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Roundtable: Making Elections More Legitimate in Africa

Tuesday 25 March 2014

**Boardroom, Jan Smuts House, East Campus,
University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg,
South Africa**

Concept Note

Promoting elections

In 2014, South Africa will be celebrating 20 years of democracy, and holding its fifth democratic national poll on 7 May. Some 20 African countries are scheduled to have an election this year. To what extent do all these elections reflect the entrenchment of democracy on the continent?

The political and economic liberalisation waves that swept through the African continent in the 1990s led to many countries undergoing multiparty elections, which were presented as evidence of successful democratisation. However, the underlying reality is a lot more complex.

Rapidly, elections became a minimum standard of democratisation to which political leaders adhere, whether they are in power or in the opposition, albeit with differing degrees of conviction. This minimum standard “legitimises” power, giving it external recognition. Thus, even authoritarian African states now function with the veneer of elections so as to ensure their external legitimacy.

Elections cannot be equated with democracy, nor can they be considered as the only criterion to assess democratic legitimacy. There is therefore a need to consider electoral processes in a larger democratic governance perspective.

Inclusive political settlements

In Africa, the main issue of political and electoral contests remains that of access to the state apparatus and the monopoly it grants for the control and use of state resources. Being in power creates the means to capture and redistribute public resources. It also gives the opportunity to incumbents to exclude opposition organisations from accessing those resources.

In cases of non-consensual and unilaterally imposed procedural arrangements, elections cannot fulfil their roles of channeling political conflict and preventing violence. Elections, far from being an automatic democracy-strengthening tool, present critical moments for fragile political regimes. In those contexts, elections can become a source of instability, exacerbating tensions, and polarising issues.

Therefore, the assessment of an electoral process should not be limited to the formal respect of its procedures, but should also take into account the political economy context in which it takes place. Post-election power-sharing agreements through coalition governments were recently experienced in Kenya, Mali and Zimbabwe. Those experiments had mixed results that should be questioned in terms of political stability, fairness and democratisation.

Institutionalise electoral processes

Procedures aiming to limit or contain election violence can only be fully effective if they are part of a broader institutionalisation of the totality of the electoral system. Under such circumstances, elections can become the bedrock of a common political mindset, thereby building trust, reinforcing the “social contract”, and legitimising the state. Institutionalisation starts when the stakes, rules, and procedures of elections are perceived as “natural” and non-negotiable.

Voter education and broader political socialisation around public affairs and citizenship are crucial to develop public awareness and ownership of election processes. But the risks of

electoral conflicts and violence should also be diminished through strengthening some specific institutions related to elections. This includes the development of credible independent electoral management bodies, the strengthening of legitimate election observation units involving civil society, and establishing multi-stakeholder mediation mechanisms (including early warning systems). Multi-actor management constitutes a fundamental approach to the prevention and pacification of electoral conflicts. These issues will be discussed through specific experiences from African countries including Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa and Zimbabwe.

African instruments promoting elections

Much thinking has gone into developing instruments in Africa to promote good governance and elections. This round table will explore the contributions of the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, and the African Peer Review Mechanism.

The role of external support

Over time, the international community has evolved its approach to electoral assistance, with the objective to work on the political dimension of elections. Electoral assistance is no longer conceived to focus only on the electoral moment itself, but on the whole electoral process. But still not enough support is provided in the long term.

External actors should better understand the political economy of elections and design their support accordingly. The role of civil society and the media in monitoring the transparency and fairness of the electoral process is now considered as key in terms of electoral support.

The international community could also strengthen electoral stability by promoting inclusive political dialogue. In that regard, supporting the interactions between the various actors in an electoral process is being preferred to fragmented support to each of them.

This roundtable will discuss recent trends in African elections and their relation to instability, drawing lessons from specific case studies and determining how African governance instruments could serve to improve the quality and legitimacy of electoral processes.