

Despite the spread of multiparty democracy to many parts of the continent two decades ago, stability has not always followed. *Focus on Africa* magazine asks:

“Are elections in Africa always worth the risk?”

Yes



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Today, elections are a permanent fixture in the African political process – a marked departure from a few years back. Between 1970 and 1989, 15 polls took place in sub-Saharan Africa, and of these only three were broadly free and fair. This underscores the fact that citizens' engagement in the political process at the time was almost non-existent.

How times have changed. Looking to the future, between November 2009 and December 2011 there are 15 presidential, five parliamentary and three legislative multiparty elections scheduled to take place across Africa.

At first glance this is impressive. But despite the greater than ever use of the electoral process to advance democracy, the electorate in many African countries continues to be disappointed by the governments they choose, often because of electoral fraud. This frequently results in riots that cause loss of life and property, and raises the question – are elections always worth the risk in Africa? My answer to this question is 'yes' mainly because of my conviction that democracy is not a destination but rather a journey – one well and truly underway on the continent.

During the last presidential primaries in the United States (US), a Nigerian journalist e-mailed me asking my view on then Senator Barack Obama competing against Senator Hillary Clinton for the Democratic Party's nomination. He could not understand the motivation behind the efforts of a young, black one-term senator who was significantly less financed and lacked a strong following within his party in comparison to Senator Clinton. In my reply to him, I wrote of the importance of a campaign that engages party members and motivates them to turn up on election day; that also strikes a chord with the public on tackling corruption and promoting accountability and which offers the best way for citizens to access government. Obama seemed to manage these well.

In reply to my e-mail, my friend said that this was all superfluous in Africa since “politicians in the US are different to African politicians, who are corrupt and do not care about the electorate.” I disagreed – it is not really about the politicians at all. In a democracy, anywhere in the world, the electorate must always drive issues and political debate and never surrender to politicians or a political class. This point can never be over emphasised.

Because of this, this next stage in the evolution of democracy in Africa must be focused on how better to position the electorate in African countries to the centre-stage. Civil society and the private sector are crucial to this, particularly in rural communities where the majority of citizens live.

Also, political parties – the ‘factories’ that produce candidates for elected office – must always be held accountable to their constitutional mandates. Electoral commissions must operate autonomously, be financially independent and be populated by competent citizens that have a record of integrity.

We have made a start on this in Africa. But it is important to remember that while the desire for freedom,

liberty and prosperity is universal, each country is at a different stage of institutional and societal development. One cannot expect that the electoral processes of newly democratic African states will be as developed as established democracies. However we cannot abandon the process altogether because of the bumps along the road.

The temptation may be to look towards autocratic countries like China and Cuba which, on the surface, have lifted large swathes of their populations out of poverty. That may be the case on a macroeconomic level – but not necessarily what you will hear from individuals living in Beijing or Havana. China for one may give the illusion that it is moving towards democratic reform, but any elections it holds are solely about ratifying the wishes of the ruling party. The missing element here is, yet again, the absence of a people-centred democracy.

On November 19, 1863, in the midst of a dark period of America's democratic journey, President Abraham Lincoln made one of his most famous speeches, the Gettysburg address. According to experts the mood in the country during this time was “deeply troubled”.

Americans felt hopeless because civil conflict was dragging on and Lincoln was worried about continuing support for the war effort by the people. But he had an eloquent answer and gave the speech that many believed saved the country's fragile democracy. “We here highly resolve these dead shall not have died in vain; that government of the people by the people shall not perish from the earth.”

In one speech, Lincoln gave life to a democracy then in crisis, he accentuated the importance of the electorate and gave the nation the inspiration to overcome internal strife and, ultimately, slavery. And since that cold day in Gettysburg, the US has, along its democratic journey, also enshrined women's suffrage and civil rights.

Yes, elections in Africa are always worth the risk, there really is no alternative. We are on a journey, much like the US was centuries ago. We will get there. Look how far we have come already.

No



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The holding of elections is the bedrock of a democratic system, so a good starting point for this debate would be former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill's 1947 statement. Democracy, he said is “the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time”.

More than 60 years later, millions in Africa and other regions of the developing world argue that democracy has failed them so badly that Churchill's maxim is simply not good enough. Indeed other systems are beginning to prove themselves, particularly in poor societies with weak institutions. Electoral democracy is being called to account.

In the 20 years since the end of the Cold War – with communism and fascism defeated – the West has had a largely uncompetitive canvas on which to make democracy work. But the score card has been mixed. Europe has expanded and become richer. But it was rich anyway and its institutions reasonably strong. Russia tried free market democracy and quickly abandoned it in favour of a more dictatorial system. China opted for authoritarianism and forged ahead. Africa, whose countries held election after election, slid backwards.

When Churchill made his parliamentary proclamation, most Chinese were poorer than Africans. Now, young Chinese are taking out mortgages on their first homes, while young Africans are fighting disease, hunger and tribal conflict. Chinese traders and engineers are all over Africa building roads and buying up minerals, when many had predicted it would have been the other way round.

The post-Cold War era has created an Africa overshadowed with prescriptions of Western-style governance and economics, but much of it cloaked in double standards.

The economic free market doctrine has barred many African farmers from subsidies, yet agricultural subsidies are seen as an economic fundamental to European and American stability.

Western import tariffs have made the cost of exporting processed and manufactured goods from Africa prohibitive. Yet, free trade is seen as an engine of economic growth.

And elections are routinely used by Western governments as a benchmark of acceptability, when very often they end up protecting the political elite and doing little to improve the lives of the poor.

It is this concept of asking a population to choose between competing groups of vested interests that should be questioned for its effectiveness. Time and again, we see political parties relying on force and patronage, parliaments representing not broad constituencies but the political elite and constitutions written but, because of weak institutions, rarely upheld.

For sovereign elections to work

there has to be a minimal strength to a country's institutions that can hold to account the process itself and the subsequent work of the elected government.

These include a strong electoral commission, efficient public services free of corruption; an independent judiciary that closes cases and makes decisions; a disciplined police and military and organisations that deliver basic standards of transport, schools and health care.

Without these fundamentals, elections carry high risks of opening tribal, ethnic and regional divisions that lead to corruption and violence, which in turn fuels poverty, disease and war.

It is no coincidence that, through international agreement, ultimate control in Europe's two most fragile societies, Bosnia Herzegovina and Kosovo, lies not with elected governments but with external organisations, neutral to the pressures of local politics.

In recent years, whether it be the Democratic Republic of Congo, Afghanistan or Iraq, there have been many elections and much bloodshed. In a way, they mirror the violence experienced by the now freer and wealthier Western societies in their own historical wars over tribalism, trade and moral values.

Therefore the challenge facing the developing world is to get to a similar place as Western societies but without the same horrendous level of conflict. This requires careful management of the dangerous transition from oppression and dictatorship.

The 2003 Iraq invasion destroyed the myth that a dictatorial system can suddenly be peeled away and a panoply of good democratic things will descend. The continuing insurgency rammed that lesson home.

Yet, despite this evidence, the democracy debate can very quickly spiral into ideological and emotional conditions. But it should not.

It is not about denying people the vote. It is about setting up a system that will ensure the vote is meaningful.

It is not about withdrawing basic freedoms. It is about ensuring that the interpretation of freedom does not stretch to the machete and Kalashnikov and to burning villages and murdering neighbours.

It is not about singling out Africa from the rest of the world, for not long ago our television screens were filled with suffering and war in Asia with the cry that democracy was not suited to Asian societies. Taiwan and South Korea have proved that premise wrong.

Under Western eyes, from Taiwan to Liberia to Bosnia Herzegovina, alternative systems of transition have been tried and war has ended. Outside of Western control, China, Cuba and others have had remarkable success in freeing people from poverty.

The search for alternatives must not become stalled in polarising arguments about dictatorship, colonialism and sovereignty. These need to be swept away to clarify the purpose of elections and of government – which is to deliver higher standards of living and dignity for its citizens. If sovereign elections fail to do that, then other mechanisms must be explored that will achieve the desired goal.



People stand in line outside a polling station in South Africa, during the 2009 general election