AU has a cutting edge role to play in both the specific aspect of bringing harmony (avoiding chaos and violence) and amelioration in the electoral situation of African countries. The Organisation can provide a collective and louder institutional voice on issues of elections:

- Providing scrutiny and oversight in the interval between elections
- Undertaking periodic electoral assessment visits
- Carrying out periodic review of existing continental level electoral policy instruments
- Interfacing with civil society organizations for improving the environment for elections
- Providing technical support for electoral reform aiming at putting in place more credible arrangements for conducting elections

Furthermore, in a situation whereby an election dispute has erupted, the AU represents a non-controversial collective institutional approach; it becomes the main point of recourse if intra-country efforts face complications:

- Forthrightly condemning bad motives and actions
- Visiting the crisis affected country (and its neighbouring countries if necessary) for finding a solution
- Mobilizing international public opinion to bear more influence on parties to an election dispute
- Deploying a neutral mediation process around parties to an electoral dispute

There are, also, prospects of AU's thinking getting more and more shaped by an imperative to decisively prevent the eruption of election dispute fuelled conflicts. That thinking could see the continental body taking more robust initiative to be involved in promoting periodic and peaceful elections on the continent. The decision of the Assembly of the Union cited far above is indicative of a probable trend in which the AU would put arrangements for a more effective and timely presence on the ground ahead of, during and also, if need be, stay as long as is necessary in the immediate period following the announcement of the election outcome.

More importantly, the AU would make more difference in terms of qualitative impact by promoting a decisive massive presence of election monitoring teams. Massive presence meaning early arrival on the terrain, sufficient numbers of monitors to spread out evenly across constituencies, adequate resources, capacity to receive and pay attention to unsettling circumstances ahead of, during and immediately after elections. It is through such massive presence that the ordinary African voter would perceive the AU as a neutral and effective entity and one driven by the interest and needs of the African people within the context of elections.

Individual African countries

The bigger part of the burden to improve political management reposes on the shoulders of each of the African countries. Equally, the lion's share of the benefits of such improvement goes to these countries. In fact, the ultimate responsibility for promoting credible, free and fair elections rests with individual countries and not with regional/continental organisations in Africa. Hence, each country must see to it that the institutions in charge of the conduct of elections are both representative and effectively empowered with respect to:

- Participatory selection and incorporation of members designated by a governing party and opposition parties in electoral institutions at the material time;
- Providing for balanced membership in the National Electoral Commission, based on human factor, intellectual, gender, neutrality and geo-demographic aspects;
- Non-interference by any political authority or political party in the core business of conducting elections: management of polling stations; collection, counting and tallying of votes; announcement of the results of the elections on each issue on which the elections were contested;
- Providing opportunity for voters to verify the voters register more times in-between elections. The voters register is a document of major political interest which should have periodic scrutiny by voters and potential voters (those attaining the voting age by the time the next election takes place).

Political parties

The behaviour of political parties, be it those in power or in opposition, plays a decisive role in improving political management in a country. It is misunderstandings and suspicions between parties that often plunge a country into a crisis. No less is it true that when decay occasions parties, that decay, be it in the form of corruption or poor performance, overflows into national life. So parties have work more to help improve political management in Africa:

1. Political parties should encourage and embrace open internal leadership arrangements, especially those covering succession. Such arrangements would allow for predictability in the political party vis-à-vis the public. Debate and flexibility should be part of the lifeblood of a political party
2. Political parties should put in place manipulation-proof mechanisms for conducting intra-party elections whenever there is an imperative for electing new leadership. This would reduce the burden upon a political party of keeping at the top a personality that has become a liability and therefore undermines the attractiveness of a party vis-à-vis the public
3. Political parties should be champions of top leadership term limits. For whatever reason, a leader should not prolong their stay at the helm of a political party. Over staying means any time beyond ten years, taking due account of the heavy demands of running a party concurrently with the affairs of the State. Within ten years, any one should naturally be too exhausted to carry on. Also, within any period spanning ten years, the country's characteristics undergo change, thereby demanding appropriate adjustment in social, economic and more importantly, political arrangements. This dynamic nature of a country's situation is such that only new ideas and approaches, as well as new methods of organization and work, can keep the country going. Any political party needs to adapt to this in order to remain relevant in changing times both in the country and in the world. In the field, the over staying of a party leader would cost a party some of the following aspects vital for its continued existence and influential visibility:
 - Renewal of genius
 - Replenishment of fresh blood
 - Retention of focus on basic public needs
 - Self-scrutiny and internal reform
 - Avoidance of tyrannical behaviour
4. Governing political parties need to avoid confusing the affairs and assets of the State with those of a political party. Whilst the governing party or coalition exercises its mandate to govern a country, it needs to safeguard the affairs and assets of the State in the interest of and to the benefit of the public. As matter of fact, any governing party, by virtue of incumbency, enjoys the privilege of access to the services and utilities of the State. However, there is need to avoid corrupt and extravagant usage. Space must be left for opposition parties to also have, as a legitimate right, especially towards and during elections, access to those services and utilities of the State
5. Opposition political parties need to do a thorough homework. They must fulfil the need for proper organisation, offering sound alternative ideas and programmes, and having vision for the future, as well as for planned action in competing for power.

Precipitated action and stampede for power must be avoided

People's role in improving political management

Elections are done by the people and for themselves. It is the people who stand to benefit if all goes well; but when elections are done badly, the people pay a high price (instability, insecurity, violence, perturbation of economic life, etc). Of the work that people could do to bring about desired change, it is the issue of the role of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and the need for "meaningful developmental decentralization" that quickly comes to one's mind.

Potential for positive contribution by Civil Society Organizations

CSOs have the potential to contribute to an improvement and stabilization of inter-election processes and the conduct of national elections. They have the special characteristic of being closer to grassroots dynamics and of being generally responsive to grassroots needs. The following aspects represent choices for action that CSOs could make to help improve the electoral landscape in the continent within a broad effort towards political management:

- Contributing conceptual inputs for constitutional reviews and reform
- Holding periodic symposia to reflect on political and economic challenges (assessment of social climate) in Africa and document on them
- Consulting with AU and RECS field missions whenever such missions are undertaken within the context of elections or related issues
- Documenting and notifying the AU and the RECS of efforts deployed by CSOs in technical fields with relevance for improving preparations for and conduct of elections
- Making written contributions/presentations to brainstorming sessions of the AU and the RECs
- Conducting training in negotiations for election-based disputes
- Providing relevant early warning information regarding elections
- Carrying out impact assessment relating to election observation and monitoring activities
- Conducting seminars on elections

Need for meaningful developmental decentralization: socio-cultural, technical, political and economic aspects

In order for any political architecture to manage well a country's diversity, there has to be a choice towards meaningful developmental socio-cultural, political and economic decentralization, as opposed to cosmetic decentralisation.



Cosmetic decentralization, as experienced in different parts of Africa, involved the creation of ineffective or faulty institutions and processes under the banner of socio-economic development. In most cases, the process was underpinned by the extension of the organizational structure of a governing party. In the set up, party structures will assume the commanding heights of influence, control and decision-making at the national, provincial, district, local and village levels. The decentralized system will then simply act as the eyes and ears of a governing party and as a conduit for top-down decisions. The real political, financial, human and technical resources needed to qualitatively transform local communities remain rare in this approach to decentralization, since it is simply a decentralization to consolidate the outreach and control of a governing party. In short, cosmetic decentralization fosters a cancerous situation that, if not arrested on time, will eventually bring down a country.

Undertaking meaningful developmental decentralization

The term 'meaningful decentralisation' is used here with the benefit of hindsight. From the 1960s, through the 70s and 80s, African countries initiated decentralisation strategies that were meant to qualitatively improve the condition of local communities in every facet of life. The strategies were also targeted at boosting local entrepreneurship, development and self-reliance. But all this did not see the day. Not because the intention was absent; it was the mode of implementing arrangements on the ground that were ill conceived and they simply misfired. No effect, no progress and no national socio-economic integration occurred.

In undertaking developmental decentralisation, the first issue is that local communities must be in a position to identify their needs and assess what it costs them to meet those needs. There must be an inherent capacity within local communities to meet part of the costs, i.e. drawing resources from local economies. The second issue is that technical education facilities/schools should be available within local communities. There should be an emphasis on essentially those facilities capable of producing practically relevant personnel *vis-à-vis* the needs of local communities. Brick moulders, builders, carpenters, roofers, welders, electricians, agro-mechanics, bridge builders, irrigation technicians, foresters, livestock treatment assistants, crop disease control assistants, etc, are the kind of skilled labour categories that must be readily available to local communities. Evidently, these skills are grassroots requirements that are needed to provide

for the provision of services, the establishment and upkeep of social and physical infrastructures of local communities. These are the technical inputs into the local development process as the most critical level at which progressive socio-economic transformation must take place. This is the underpinning base for tangible national development.

Evidently, also, the old style decentralization as practiced thus far in Africa, has been far short of these dimensions. For example, the school and college training approach focussed too much on white-collar jobs. The grease, oil, spanner and heavy work suit jobs were ignored. Investment in university education, too, concentrated on suit and tie graduates. Farming, engineering, pharmaceutical, real manufacturing activity graduates, etc were given little attention.

In the field, party-centred political organization became the main activity and not developmental organization. Local authorities (councils) became outposts for the governing party's mobilization of support and not for the mobilization of efforts and resources for local development. In fact, local authorities became weaker and languished in economic stagnation as fiscal support from the centre dried up.

CSOs have the potential to contribute to an improvement and stabilization of the inter-election processes and the conduct of national elections

The third issue is that the central political and economic authorities must channel substantive resources to beef up the resources mobilized by local communities on a timely basis. The fourth issue is the avoidance of the grand national development plans, or projects compromising locally relevant and implementable project plans. Local roads, water harvesting facilities and arteries, agro-schemes, local markets, etc, must be left to flourish. More often

that not, local project plans do not demand excessive financial investments as is the case with national scale developments projects – which often suffer from ruptures due to waiting for future budgetary allocations; costs rise and targets are missed on the way; meanwhile, the delay faced by such large projects stifles efforts towards local projects.

The fifth important issue is that local communities should be empowered with real competencies to develop and run their own cultural, economic and political affairs. Such a choice is not divisive at all; rather, it empowers specific communities that, as propelled by their internal growth, would naturally develop strong networks of interdependency, as well as mutual and multilateral fusion among themselves. Some sort of a naturally driven integration would take place – that, in turn, would be of instrumental utility for national, regional and continental integration in Africa as a long sought for aspiration and goal.

In largely rural Africa, where the urban dimension is still visibly subordinate, ethnic diversity remains the king maker in setting social, political and economic trends. This ethnic diversity underlines the necessity of careful management. Developmental decentralisation could be one effective tool for fruitfully managing this diversity.

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Notes

- 1 See decision Assembly/AU/Dec.187(X) of the 10th Ordinary Session of the Assembly of the African Union, Addis Ababa, 30 January to 2 February 2008 (the leadership of Africa have signalled the need for profound thinking on how to improve the conduct of elections on the continent)
- 2 Dumont R, *L'Afrique est mal partie*, l'Hammattan, Paris, 1967 (Dumont sought to expose the ineffectiveness of the development strategies adopted by African countries

after independence)

- 3 John Stuart Mill remains at the intellectual and philosophical tower of liberal political and economic thought; his ideas, after those of John Locke (1668), substantially influenced the social genesis of western societies
- 4 Globalisation – a dynamic trend that emerged with the fall of communism and the end of the Cold War around 1989, ushering in a global economy featured by large business corporations that are in constant competition and rivalry over products and markets. Relentless technical innovation characterise the operations of these business conglomerates. Francis Fukuyama, in his work 'The End of History and The Last Man' (1990) belabours this point very articulately
- 5 See the Constitutive Act of the African Union; See also Accra Declaration, adopted by the 9th Ordinary Session of the Assembly of the African Union, Accra, Ghana 30 June - 2 July 2007
- 6 Accra Declaration, adopted by the 9th Ordinary Session of the Assembly of the African Union, Accra, Ghana 30 June - 2 July 2007
- 7 Nyerere Julius K, Message to Kenneth Kaunda (appeal to quit elections and politics), March 2000;
- 8 Kaunda K. D. (former President of the Republic of Zambia), *Ethnic Balancing: regarding recruitment of personnel for the party and government services*

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The vision of the Institute for Security Studies is one of a stable and peaceful Africa characterised by a respect for human rights, the rule of law, democracy and collaborative security. As an applied policy research institute with a mission to conceptualise, inform and enhance the security debate in Africa, the Institute supports this vision statement by undertaking independent applied research and analysis; facilitating and supporting policy formulation; raising the awareness of decision makers and the public; monitoring trends and policy implementation; collecting, interpreting and disseminating information; networking on national, regional and international levels; and capacity building.

About this paper

This contribution seeks to highlight the fact that properly conducted elections (based on genuine and effective functioning electoral machinery and respect for the will and choices of the people with respect to those who seek to govern them) in any African country would be a major contribution to Africa's social and material development. With no pretence of exhausting the issues covered, it belabours the various factors bedevilling elections in Africa and the lessons to be learnt from past election crises. It dwells on how such factors could be addressed with a view to bringing about a productive electoral landscape in Africa. The central thesis in this work is that Africa and its people stand to benefit tremendously if African countries turn elections into assets (tools) for development. In so doing, these countries would also be preventing conflicts and achieving increased national self-confidence and self-empowerment *vis-à-vis* the global politico-economic and strategic environment.

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Funder



The publication is made possible through the generous contribution of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark.

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Published by the Institute for Security Studies
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Tel: +27-12-346-9500 • Fax: +27-12-460-0998
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ISSN 1026-0404



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