

Conflict Prevention and Resolution Forum

Notes for **October 9, 2007**

Topic: **Achieving Peaceful Elections: Lessons Learned from Sierra Leone and Nigeria**

Speakers:

Christopher Fomunyoh, Senior Associate for Africa, Regional Director for Central and West Africa, National Democratic Institute (NDI)

Christian Hennemeyer, Director of Programs for Africa, International Foundation for Election Systems (EFES)

Moderator: Randolph Carter, Program Manager, Children and Youth Division, Search for Common Ground (SFCG)

Looking back at the recent elections in Sierra Leone and Nigeria, the October forum examined and illuminated the nexus between elections and conflict. The significance of fair and transparent democratic elections was highlighted, but it was stated that democratic elections should not be confused with sustainable peace, democracy or even governance. Elections were characterized as a possibility of a change, a process that in some cases solidifies peace, and in some other stirs up preexisting tensions. In addition, the highest degree of importance was ascribed to the work before the elections – among other, preparation of legal framework and support to develop the infrastructure of the civil society. In this context, the remarkable work of Search for Common Ground (SFCG) in the Sierra Leonean elections was offered as an example of successful cooperation with local actors in making the process transparent and credible.



In the introduction to his presentation, Dr. Christopher Fomunyoh mentioned the existence of an ongoing public debate about the relation between elections and conflict – he pointed out that the elections are said to have a role in either generating or mitigating conflict. However, in Dr. Fomunyoh's words, while it is common knowledge that democracy is necessary for sustainable peace, it is clear that democratic elections alone do not bring about peace. Democratic

elections, Dr. Fomunyoh said, can either help support the peace process, or generate upheaval. They usually bring to the surface preexisting elements of conflict and expose them to the public and the international attention. In addition, in an ideal case, elections are supposed to bring about a peaceful allocation of power. According to Dr. Fomunyoh, the problem is not with elections as such, but with flawed elections. He added that elections can be a tool for conflict mitigation and resolution, as well as a sort of a "rites of passage" for parties to resolve conflict among themselves. Some of the more successful election processes in Africa, according to Dr.

Fomunyoh, paved the way for democratic gains. Furthermore, elections can also help in or bring about fostering of multi-ethnic collaborative relationships and networking across ethnic lines. In Dr. Fomunyoh's words, ethnic affiliations are what elites have relied on, whereas elections can foster networking across the ethnic channels. In both countries, Dr. Fomunyoh continued, politicians at the last election seem to have had non-ethnic bases of support.

Dr. Fomunyoh also spoke about other manifestations related to the election process: the fact that the abilities of the civil society become visible, as well as the notion that governments can achieve legitimacy in the course of peaceful and democratic elections. In Dr. Fomunyoh's words, the reverse happened in Nigeria – the president inherited power after flawed elections. This is primarily the reason why the new president lacks legitimacy, even though for many Nigerians he seems like a promising choice.

The comparison between Sierra Leone and Nigeria, Dr. Fomunyoh stated, looks at an odd couple. Sierra Leone, he added, is a small country with few resources and a high level of political will to do the right thing. Nigeria, on the contrary, is a country with huge resources and an atmosphere of general indifference to democratic elections. In addition, Dr. Fomunyoh said that in Sierra Leone the elections were being monitored by an independent commission, while in Nigeria many important elements were missing. One of these was limited media coverage with only a few media houses present, another was the unwillingness of the election commission to do the right thing.

Christian Hennemeyer started his presentation by saying that IFES had worked in Nigeria since 1998 with the government and the NGO community on restructuring the election commission and the voter registration commission. Echoing Dr. Fomunyoh, Mr Hennemeyer said that the comparison between the two countries is indeed not an easy one. In his words, the elections in Sierra Leone are by far a more positive example but also not without problems. Another issue, Mr. Hennemeyer mentioned, is that the election is not the only way to measure democracy. Democracy can be good and stable even with bad elections. After all, in Mr. Hennemeyer's words, both countries will be judged by how well the election is going to be transferred to services delivered to their respective populations.

Mr. Hennemeyer pointed out that the preparation of elections represents the "real work" behind the election. What this means, he added, is that, in years before the election, election law is being reformed or designed, electoral managing body is being structured or restructured, a system for the registration of voters is being set up. In Mr. Hennemeyer's words, voter registration in Nigeria was disastrous this time, while Sierra Leone did a very good job and showed high level of accuracy in registering voters. In Nigeria, he further stated, wide spread inaccuracies occurred partly due to logistical challenges but mostly it was fraud that caused these. Some of the manifestations, in Mr. Hennemeyer's words, were erroneous tallies, underage voters, falsified voter registrations and more than 100% voter turnout. The difference between Sierra Leone and Nigeria as regards voter turnout, according to Mr. Hennemeyer, was mainly in dealing with such erroneous data – in Sierra Leone such results were immediately cancelled. In the case of Nigeria, he added, the country has a way of dealing with voter fraud, but it may take 2 or 3 years before we see the election results overturned.

An additional factor, according to Mr. Hennemeyer, is that the fresh memory of war seems to have played a role in the Sierra Leonean elections – people were aware of the alternative and were thus more determined to have real democratic elections.

In terms of management bodies, Mr. Hennemeyer said, there is a large difference between the two countries. He continued by saying that since Sierra Leone is a small country, its management body with one chairperson and four commissioners fits its size. In Nigeria they have one chairperson, twenty two commissioners, 37 state commissioners and thousands of people on the payroll.

Additional factors are, according to Mr. Hennemeyer, the fact that the staff in Sierra Leone was young and new, the chairperson an “outsider” a nun named Christina Thorpe. Both she and her Nigerian colleague Dr. Ewu were election outsiders, which, Mr. Hennemeyer commented, meant that their careers were not put at stake. In his words, having “amateurs” as heads of the managing body usually leads to “decent” election results. In Nigeria, however, Mr. Hennemeyer added, this was not the case. One of the problems he pointed out was that Dr. Ewu and others had received a lot of pressure from the executive mansion.

Mr. Hennemeyer also brought up the EU final report on the Nigerian election process. The report, he said, points out the structural flaws, some of which are the widespread irregularities and voter disenfranchisement. The report’s conclusion, he quoted, described the process as having fallen short of standards and therefore ultimately not credible. To this harsh criticism of INEC, Mr. Hennemeyer added, the Nigerian government reacted by criticizing the report for being biased.

In addition Mr. Hennemeyer reiterated that the differences between the two countries played a role: the small size of the country and the centralized system in Sierra Leone, versus the huge size of Nigeria with its strong executive playing a dominant role.

“Having said all this,” Mr. Hennemeyer added, “we must emphasize that elections alone are not a measurement of democracy.” He mentioned other tools to measure democracy, such as the media, judiciary, civil society or anti-corruption bodies. In Nigeria, Mr. Hennemeyer further stated, the media are much more sophisticated, while the judiciary is perhaps not always objective, but also not always predictable. According to him, the civil society is prominent in both countries. Regarding the anti-corruption bodies, Mr. Hennemeyer limited his comments to mentioning that the EFCC is a new body and for the first time in history one authorized to put in people in jail for corruption.

Finalizing his presentation, Mr. Hennemeyer asked himself and the audience the following question: “What do we learn from these lessons?” People in Nigeria, he added, admit the process was flawed, but believe the outcome was still the best possible one. “Is the process important?” he asked, immediately replying that it certainly is. The examples discussed here, Mr.

Hennemeyer stated, also show that election law is critical. In Nigeria, he added, the President had inordinate power and the INEC was directly financially dependant on the government which in turn was very negligent with funding. In Mr. Hennemeyer’s words, the election law should have made INEC a truly independent body. According to him, press controls were also critical in this case. In the context of ethnicity signs were appearing that divisions were breaking down. In regard to other democratic institutions, he added, it should be highlighted that the cycle is much longer – although donors get excited about elections because they are a process with measurable results, with a beginning and an end, working together with the civil society, the judiciary and all those who contribute to the election process is crucial. All the agents, Mr. Hennemeyer pointed out, should be supported to help make the process free, fair and transparent. He concluded by stating that elections should not be confused with governance.

Two members of the SFCG staff spoke about the outstanding work of the organization in the preparation and realization of the Sierra Leonean elections. Randolph Carter pointed out that, in Sierra Leone, SFCG focused on building capacity and establishing local structures that support a credible free outcome in elections. In this framework, SFCG supported an extensive national voter education campaign. Furthermore, the organization coordinated and directed the development of the Independent Radio Network (IRN), as well as the National Election



Watch (NEW), a coalition of civil society organizations dedicated to observing the elections. Philip Hellmich talked about two concrete activities of SFCG on Election Day: deploying 420 election reporters in partnership with IRN, and supporting NEW's 6,000 domestic observers. (For more information see www.sfcg.org – West Africa Update) Finally, Mr. Hellmich highlighted the importance of the media for democratic and credible elections, stressing its role not just in the coverage, but also in the preparation of the process. The real challenge, he stated, is how to keep this infrastructure alive.