
Democracy and Elections in Sub-Saharan Africa: Lessons Learned from 2016 and What to Expect in 2017

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Dr Christopher Fomunyoh

Thank you Dr Vines for your warm welcome and for those very kind words of introduction. I would also like to thank Chatham House for giving me the opportunity to discuss a topic that is dear to my heart, namely: democracy and elections in sub-Saharan Africa. I am truly honoured to be here at Chatham House, a highly respected institution with a broad international outreach that draws considerable attention to pressing international issues. During these uncertain times in global politics when many development partners seem to be inward looking, we Africans and friends of the continent appreciate very highly the special platform for debate, discussion and research that Chatham House is. Today's opportunity to share ideas, experiences from the past year and expectations for the year just begun with you all on democratic trends and electoral patterns across Africa could not be any more timely.

First I should underscore the correlation between elections and democracy in the sense that while we all agree that elections alone do not a democracy make, we must also acknowledge that elections are a key pillar of every democracy. Elections are a pivotal barometer by which to gauge the vitality and resilience of democratic societies, not just because they are the only means through which citizens choose their leaders as stipulated in Article 23 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but also because by their very nature, elections test the strength of other components of democratic governance. For example:

- Elections are the only contract negotiated in public view (in the public space) between the governed and those that will ultimately earn a mandate from citizens to govern;
- Respect for the rule of law is manifested by how inclusive and fair the legal framework for elections is in terms of voting rights of citizens, the ability of candidates and parties to campaign freely across the country, the independence of the election management body to administer the polls impartially and independently of any and all interferences, and the independence and fairness of the courts to adjudicate election-related disputes and provide redress to aggrieved parties in a timely and just manner;
- Freedom of speech, freedom of the press and of association are tested in the ability of citizens to actively engage in the electoral process without restrictions, acknowledging therein the role of the media in shining the light and enhancing transparency and credibility of elections;
- The need for a healthy and reassuring state of civil-military relations that underscores the professionalism and impartiality of security services to guarantee the safety and security of all citizens and candidates irrespective of their political affiliations, especially during competitive electoral processes.

So, I propose to you that if a country does not get its elections right, it is less likely to succeed in meeting benchmarks of the other broader issues of accountability and good governance. If a candidate or government steals an election, then issues such as fighting corruption, shutting down media houses and persecuting journalists, trampling on citizens' rights and perpetuating impunity then pale in comparison as they relate to fewer individuals and only a smaller segment of society.

That said, I also must admit that in many ways, a conversation on democracy and elections in Africa today is easier than was the case two or three decades ago, given the number of success stories on the continent. Most recently, the 2016 elections and the peaceful alternation of power in Ghana, for example, highlighted a strong and enthusiastic commitment to democratic processes and stood as a beacon for democracy in the region. Also, a few days ago, the people of The Gambia finally got rid of an autocrat that came to power through a military coup and for over two decades had terrorized his fellow compatriots and destroyed many lives. The people of The Gambia did so all through the power of the ballot box and ordinary marbles, and without firing a shot. Without the melodrama of The Gambia, Ghana's success in

the 7 December 2016 presidential and parliamentary polls underscores some of the accomplishments that have helped to consolidate democratic electoral practices across the continent, including increased independence of election commissions, vibrant participation by civil society, and the routinization of the alternation of power. Benin, Nigeria, Cape Verde, Malawi, Botswana and Mauritius are among many African countries that now serve as a collective beacon of hope for democracy with the routine upholding of presidential term limits and renewal of political leadership through the ballot box.

Election observation by citizen groups is growing ever more sophisticated and effective in deterring irregularities and informing public confidence in election processes in African countries. Groups such as the Coalition for Domestic Election Observers (CODEO) in Ghana, Plateforme des Organisations de la Société Civile pour l'Observation des Elections (POECI) in Côte d'Ivoire, the Transition Monitoring Group in Nigeria, and the Christian Churches Monitoring Group in Zambia, for example, conducted very effective and accurate parallel vote tabulations that provided voters with independent verification of the election results based on information from a statistical sample of polling stations. As we witnessed in Ghana recently with the country's two main political parties – the New Patriotic Party (NPP) and the National Democratic Congress (NDC) – even African political parties are beginning to conduct their own comprehensive compilation of election returns in order to verify election outcomes and hence raise voter confidence in election processes.

This is not to say all is rosy – far from it. Electoral malpractices and deficiencies persist in far too many African countries. For example, as observers have increased scrutiny of election day activities, some political actors and parties seek aggressively opportunities to tilt electoral outcomes at other points in the electoral process. Inaccuracies and failure to include all eligible citizens in the voter register, inequities in parties' freedom to campaign and rally supporters, and biased coverage by media sources significantly impact citizen access to voting and their ability to make informed decisions as they do so. For example, prior to election day in Uganda, the government limited media access for opposition candidates, intimidated journalists, and repeatedly detained the leading opposition candidate. Similarly in Zambia, after a pre-election period during which there were numerous incidents of violence and restrictions of the media and opposition party candidates, election day last August 2016, was relatively peaceful and orderly. The disputes that followed the announcement of results highlighted the importance of ensuring a level playing field throughout the entire electoral process.

The early part of 2016 saw a string of controversial and contentious electoral processes in countries such as Congo Brazzaville and Chad, almost akin to what Burundi experienced in 2015, with opposition candidates languishing in jail or suffering other gross violations of their rights. In those countries, as in Gabon going into 2017, extraordinary efforts will need to be made to avoid further backsliding which could degenerate into conflict and a deterioration of the wellbeing of citizens.

As we look forward to 2017, a number of important elections would warrant particular attention, notably in Angola, Kenya, Liberia and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

In Angola, current President José Eduardo dos Santos, one of Africa's longest serving presidents, will be stepping down and paving the way for new faces and new leadership to emerge from the legislative elections and subsequent indirect election of the Head of State. While it is premature and indeed presumptuous to try to forecast what Dos Santos' retirement after 37 years in office means for the balance of power between the ruling People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) and the opposition National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), there is reason to hope that this departure will create greater space for citizen participation in the medium to long term.

Many Kenyans are beginning to voice concerns that political polarization in the country could lead to contentious elections and ethnically-based violence when the country conducts national elections in August. A new set of commissioners has been selected only in the past few weeks and electoral reforms have recently been adopted by the Kenyan parliament, although mainly along party line votes. The realignment of political alliances and coalitions; the mobilization of youth, between six to nine million of whom will be eligible to vote for the first time; and the emergence of new technology would add levels of both fascination and unpredictability to the Kenya polls – which is good proof of the vitality of the country's democracy.

In October, Liberia will experience its first democratic change of government through open elections in modern history. Incumbent President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the first woman to be elected president in Africa, has done an incredible job lifting up her country after it slumbered into years of civil war. She is term-limited and, in respecting the country's constitution, will step down at the end of her term, leaving an open field for a highly competitive race.

Other countries to watch out for include the DRC, where violence occurred during public demonstrations as President Kabila's term of office ended without agreement on an electoral calendar. We all hope that the last ditch mediation efforts being led by Catholic bishops will lead to a national consensus on the electoral framework and election timeline for presidential polls by the end of the year.

In South Africa, questions are growing about internal democracy within the African National Congress (ANC), which could reach a tipping point when the dominant ruling party may hold its congress by the end of 2017.

Despite the pending challenges to democratic elections and the institutionalization of good governance practices mentioned earlier, I remain optimistic about the outlook for democracy in sub-Saharan Africa. Public opinion surveys across the continent by Afrobarometer and other reputable organizations continue to show that a large number of Africans believe democracy is the best form of government. While Freedom House rankings have shown a slight decrease in democratic trends in recent years, the continent has made significant progress from where it was in the 1990s.

In today's Africa, unlike two decades ago, civil society is vibrant and seeks to play an advocacy role; human rights organizations exist and regularly denounce the gross violations of human rights by the dozen or so remaining autocratic regimes; and independent media that includes community-based radio stations, print and social media provide opportunities for diverse viewpoints and dissenting voices to be heard. The emergence of new instruments that emphasize the rule of law, democracy, and good governance, such as the 2007 African Union Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, and various Economic Community Of West African States (ECOWAS) protocols, and the willingness of these organizations to back these ideals in practice, also bode well for the future consolidation of democracy on the continent.

Also on the positive side of the ledger for Africa is the youth bulge, which I consider a huge asset for the continent. Africa is home to 200 million youth between the ages of 15 and 24; a sizeable population that could double by 2045 according to the African Development Bank. The demographic group is oblivious of the autocratic practices of one-party and military, autocratic rule; it is technology-oriented and tech-savvy, poised to contribute meaningfully to positive changes to the social and political development trajectory of Africa. For one thing, in almost every African country this youth demographic group wants its voice heard and now. On those youth voices lies Africa's hope for a brighter and better future.

Today's new technologies present innovative tools to enhance citizen engagement in furtherance of democratization on the continent in ways unknown to the activists of the last decade. New technology is increasingly being used to enhance election processes, including the use of biometric information to create more accurate voter registers and verification of voters, as well as the use of SMS technology to transmit and collate citizens' observations during election processes.

In conclusion, let me state that these last three factors give me reason to remain guardedly optimistic that future elections will reinforce the continent's long-term democratic growth, despite the challenges mentioned earlier and others such as the lack of political will and respect for constitutions by some regimes, external threats of terrorism and insecurity and their impact on democratization efforts, armed conflicts and their drain on human and material resources.

Thank you for your time and attention.