U.S. Election Support in Africa

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Introduction

Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Bass and Members of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations, thank you for this opportunity to testify on election support in Africa. Given how many Africans throughout the region will head to the polls in 2015 and over the next several years, this hearing is extremely timely. Some 30 countries have elections between now and the end of 2016. These countries face many challenges, not least of which are attempts among many leaders to evade term limits, the marginalization of youth and ongoing civil conflicts, all of which can exacerbate the potential for violence, before, during and after the upcoming elections. It is critical that the United States and its partners work together to support the African people in their pursuit of democracy, recognizing that elections are only one part of the process.

IRI Africa Programs

The International Republican Institute (IRI) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization and one of the four core institutes of the National Endowment for Democracy. Our mission is to encourage democracy in places where it is absent, help democracy become more effective where it is in danger and share best practices where democracy is flourishing. Specifically in Sub-Saharan African, IRI focuses on six core components: bolstering the capacity of multi-party political systems, promoting democratic governance, empowering marginalized groups, legislative institution building, supporting civil society initiatives and strengthening electoral processes. We currently work in Burundi, Cote d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda and Zimbabwe.

Trends and Challenges in Upcoming Elections

It is valuable that we look at elections across the continent as a whole. While there are best practices that can serve as models for other countries, there are also broader challenges that could hinder elections in Africa and that should be considered as we explore ways to support the electoral process in transitioning African countries. I will highlight four of those broader challenges today.

Lack of Multi-Party Democracy

Many African states have made steady progress toward developing and consolidating democracy following centuries of colonialism and underdevelopment. Since the 'third wave' of transitions through the ballot box, a wave of popular demand and international pressure for political reforms led to the overthrow of numerous authoritarian regimes, single-party dictators and military elites. Yet, genuine multi-party democracy has yet to take root in most countries, and this is the first challenge to highlight as we look at elections in Africa. Without a vibrant political system in place, elections too easily can

become a rubber stamp for the party in power. There are many reasons for this absence of multiparty democracy on the continent. Parties are too often personality driven and have ill-defined structures that contribute to inadequate capacity and inefficiency. Even in countries with more competitive politics, the lack of effective political competition has often resulted in unstable and fractured government coalitions that prevent effective governance and offer little inspiration to the voter. Furthermore, many political parties remain ill-equipped to address their countries' immense challenges, particularly staggering inequality and extreme poverty. The limited capacity of political parties to govern – that is, to exercise legitimate authority and provide basic services to citizens – is contributing to increasing citizen distrust and apathy, low voter turnout and a failure of expectations of democracy among many Africans throughout the continent.

Changing the Rules

A second challenge is the pervasive trend to attempt to change the rules of the game. Specifically, there are increasing attempts to change laws and even constitutions to evade term limits. Across Africa, the 'politics of personality' continues to present a challenge to democratic transitions and consolidation. Once in power, leaders often have no desire to foster peaceful political transitions and instead openly work to change the rules to stay in power.

Togo is such a country, having abolished presidential term limits from its constitution in 2002. Critics and the opposition have not been able to persuade the ruling Union for the Republic (UNIR) party to support a two-term presidential term limit and talks in the National Assembly to change the constitution broke down in January of this year. Togolese President Faure Gnassingbé has already served two-elected terms in office after he was installed in a military coup upon the 2005 death of his father, who himself had ruled Togo since he took power in 1967. Ignoring the calls of the opposition and international leaders who have warned against African leaders 'who cling to power,' President Gnassingbé accepted the nomination of the UNIR to seek a third term in Togo's April elections.

In Uganda, ironically when multi-party politics was reinstated in 2005, legislation was also passed that year that removed presidential term limits. This has allowed President Museveni to remain in power for nearly 30 years. According to IRI's most recent public opinion poll in Uganda, of 2,402 Ugandans surveyed, 65 percent believe the constitution should limit the president to serve a maximum of two terms. Despite this, President Museveni has already been declared the candidate for his ruling party, the National Resistance Movement, in advance of Uganda's 2016 elections.

Even in countries that have presidential term limits, many leaders continue to seek creative ways to try to circumvent these limits. For instance, in Burundi, where parliamentary and presidential elections are expected to take place in May and June of this year, President Nkurunziza's spokesperson announced on February 15 that the president plans to run for a third term, in direct contradiction to the Arusha Agreement, the 2000 ceasefire accord that established the power-sharing transitional government in the midst of the country's civil war. This effort is despite a failed attempt to change the constitution to permit a third

term, which fell one vote short of the 80 percent parliamentary majority needed to amend the constitution. Nkurunziza claims that since he was appointed by parliament for his first term in 2005, he should be able to contest once more. Should Nkurunziza win reelection this spring, which many anticipate he will, it would present Burundi with the dilemma of a president in office for three terms, in direct contradiction to the constitution.

These sort of actions are widespread across the region. Just recently, President Denis Sassou Nguesso's ruling Congolese Worker's Party called for a constitutional change to remove the Republic of Congo's two-term presidential limit and age restriction that excludes candidates more than 70 years old from running for office. The 2002 constitution as it stands now would rule out President Nguesso, who is 71, came into power in 1997 and remained in office through disputed elections in 2002 and 2009.

These attempts to change the rules of the game have not gone unnoticed by the people of Africa. Citizens are protesting against incumbents who are seeking to extend their terms in office, and, unfortunately, these protests often turn violent. Last October, Burkina Faso saw massive demonstrations and widespread protests in response to President Blaise Compaore's attempt to remove presidential term limits. These protests culminated in protestors setting fire to the country's parliament building to prevent a vote on the issue and ultimately resulted in Compaore's fleeing from the country and resigning. The country has since been run by a transitional government with new elections now scheduled for October 2015.

What happened in Burkina Faso has had a significant impact on the region. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), a provision initially included in the electoral law currently being considered before the Senate required a national census to be conducted prior to the presidential election. This provision would have effectively postponed the next round of elections to 2018 despite the fact that President Kabila's second term is set to expire at the end of 2016. On January 19 and 20, citizens went to the street in the capital Kinshasa and two other towns in protests that quickly turned violent. Human Rights Watch reported some 42 people were killed. As a result of this street action, the Senate removed the controversial clause from DRC's electoral law, and while the census can no longer be used as a delaying tactic, the verdict is still out on whether President Kabila will leave office when his term expires.

What happened in the DRC is particularly relevant for the entire region, and citizens in each country are keeping an eye on their neighbors. As an opposition Member of Parliament from Kinshasa recently said in Washington, D.C., "People in Burundi have seen how the Congolese stood up, and the Congolese saw how people in Burkina Faso stood up. The upcoming elections in DRC are important not only for DRC, but for all of Africa." This underscores the critical need to look at elections and the challenges impacting them along regional lines and not only in isolation for each country.

Marginalization of Youth

A third challenge that could impact the outcome of elections in Africa is the huge youth demographic on the continent. The region has the youngest population in the world, with two thirds of its 1 billion population under the age of 25 and half of the population under the age of 19, according to the 2014 United Nations African Economic Outlook report. This means that for many youth, elections set to occur over the next few years will present the first opportunity for them to exercise their right to vote. Furthermore, young people bear a disproportionate burden of the high unemployment rates that many African nations are experiencing. According to the World Bank, youth account for 60 percent of all African unemployed and these statistics fail to encompass those who are underemployed in the informal sector.

It is not surprising, given extreme poverty and unemployment, that youth participation and engagement in political and electoral processes remain relatively low and varies across the region. While Kenya saw more than half a million youth join a *bunge* or community parliament to monitor the 2013 elections, in South Africa, only 22 percent of 18 and 19-year-olds were registered to vote in advance of the May 2014 election, according to the South Africa Independent Electoral Commission. According to a recent Pew Research Center study, young people throughout the developing world, including Africa, are significantly less likely to vote than older people. The study also shows that young people are interested in issues, and that they do want to participate in other forms of activism, for example, by discussing politics online and through social media. They are just less likely to actually go to the polls and vote.

The Pew study underscored the close link between political efficacy and political engagement, whereby people who more strongly believe that they can have an influence on political matters are more likely to participate in political processes than those who lack faith in the process. For the countries surveyed in Africa, roughly two in three people believe that the government does not care about citizen opinion. This is a damaging statistic and could signal low turnout among Africans of all ages during the upcoming elections. If people believe what they think does not matter, how likely will they be to go to polls as a means of expressing their opinions?

Tapping into the voices and desires of young people is a huge challenge for the region, one that holds extraordinary potential for ushering in new leaders with new ideas. African nations must find ways to engage their growing youth populations to participate positively in the electoral process and help shape the future trajectory of their individual countries and the region as a whole.

Civil conflict and electoral violence

Fourth, of the roughly dozen African nations holding elections this year, many are engaged in civil conflicts or are battling terrorism and domestic insurgencies at home. Many also have a history of electoral violence that raises reasons for concern. For the continent, 2015 will be a year of contentious politics where pre-existing tensions will intersect with

elections. There is an urgency to devise strategies to prevent and manage electoral violence.

Internal conflicts have already caused the postponement of some elections. Nigeria's February 14 elections were postponed to March 28, according to the Nigerian government, to allow a six-week offensive against Boko Haram to play out. According to Human Rights Watch, more than 2,500 civilians have died at the hands of Boko Haram in 2014, and we know that hundreds more have been killed so far this year. Separate from the threat of Boko Haram, Nigeria has a history of violence around elections. Upon the announcement of the results of the 2011 presidential election, violence erupted in several Northern states, ultimately killing more than 1,000 people. To date, it has been encouraging to see that promises of nonviolence agreed to in the Abuja Accord, signed by President Goodluck Jonathan, General Mohammadu Buhari and 12 other presidential candidates on January 10, have held firm. IRI is now working at the state level to encourage wider endorsement of the Abuja Accord by local level party officials and activists. Nonetheless, given that the March 28 elections will be the most contested in Nigeria's history, the possibility of violence cannot be dismissed.

Ongoing conflict also contributed toward the postponement of the presidential election in the Central African Republic (CAR). Already delayed once, the parliamentary and presidential elections in CAR scheduled for February have since been postponed to July and August, with calls for even longer delays to allow time for disarmament of the warring militias before elections take place to help deter election-related violence. Similarly, South Sudan's first election since independence in 2011 was initially planned for June 2015, and is now postponed to 2017 as a result of the civil conflict there. Recently, Mali's local elections – originally scheduled for April 2014 but postponed to October 2014 and then pushed to April 2015 – have been postponed again to late 2015. Though no official reason for the postponement was given by the government, it is widely believed that insecurity in the northern part of the country contributed to the decision to delay the elections.

Sudan remains entangled in a long-running conflict with rebels in the west in Darfur and the south in South Kordofan and Blue Nile. In December, opposition forces came together under the "Sudan Call," a new political agreement calling for peaceful and popular democratic reform in the country. This agreement was deemed an act of treason by the government and some of its signatories were subsequently arrested. Meanwhile, most opposition groups have refused to participate in the national dialogue initiative launched by President Bashir in 2014 and the National Consensus Forces (the main opposition coalition in Sudan) has called for a boycott of the April 2015 elections. There appears to be a confluence of factors that could tip the scale toward violence.

Other countries have a history of electoral-related violence and some fear a reoccurrence. While countries such as Cote d'Ivoire and Nigeria experienced widespread electoral violence in the past, what is more common is low-intensity violence coupled with voter and candidate intimidation that such countries as the DRC and Uganda have witnessed. Elections often risk intensifying existing rivalries and exacerbating societal divisions. This is especially true in countries where basic electoral procedures have been adopted but

democratic norms have not yet taken root. For instance, one-party or dominant party systems that characterized many African nations often lead to exclusionary politics where the stakes are high and elections are viewed as a zero-sum game, raising the risk of electoral violence. Not only should more be done to mitigate election-related conflict for the sake of avoiding bloodshed, but it is also critical since recurring electoral violence may cause citizens to lose faith in democratization.

Looking Forward

While it is encouraging that elections have become a regular occurrence in Sub-Saharan Africa, they are still imperfect and much remains to be done to ensure that elections are free, fair, inclusive and transparent throughout the region. Elections are a process, not a single event. United States policymakers and development organizations should continue to provide support throughout the process and not only in the few months leading up to Election Day. The democratic process does not end after the polls are closed. Continued support is needed between elections in order to see sustainable progress. There are steps the United States and its partners can take to help support electoral processes throughout Africa, many of which are relevant even for those elections scheduled later this year.

Because of the resistance among many leaders throughout the region to step aside when their terms expire, it would be helpful to encourage more dialogue on next steps leaders could take once out of office. This is a complicated issue, and there are a variety of reasons that are keeping leaders in office, including fears of being held accountable or made a political target for alleged crimes, such as personal enrichment. The United States and its international partners could coordinate messaging to these leaders to help encourage their peaceful departure and promote a transfer of power that can occur without conflict or bloodshed.

The United States should continue to support important efforts on the ground to bolster democratic activists throughout the region. Now is the critical time to support aid efforts that encourage broad-based and inclusive strategies for mobilizing voters, particularly marginalized populations such as youth. Recurring electoral violence usually signals underlying grievances which is why promoting citizen participation throughout the electoral cycle is critical. Citizens need to find alternative, non-violent ways to air grievances, not just when election results are announced, but in between elections as well. These citizen engagement and conflict-prevention efforts are complemented by polling and programs that encourage political parties and candidates to campaign on policy issues rather than personalities and by programs that educate citizens on these issues to promote an informed, active electorate.

Another important way to strengthen democratic processes throughout Africa is to enhance support for both international and domestic election monitoring to help confirm legitimacy to the electoral process. An important element of election observations is conducting assessment missions in advance of elections to let the country's government and candidates know that the international community is watching and paying attention to the process. In January, IRI conducted such an assessment jointly with the National

Democratic Institute in advance of Nigeria's election. The assessment provided an important review of the current political and electoral environment and preparations. It also provided a set of recommendations to enhance citizen confidence in the process, help mitigate violence and demonstrate international support for Nigeria's democratization process. Such assessments can provide guidance for governments, election commission, political parties and citizen groups, as they prepare for national polls.

Ultimately, the challenges Africa faces – leaders evading term limits, marginalization of youth, ongoing civil conflicts and potential for election-related violence – are all related to the lack of strong multi-party democratic systems. Once nations fully embrace and adopt competitive, transparent, representative political processes with all of its checks and balances, then these challenges will be better addressed. We should support Africans in their pursuit of prosperity with sustainable democratic institutions and processes where all individuals have the opportunity and incentive to participate in the political process. And where peaceful political transitions can occur, the people of Africa will be freer to pursue their civil, political, economic, social and cultural aspirations.