



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Elections in Africa, 1991-2009: Ways to democracy or breeding grounds for conflict?

Abbink, G.J.

Citation

Abbink, G. J. (2010). Elections in Africa, 1991-2009: Ways to democracy or breeding grounds for conflict? *Ascl Infosheet*, (9). Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/15654>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/15654>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).



Elections in Africa, 1991-2009: Ways to democracy or breeding grounds for conflict?

High hopes for reform

Since the global wave of democratisation of the early 1990s, hopes were high that 'multi-party' elections would also bring the goods of democracy to Africa, e.g., political freedoms, representative public systems, accountable leadership, and a functional justice system. Like other parts of the world, Africa was tired of one-party states and autocratic rulers, and wanted its share of change after the fall of the Berlin Wall. There was a groundswell of protests among African populations and across the continent in those years. Many authoritarian regimes caved in to the combined pressure for reforms, from both their citizens and the international community (e.g., donor countries demanding 'good governance'). Electoral reforms were implemented, political parties were allowed and periodic elections for parliament or president introduced.



Kenyan lining up to vote, 2007
[<http://bildochfoto.se/wpcontent/uploads/2008/01/kenyavote.jpg>]

However, the old elites and regimes did not disappear overnight and, with some exceptions to be mentioned below, countries often morphed into conflict arenas or 'façade democracies' that appropriated the discourse of political rights. They only allowed elections and freedoms under specific conditions. In some countries the nature of civic society was such that they were often not prepared to exercise the difficult game of parliamentary-democratic politics. In several cases this was because the incumbent regime had all but destroyed civil society organizations (trade unions, professional groups, religious associations, etc.). In other countries, elections came to gravely exacerbate antagonistic 'eth-

nic' or ethno-regional politics, based on patronage and divide-and-rule tactics, thus subverting issue-politics and the shared national interest. This often led to harshly polarised and violent electoral campaigns, a telling example of which were the December 2007 Kenyan elections, with hundreds of people killed, and thousands injured and displaced from their homes.

Does multiparty democracy work for fair representation?

Partly in view of such ugly exploitation of the 'ethnic card' in election processes in Africa (but not only there), the question emerges whether electoral systems have brought progress in Africa or not. Is multi-party democracy the best way to effect efficient and fair political representation and communication, or are they a catalyst for more conflict? What additional conditions must be in place to make them work? Is there national consensus on organizing elections as a means to establish legitimate government? What are the views of local people, and what are the experiences so far? Is the (western) donor-country agenda not skewed and dogmatic about its demand to always implement multi-party democracy in Africa as soon as possible and in a one-size-fits-all model? How could the process of constructing democratic systems via elections be improved in view of the several dismal failures since 1991?



Post election violence in Kenya, 2007-2008
[<http://medias.lepost.fr/ill/2007/12/31/h-3-1075682.jpg>]

This major 'policy-relevant' topic has received much attention from researchers worldwide, including from those at the African Studies Cen-

tre. Research has been done on electoral processes, on election observation, and on wider processes of democratisation and their societal context. Our research, while oriented towards a political analysis, often took a historical and sociological turn, as we looked at the local traditions of politics and governance, the structures inherited from the colonial past, and the larger setting of national and global inequities and economic factors that prevented a quick turn towards institutionalised democracy.

Elections carry no guarantee for success

Understanding of these wider contextual factors may help explain why elections are perhaps not the key element to guarantee democratisation and emergence of a rule-of-law state. But they can, if tried repeatedly, contribute to the gradual emergence of a democratic culture *in conjunction with* other political-judicial reforms. But in that case there must be some national consensus about the political rules, and new institutions that are accountable to the voters. This is by far not the case in most of Africa. Only Ghana, South Africa, Mauritius and to a lesser extent, despite failings, Benin, Somaliland and Senegal, are perhaps examples. In these countries power changed hands peacefully in recent – and widely accepted – elections. In the 2007 Kenyan elections an opposition party (of current PM R. Odinga) won at the cost of the incumbent party of M. Kibaki and became part of the government, but the election violence, killings and destruction was massive, showing that at such a price the country might perhaps have been better off without elections.



Somaliland ballot boxes taken for the count, 2007
[<http://www.apd-somaliland.org/img/ballots.jpg>]

To address these issues, the ASC and the Africa Direction of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs in November 2009 organized an international conference *'Elections in Africa: fair, façade or failure?'*, which specifically addressed the question of whether elections in Africa had meaningfully contributed to the establishment of democracy – and thereby to 'good governance'

– and what the prospects of further democratisation through electoral process would and could be. Keynote speeches were given by academic experts N. van de Walle and S.I. Lindberg, whose comparative work was exhaustively discussed. They shared the idea that while elections in Africa in the past decades show many faults and carry no guarantee for success, they are a necessary but not a sufficient condition for a durable democratisation process. The tenacity of old (autocratic) elites is, however, not to be underestimated and new ones often take over the customary authoritarian culture of governance and divide-and-rule tactics. Public and international scrutiny may help in the processes of reform.



Difficult campaigning: a Sudan opposition group, 2010
[http://arabnews.com/middleeast/article26052.ece/REPRESENTATIONS/large_620x350/mid_sudan.jpg]

Recent election campaigns in, for example, Sudan and Ethiopia (2010), demonstrate, however, that democracy is very tenuous and not well-rooted. Elections there have generated deep divisions and often vilification of opposition parties so as to delegitimize them. Voters and political parties deeply disagree with the regime over the procedures of elections and the political system as a whole.

Stakes too high and anonymity not guaranteed

The stakes in African elections are very high, as the powers in place stand to lose very much when they are defeated, and their general attitude is that they 'cannot and should not lose'. A defeat may also bring judicial proceedings against corruption cases and illegal dealings done by those who were in power, and of course they try to prevent this at all cost. Especially in the rural areas, people are easily 'convinced' or intimidated not to vote for opposition parties, e.g. if certain sanctions are perceived to result for having voted against the incumbent regime. In many cases, the opposition groups or candidates cannot even properly campaign there. A problem in elections in many countries is that from voting results at the aggregate level (of districts or even polling sta-

tions) it can be seen how the majority voted. If this is for an opposition party, pressure and harassment often follow, disregarding individual differences. This phenomenon of identifying polling stations or voting districts according to 'political colour' undermines the secret ballot.



Voters in Ethiopia, 2010

[http://d.yimg.com/a/p/ap/20100523/capt.27d2f116e6d34b519451f1c6e4ab8dd5-27d2f116e6d34b51945_1f1c6e4ab8dd5-0.jpg]

Time to temper optimism

It is therefore time to temper the optimism about elections in Africa. One could, of course, also suggest that countries need to learn the democratic-electoral game in the hard way, with an inevitable measure of intimidations, harassments, riots, destruction of property, post-election conflict, etc., because such events have historically accompanied most processes of democratisation elsewhere as well. The question as to what policy course to follow cannot be answered here. But one would at least expect donor-countries that cherish democracy for themselves not to support tyranny or repressive elite rule in countries that they keep giving aid money.

What to do?

At any rate, it appears crucial to take into account specific traits in local political traditions and their impact on the success and durability of elections. Such traits can be the nature of elite rule in place, cultural notions of authority and accountability, a minimum level of voter education, a level of economic development and equity, the extent of 'neo-patrimonial' networks, patterns of gender relations, and religious values regarding community representation and the political process (Recall that some movements, like the Islamist armed rebels in southern Somalia, consider democracy as 'un-Islamic' and dissociate themselves from any negotiation process). Some 'traditional' elements from local politics could be given a place in a contemporary electoral-political system, like for example Somaliland has done with its House of Clan Elders (or *Gurti*) as the second chamber of the legislature. An independent

Electoral Board is also a must. More generally, the role of an independent and functional judicial system in shaping the democratic-institutional context of elections appears to be critical, especially when it has inculcated procedural respect and tolerance of difference in the public sphere.

Retrospect

To summarize, several types of electoral process can be observed in Africa: 1. successful, competitive elections (e.g., Ghana, Senegal, Botswana, to some extent Somaliland), 2. competitive but deeply problematic and divisive elections (Kenya, Nigeria, Ivory Coast, Zimbabwe), 3. 'façade' elections', where despite some opposition gains the playing field was never level and the incumbent party always could engineer victory (Rwanda, Sudan, Ethiopia), and 4. fragile electoral processes in post-conflict countries (e.g., Burundi, Angola, Sierra Leone, Liberia). There is also a rest category of countries without elections (Eritrea, Equatorial Guinea, Chad). In the past 15 years, electoral-political reform and the organisation of elections in Africa have made advances, but these are not irreversible. Democratic consolidation through elections is neither guaranteed nor solidly entrenched in most of Africa's political systems, susceptible as they are to elite manipulation, religious contestation, weakness of the justice and educational systems, alleged 'ethnic'-based strife, and economic shocks. Elections can go either way in a process of 'democratisation'. A secure legal environment, a sound economy benefiting all citizens, a set of conditions enhancing tolerance and power-sharing, as well as the constructive engagement of external partners (in line with agreed-upon international norms) determine success or failure. But we do not know the precise reasons for the success stories. Why does the Ghana model work? Comparative work is needed on this, for both academic and policy reasons.



The 2008 Ghanaian presidential candidates.

[http://farm4.static.flickr.com/3048/3073565013_37f62103dd.jpg]

Relevant publications (selection)

- Abbink, J.
 2006a Discomfiture of democracy? The 2005 election crisis in Ethiopia and its aftermath. *African Affairs* 105: 1-27.
 2006b Prager Frühling in Addis: die Parlamentswahl in Äthiopien und die Repression der Regierung. *Der Überblick* 42(3): 46-49.
 2000 The organization of elections in federal Ethiopia: retrospect and prospect. In: J. Abbink & G. Hesselning, eds, *Election Observation and Democratization in Africa*, pp. 150-179. London - Basingstoke: Macmillan / New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Abbink, J. & G. Hesselning, eds
 2000 *Election Observation and Democratization in Africa*. London - Basingstoke: Macmillan / New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Donge, J.K. van
 2008 The EU Observer Mission to the Zambian elections 2001: the politics of election monitoring as the construction of narratives. *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 46(3): 296-317.
- IS-Academy – Ministry of Foreign Affairs (NL)
 2010 *Elections in Africa: fair, façade or failure? Conference Report*. The Hague (28 p.).
- Kadhi, J. & M. Rutten
 2001 The Kenyan media in the 1997 general elections: a look at the watchdogs. In: M. Rutten, A. Mazrui & F. Grignon, eds, *Out for the Count: the 1997 general elections and prospects for democracy in Kenya*, pp. 242-273. Kampala: Fountain Publishers.
- Kessel, I. van
 2005 Verkiezingen in Afrika: wel een stem, maar niets te kiezen. *Zuidelijk Afrika* 9(4): 33-35.
 2004 De toekomst van de democratie in Afrika: stuur belastinginspecteurs, geen verkiezingswaarnemers. *Internationale Spectator* 58(1): 18-22.
- Rutten, M.
 2001 The Kenya 1997 general elections in Maasailand: of 'sons' and 'puppets' and how KANU defeated itself. In: M. Rutten, A. Mazrui & F. Grignon, eds, *Out for the Count: the 1997 general elections and prospects for democracy in Kenya*, pp. 405-440. Kampala: Fountain Publishers.
- Rutten, M., A. Mazrui & F. Grignon, eds
 2001 *Out for the Count: the 1997 general elections and prospects for democracy in Kenya*. Kampala: Fountain Publishers.
- Rutten, M. & S. Owuor
 2009 Weapons of mass destruction: land, ethnicity and the 2007 elections in Kenya. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 27(3): 305-324.
- Walraven, K. van
 2002 The end of an era: the Ghanaian elections of December 2000. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 20(2): 183-202.
 2000 Democratisering in Afrika. *Internationale Spectator* 54(5): 268-272.
- Walraven, K. van, P. Thomas & C. Thiriot
 2002 *Democratization in sub-Saharan Africa: transitions and turning points - an overview of the literature (1995-1996)*. Leiden: African Studies Centre (Research Report 65).

Contact: J. Abbink
 African Studies Centre
 P.O. Box 9555
 2300 RB Leiden
 The Netherlands

e-mail: abbink@ascleiden.nl
 website: www.ascleiden.nl