Conflict Prevention & Resolution Forum

Elections in Post-Conflict Africa: A Look at Process and Impact

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Conceptual Framework: Elections and the Perception of Democracy

The conventional view of peace and democracy, such as in post-conflict Africa, typically features structural aspects of balance of power, rule of law, and security to name a few. It is believed that if a society puts into place a constitution and a body of laws, they get the structure and institutions of a democracy. Post-conflict reconstruction actors often have a checklist that specifically includes multi-party elections, an independent judiciary, establishing strong civil society, a free media, and an integrated security structure.

These perceptions are rooted in Western liberal democratic principles. Conventional perspectives firstly view vigorous and open debate as the most effective way to create sound public policy. Democracy builders have placed such an emphasis on multi-party elections; leading to the belief that elections become a 'be all and end all' for democracy. Donor organizations conducting governance and democracy programs focus their funding on political pluralism and creating a robust and competitive election system.

This conventional perception misunderstands democracy. Enduring democratic societies require more than pluralism and open democratic competition. It also depends on underlining sets of agreements, formal and tacit, among the members of society, such as the definition of a national

community, the rules of the society, and the way in which leaders communicate amongst each other and to the public.

Secondly, there is the misunderstanding concerning the difference in perception versus difference in values. Varying parties in a country often do not see each other in the same national unity, especially in countries where national boundaries were subject to external or colonial imposition. Members of some parts of a community will see other groups as outsides or even dehumanized. This makes the challenge not instilling a sense of democratic values, but rather the fact that some members of a society do not perceive others as part of their own national identity.

The importance of elections in a post-conflict society should not be disregarded. Instead, peacebuilding must address the situation where a society is divided on multiple fault lines and a lacking sense of national identity or unity is bound for failure, despite a robust election system. Nigeria's election in 2011 was structurally the most sound procedurally but also one of the most violent. The structural and preventative measures are not always enough and political will and domestic support from actors who reach out to constituents and the international community are just as important.

Thus, sequencing is crucial. When is an election appropriate vis-à-vis collaborating with these other national identity issues? This may require national government coalition units and reconciliation initiatives so that they can begin an organic process of constitution building before elections take place. The following illustrates various methods and standards for electoral capacity building, security evaluation, as well as broader democratic development.

Inclusiveness, Transparency, and Accountability in the Election Process

Inclusiveness requires that all sides be involved in the preparation and process of elections. Prior to elections, consensus is built around a legal framework and communication is constantly maintained amongst all parties, including non-partisan actors. This means giving non-partisan actors a seat at the table, but also mobilizing these actors to promote awareness of non-violence within the society.

The introduction of non-partisanship is difficult as it can be foreign to many societies. This was the case during the election process in South Sudan. Allowing non-partisan actors working in that role can ease tensions between political parties and members of the society.

To ensure transparency, an election commission must be open and share information while actively communicate with various stakeholders throughout the process to keep the dialogue progressing. Another mechanism to promote transparency and defuse tension is election monitoring. This will become increasingly necessary to overcome the adversarial post-election

sentiment where the winner will feel that it is their turn to take care of their own people, rather than the entire population, because their opponent did the same during their time.

The election administration should be impartial and represented by all parties as well as non-partisans. Furthermore, the election administration should be able to admit when there are problems. In the first 2000 Nigeria legislative elections, the election was halted mid-day and postponed a week due to feedback received by the administration from parties and actors on the ground that the process was not proceeding as planned. This provided a positive step for the commission in resolving an issue, rather than attempting to cover it up.

On the day of the election, strong communication between political competitors and monitors throughout the day will increase transparency. The electoral complaints structure requires the capability to receive several complaints in a short time and provide timely and effective mediation and resolution remedies. If complaints are expected to be high, a separate body can be formed and, importantly, funded to undertake those complaints effectively. Competitors must know how the system works and be prepared to use it.

An election process needs to represent accountability as a central principle. Effective remedies must be available to contestants and voters, including formal and informal feedback mechanisms for administrators of elections so that accountability can be held. Respect for the rule of law, enshrined in the constitution, and election laws allows for accountability for those who commit election crimes. Accountability will also spur public confidence in the election system.

The legal framework must be inclusive and promote citizen participation. Confusion in the electoral process can create tension and accusations of fraud. Thus, the legal framework must be clear and understandable so that participants and voters are not confused. Specifically, the designation of seats in parliament can be complicated to the point that voters and the opposition allege fraud simply because they do not understand the process.

Additionally, the campaign process is vital to a peaceful election process. All sides must have the opportunity for freedom of expression through the media. The campaigns should search for a means to pacify the dialogue. Through informal means of political mediation and Codes of Conduct, agreements can be made as to what is appropriate to say in the public sphere, creating a non-adversarial atmosphere.

The Electoral Security Framework

The United States Agency for International Development has created a security framework to assess electoral security threats and help design programming to address them. USAID conducts an assessment to identify priority areas of electoral security interventions. Firstly, a contextual analysis will assess risk factors found in various sectors including political, economic, social, and

state institutions. Areas such as poverty, institutional legitimacy, and effectiveness are considered. Second, historical conflict factors help identify past election issues and patterns as well as possible perpetrators ranging from government officials, rebels, and citizens. Finally, a stakeholder analysis will gather information (often from the previous two steps) to determine potential perpetrators of electoral conflict.

Once the assessment is complete, program planning will examine funding constraints, donor priorities, and locate other restraints to the program. Next, the programming will be based on prior analysis and planning on what the organization wants to do, taking into consideration what other donors and the government is doing, and determine the best way to make an impact. Throughout this process, monitoring and evaluation will measure domestic outcomes, using such tools as surveys to see how the program is progressing

Conclusions

Too often, elections in Africa are triggers of violent conflict, particularly in post-conflict societies where the core causes of conflict have not been resolved and key stakeholders have not reached a cooperative accommodation with each other.

Importantly, elections are not a single event (Election Day) rather it is a cycle. Thus, early warning signs should be taken serious and timely early-targeted resolution created throughout this cycle. The international community can monitor the situation in a country prior to an election to determine if constitutional manipulation has been made, such as in the DRC where the rules were changed for a presidential victory to be decided by a plurality and not a majority. Non-directly elected presidents, such as in Angola, are chosen by a legislature often dominated by a single party. These issues need to be anticipated and monitored by all stakeholders.

Electoral conflict and violence are not isolated events. They are tied into existing conflict dynamics and grievances (e.g. land disputes, poverty, etc). It is not uncommon for citizens to be disenfranchised by their government due to a fear of reprisal after an election. Leaders may feel threatened by the loss of an election, which can create situations of fraud, manipulation, and electoral violence. This requires the establishment of a cooperative environment with mechanisms, such as those mentioned above, for peaceful transition along with the competitive aspects of elections.

In post-conflict Africa, democracy depends as much on cooperation as it does on competition. With a healthy sense of common ground within a community, competition can function and elections can help build a democratic society. Absent these factors, competition can be threatening to destabilize a society.