

Taking Stock of Elections in Africa

TESTIMONY OF: Mvemba Phezo Dizolele
Senior Advisor for Africa

Chairwoman Bass, Ranking Member Smith, Members of the Committee, thank you for holding this timely and important hearing, and thank you for the opportunity to testify. It is a pleasure and an honor to be back before this committee and talk about developments in Africa.

By way of background, the International Republican Institute (IRI) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization working in more than 60 countries around the world. We are part of the National Endowment for Democracy family, along with our sister organizations - the National Democratic Institute, the Center for International Private Enterprise, and the Solidarity Center.

Our Africa team works in over 20 countries, including The Gambia, Nigeria, Mali, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, the Central African Republic, and Chad, to name but a few.

Our programs promote transparency and combat corruption, increase inclusion and the political empowerment of women, youth, and marginalized groups, and promote democratic values and support electoral integrity.

We partner with a vast spectrum of actors ranging from political parties, governments, state houses of assemblies, women organizations to youth groups - all indispensable pillars for change.

Democracy and good governance initiatives are as challenging as they are rewarding.

At IRI we rejoice with our partners when they meet their objectives. We redouble our support when they suffer setbacks and stand by their side as they push forward. We reckon that democracy is a marathon, not a sprint, with ups and downs.

Elections in Time of Covid-19

Madam Chairwoman, the Covid-19 pandemic has put all governance systems to the test. No country, small or big, rich, or poor, has been spared. This reality is particularly poignant in the democracy and good governance space, where implementers like IRI have had to make major adjustments in the way they operate.

We have watched with great interest as African countries have held elections during these challenging times. Some elections have gone relatively well. Others, not quite.

Covid-19 has allowed electoral processes to be manipulated to the benefit of these authoritarian regimes. For example, Ethiopia postponed elections citing Covid-19 and the State of Emergency as a reason. However, they really were not ready to hold them and prioritized the conflict with the Tigray People's Liberation Front. In other instances, countries, as was the case in Tanzania, went forward with elections even with the health risks and were able to pull off elections with limited citizen or opposition party engagement and further tightened the ruling party's hold on power.

Elections in Guinea, Tanzania, Côte d'Ivoire, and Uganda were marred with abuses, including voter intimidation, civic rights violations, harassment of the political opposition and civil society.

But we have also noted the non-respect of term limits and constitutional coups in Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea, and even a military coup in Mali.

Ethiopia and Somalia are still grappling with the challenges of election preparations as we speak.

Democratization and Manipulation of Democratic Institutions

Madam Chairwoman, over the last several years we have observed some significant trends about elections in Africa that we wish to share with the committee. We have noted that, despite state and government resistance to the wave of democratization, old one-party systems are now challenged like never before by determined opposition parties and strong civil society organizations.

Autocratic tendencies, however, are on the rise as ruling parties capture state institutions, including courts and electoral commissions, to pervert the law in their favor. Over the past five years, there has been an overall deterioration in the quality of the political transformation and governance.

Today, the tension between the democratic aspirations of citizens in Africa and the resurgence of autocratic preferences of the ruling party is most apparent. Among the 54 countries, there are 15 deficient democracies and 16 hardline autocracies. Still, Afrobarometer polling shows that most Africans want and strive for open political space and democratic societies, but they must confront the rise of authoritarianism.

Elections, their shortcomings notwithstanding, are held more frequently, driven by continued popular pressures.

By and large, elections tend to meet the legal threshold and the bare minimum of voter expectations in form, but often do not translate into greater citizen participation and confidence in electoral outcomes. This has fueled an increase in citizen apathy to participate in those elections, which have not improved the living standards of the citizens.

The Rise of Authoritarianism, Digital Technology and Foreign Influence

Madam Chairwoman, democracy is more than an election. While an election is the ultimate judgment day for citizens to voice their approval or rejection of their leaders, what happens in the interim is even more important for the advancement of a democratic society.

Government's failure to address citizens' needs through adequate and inclusive public services has given way to a rise in public discontent, political contestation, and repression. This has been particularly acute in urban areas where civil society organizations, including youth and women groups, have demanded change and insisted that their voices be heard, their grievances be addressed, and that they fully participate in the management of their countries.

Unable to address citizen grievances, states resort to intimidation tactics, which triggers a vicious cycle of repression and discontent. Elections have thus become a test of will between the powerful status quo system and proponents of change.

This discontent has manifested itself in the emergence of several youth movements across the continent, including South Africa's *Fees Must Fall*, Senegal's *Y' En A Marre*, DR Congo's

LUCHA, Zimbabwe's *This Flag*, and young leaders running for office. Among such youth leaders stand Uganda's Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu, popularly known as Bobi Wine of the People Power Movement, who challenged long-serving incumbent President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni in the last elections, and Nelson Chamisa of Zimbabwe's Movement for Democratic Change.

In this challenging Covid-19 time, democracy and good governance practitioners have wondered whether the pandemic would fuel a [rise of authoritarianism](#). However, today, evidence of reduced civic and political space due to the pandemic remains inconclusive.

Indeed, authoritarian governments may have seized on the pandemic to tighten control of the civic space and freedom of expression. In some cases, public health measures enabled them to further restrict the ability of opposition candidates to engage citizens and mount effective campaigns or for civil society organizations to convene rallies. Civil society and democracy actors, however, have adjusted accordingly and found other avenues to further their engagement.

Digital Democracy has been touted as a potential viable way of the future of civic and political engagement. We believe that Covid-19 has forced an acceleration and expansion of this trend or, at a minimum, it has opened a new engagement space beyond commonly used social media tools, including Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and YouTube. Civil society organizations and their partners [have capitalized on technology and leveraged digital platforms](#), such as Zoom, Teams, Webex, and others to carry on their activities. In response to public health measures, they have moved their critical initiatives, i.e., training workshops, rallies, and other gatherings online, where skilled trainers and facilitators now have access to higher numbers of participants.

We have found that online programming offers several advantages, including the transferability of content. Training can be portable and offshored if the local environment is particularly sensitive. Training materials can be more easily shared. With a few country exceptions, mainly in the Sahel and central Africa, there has been a seamless transition to online learning.

These advantages notwithstanding, these digital platforms have [downsides](#). For one, they are targets of authoritarian governments' relentless and increased surveillance, and in some cases, internet blackouts, which are a form of harassment and intimidation. Expectedly, [harassment, arrests, and other human rights](#) abuses among civil society and political opposition have not stopped.

On the business side, however, heightened use of digital platforms has allowed surveillance equipment manufacturers to further expand their already considerable influence with these governments. With its large financial investment footprint in Africa, China is the most favored and influential with authoritarian regimes, as it also provides tools and knowledge to restrict the political space. Chinese approach often fuels public discontent and contestation and increases tensions between governments and the populations, due to the opaque nature of China's engagement.

Still, digital engagement offers two major benefits: Civil society organizations now limit exposure [to physical control and harassment](#) by state agents, and donors and implementers can afford to reduce some overhead costs and reallocate scarce resources to other pressing programmatic needs. These needs and challenges include steep prices of high-speed Internet

infrastructure, as well as the cat-and-mouse nature of the ever-expanding [state surveillance and control of the digital space](#).

Madam Chairwoman, please allow me to say a few words about two countries whose upcoming elections will certainly affect peace and stability in the Horn of Africa: The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia and the Federal Republic of Somalia.

Ethiopia

Ethiopia's national elections, which are scheduled for June 5, 2021, are among Africa's most anticipated, as they will come after years of legal restrictions and government crackdowns that closed civic space and decimated civil society and the media. Sustained protests and citizen action forced Ethiopia to embark on a historic political transition, which Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed supported by announcing a series of sweeping political, electoral, and diplomatic reforms which had the potential to spur broad change that could lead to a more democratic society. Still, even after a 2019 law lifted the restrictions on civil society organizations working on democracy and governance issues, it is taking time to fully implement and develop the support structures needed to truly re-open civic space for Ethiopians.

Presidential and Parliamentary elections were originally scheduled for May 2020. However, political changes and reform processes have been top-down and elite-driven, and there are little to no platforms for civil society and citizens to participate. As the elections are quickly approaching, the lack of platforms for civic engagement inhibits issue-based dialogue for citizen input into Ethiopia's democratic future.

Ethiopia's efforts to pursue a democratic transformation, however, have become increasingly fraught as the country has witnessed civil unrest and violence in nearly every region. Most strikingly, the tensions between the Government of Ethiopia and the Tigray People's Liberation Front have turned into a full-blown conflict.

Despite this challenging environment, we at IRI remain committed to supporting our Ethiopian partners and our team has continued to adapt its efforts to promote collaboration between civil society and the media that ultimately provides better information critical to citizens, and to strengthen efforts to hold government accountable or promote policy solutions. IRI has hosted in-person working groups with media and civil society organizations where participants discuss Ethiopia's media, hate speech and disinformation laws, and analyze how these laws impact their work. Additionally, the working groups serve as an opportunity for civil society and the media to understand the challenges and functions of each sector and identify ways in which they can complement one another. Furthermore, IRI supports local media in the implementation of its investigative journalism activities and has held consultations with civil society partners.

These elections are the key to peace in the country and the legitimacy of the government.

Somalia

Madam Chairwoman, Somalia is in the middle of an impasse over the electoral process which will determine the future of democracy in the country. To be blunt, the resolution of this impasse will impact the unity of Somalia. The tension centers around three elements: 1) The removal of President Abdullahi Mohamed Farmajo's loyalists from election implementation teams, and in

line with the Election Agreement signed in September 2020 between the Federal Government of Somalia and the five Federal Member States; 2) The withdrawal of federal troops from the Gedo region of Jubaland State and that Jubaland be given free autonomy to administer elections in the two polling stations in the state; and 3) That the Speaker of the Upper House, as the highest-ranking government official from Somaliland, should be tasked with the responsibility of appointing the ad-hoc election administrators from the region.

Civil society and political opposition have alleged that President Farmajo and his allies seek to consolidate their hold on power and consequently do not want to concede to these demands. A previous negotiation between the Federal Government of Somalia and the presidents of the five Federal Member States failed to reach an agreement. A new round of talks to resolve the election impasse is planned shortly, and hopefully Somalia's political leaders will agree on a date to hold parliamentary and presidential elections.

IRI has worked in Somalia since 2002 with a specific objective to train and assist political parties in becoming more competitive, inclusive, and representative of citizens' interests. Of the 108 officially registered parties in the country as of this writing, 53 have received some form of capacity development assistance from IRI. This support comes in many forms. For instance, our team has worked with parties to improve their registration applications by removing redundancies within their constitutions, improving the clarity of their policy proposals, bolstering their internal democracy systems, clearly dividing, and defining roles and responsibilities of party officials, and streamlining their operating procedures.

In addition, our team has implemented programs to improve the technical and advocacy capacities of Somalia's political parties, which also focuses on increasing the inclusion of women and youth in the country's political process. To this end, IRI held extensive programming aimed at sensitizing political party apparatuses on the importance and benefits of creating and supporting women's and youth wings. Several parties responded by formally establishing women's and youth wings, and many of the individual beneficiaries of IRI's trainings were able to leverage their positions within these wings into formal roles within the overarching party structures.

Recommendations

IRI believes that free, fair, and competitive elections are critical to Ethiopia's future. While civil society is quite engaged and active in the lead-up to elections, there is a belief that the elections may be less competitive than hoped. IRI supports a strong media sector that contributes to the accuracy of information around elections, a broad-based and competent civil society that helps to educate and adjudicate, and political parties that present their platforms in such a manner that citizens have a genuine choice.

With regard to Somalia, IRI supports the peaceful resolution of disagreements between the opposition and President Farmajo. Somalia's partners, including the African Union, European Union, United Nations, Gulf States, and United States will need to play a strong mediation role in order to ensure free and fair elections. Just as importantly, Somalia needs to continue to make progress toward a political environment in which each citizen (including women) has a say in who they select for office. More practically, this necessitates strong political parties, an engaged civil society, and a re-balancing of relationships between Mogadishu and the Federal Member

States. Somalia has made strong progress since 2012, and it behooves the United States to continue nurturing Somalia's nascent democracy, which includes the peaceful resolution of conflict.

Across Africa, the United States should continue to prioritize support to promote political participation and processes that enable free, fair, and credible elections. This support should not just come ahead of Election Day, but also be continuously provided between elections, as those are the critical times for civil society and political parties to reset, review and strengthen their capacities to improve electoral processes.

United States' support remains critical to reinforce governance processes and sustain the independence of institutions, which has seen an erosion by corrupt government officials and authoritarian regimes.

Finally, strong independent media are the bulwark against malign influence, including increased pro-Beijing propaganda and the control of the information operations space in Africa. The United States should provide tools and capacity to civil society and citizens on how to better fend off mis/disinformation, using technology that is safe and not linked to Chinese-backed entities.