

Elections and Democracy in Africa since 2000: An Update on the Pertinent Issues

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Abstract

This paper first addresses elections and their importance for democracy. It then gives an overview of elections in Sub-Saharan Africa since the 1990s, a decade that marked the end of the Cold War and ushered in what has been termed the “third wave of democracy” (Huntington 1991). Third, it hones in on elections in Africa since 2000, and highlights five major challenges for African elections in the present. Fourth, Ghana is used as an example of credible election management, with a focus on key requisites for free and fair elections that are acceptable to masses and elites. It nevertheless highlights some recent election management problems in Ghana. Finally, it shows the way forward to meaningful elections in Africa with eight recommendations.

Keywords: Elections; Democracy; Election Management; Africa; Ghana

1. Introduction: Elections and Their Importance for Democracy

Elections, particularly, free and fair elections, are a key criterion of the democratic system, alongside the freedom and independence of the media and the protection of civil rights and liberties. Elections emphasize two key elements of democracy – participation and competition. While elections are not the be all and end all of a democracy, they provide a major blueprint for the existence of democracy (Bratton 1999). In fact, elections may coexist with systematic abuse of human rights and the disenfranchisement of some of the electorate; nonetheless, holding formal competitive elections is a key necessary condition for a political system to be a representative democracy (Lindberg 2006: 8). Elections also help ensure democratic peace and reduce the likelihood of a democratic reversal. Third, elections allow for competition among elites, and provide for participation of the public in the selection of leaders (O’Neil 2006).

The crucial importance of elections for democracy is highlighted in the standard minimal definition of democracy itself. Here, democracy involves a political system with “meaningful and extensive competition among individuals and organized groups (especially political parties), either directly or indirectly, for the major positions of government power; a ‘highly inclusive’ level of political participation in the selection of leaders and policies, and at least through regular and fair elections, such that no major (adult) social group is excluded; and a level of civil and political liberties – freedom of expression, freedom of the press, freedom to form and join organizations – sufficient to ensure the integrity of political competition and participation” (Diamond 1988: 4; Linz and Stepan 1978: 5; Dahl 1971: 3-20; Lipset 1960: 27; Schumpeter 1950). Elections thus provide a link between the government and the governed (Ayee 2008; Chazan 1987).

Elections in the African context are replete with diverse meanings and functions, as Hayward (1987) rightly highlights. Elections are about power, where winners gain access to power and voters exercise power in making choices; elections facilitate in practical terms the idea of the consent of the governed, which legitimizes the elected; elections are sometimes used by candidates and parties to express positions and demonstrate support, without necessarily expecting to win (for example, Botswana and Senegal both with dominant parties) (Hayward 1987: 13-15). Finally, elections facilitate resource redistribution as they are marked by substantial candidate expenditures and allocation of government funds to particular areas (Hayward 1987: 16-17; Ayee 2008).

It is emphasized that elections are also a causal variable in democratization itself. An overview of elections in Africa since the Cold War ended is warranted to highlight the frequency and quality of elections.

2. Overview of Elections in Africa since the End of the Cold War

The end of the Cold War in 1991 marked the beginning of Africa's "second liberation" (Diamond 1992, 1993). This second liberation holds out more promise for democratization and stable democracy, because it is tinged with, and shaped by, past experiences of the pitfalls and in-competencies of military and authoritarian civilian rule (Gyekye-Jandoh 2006). It began with Benin's historical multiparty elections in 1991, where Matthieu Kerekou, the incumbent president, lost to Nicephore Soglo. Multiparty elections in 1991 in Malawi and Zambia also saw the defeat of incumbent presidents (Banda in Malawi and Kaunda in Zambia). While Ghana experienced increased political liberalization and democratization, its 1992 multiparty elections were fraught with irregularities, but by 2005, Ghana had held four successive multiparty elections that were increasingly free and fair. Significantly, by the end of 2000, multiparty elections had been held in all but five of the forty-eight states in Africa (that is, Comoros, Congo-Kinshasa, Equatorial Guinea, Rwanda, Somalia) (Barkan 2002). As of 2003, 33 African countries had held not only first but second elections, 20 had held third elections, and seven countries had held at least four successive elections (Lindberg 2006: 16).

A positive development since 1991 has been that the quality of multiparty elections, in the sense of being free and fair, has improved in some African countries, with Kenya and Zimbabwe the most recent exceptions. The first sign of this is that harassment by incumbent governments has waned, and opposition candidates, parties, and supporters have greater freedom to campaign and prepare for elections. Second, both foreign and domestic observers are now regarded as essential components of the electoral process (Barkan 2002). Third, voter turnout at elections has been fairly high at almost two-thirds of registered voters (Bratton 1998), and in some cases even higher. Finally, and perhaps most important, there has been systematic popular support across Africa for elections and democracy, and a consensus that military rule should be a thing of the past. Public opinion surveys in twelve African countries between 1999 and 2001 have revealed that on average, 69 percent of respondents regarded democracy as "preferable to any other kind of government," while only 12 percent felt that "in certain situations, a non-democratic government can be preferable" (Afrobarometer 2001; Barkan 2002).

Despite the above-noted positives, recent scholarship on the status of African democratization and elections has tended to be less optimistic (Udogu 1997; Ottaway 1997; Gros 1998; Herbst 2001; Levitsky and Way 2001; 2002). Jeffrey Herbst (2001: 363), for instance, developed a four-fold typology of African democratization based on the number of electoral turnovers or transfers of power – multiparty democracies with two transfers of power via elections, one transfer of power via elections, no transfer of power, and regimes with no elections. Most African countries (twenty-two of the forty-eight) fell into Herbst's category of "multiparty elections but no transfer of power." By 2005, only Benin, Madagascar, Mali, and Mauritius had had two transfers of power (where incumbents lost) via multiparty elections (Gyekye-Jandoh 2006). Countries like Uganda, Eritrea, and Somalia had not held multiparty elections (Herbst 2001: 366). Comoros, for instance, backslid after one consequential election and a coup in April 1999 (Herbst 2001: 364), and so did Ivory Coast after the 1999 coup by Robert Guei. In Liberia, voters elected Charles Taylor president in 1997 for fear that he would plunge the country into civil war if he lost (Herbst 2001: 364), but largely free and fair elections to elect Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf president in November 2005 have raised cautious optimism for elections as embodying the "democratic hope" (Ayee 2008) for Liberia and African countries in general. Burkina Faso, Cameroon, and Togo faced protracted transitions in the 1990s, while the Central African Republic has continued to face instability.

The disputed Kenyan elections in December 2007, and the Zimbabwean debacle beginning with the March 29, 2008 general elections have given some credence to the pessimistic assessments of competitive multiparty elections in Africa as voting without choosing, resulting in "choice-less democracies" (Mkandawire 1999), resurgent "illiberalism" (Zakaria 1997; Gyimah-Boadi 2001), or "liberalized autocracies" (Joseph 1998). Yet some African countries (Botswana, Ghana, Benin, for example) continue to provide the empirical proof of free and fair competitive elections as the democratic hope for the continent.

The Kenyan and Zimbabwean cases are discussed below to highlight five major challenges for African elections in 'the present'. This paper operationalizes 'the present' as involving African elections that took place from 2000 to 2012.

3. African Elections Since 2000

The above overview of African elections in the post-Cold War era provides support to the observation made by Hayward (1987) of the resilience of the electoral process in Africa.

Hayward rightly notes that:

.....much of it rests in the commitment of Africans to some level of participation and choice in the governmental process. It is clear that elections in Africa are not just the stuff of politicians, that the masses in many African states, sometimes much more than the elites, have a preference for electoral forms and processes (Hayward 1987: 18).

Elections in Africa in the 21st century, from all indications, seem to have a resilience that is here to stay. Even those countries, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, that have been autocratic or in turmoil, view elections as the threshold to cross in order to legitimize their governments, embark on different policies, and prevent public unrest.

General elections in Africa in 2008, for example, depicted the wide incidence of elections and included: indirect presidential elections held in Mauritius, Rwandan parliamentary elections held from 15 to 18 September 2008, parliamentary elections in Swaziland in October 2008, and Ghana's presidential and parliamentary elections held on December 7, 2008. In addition, parliamentary elections were held in Angola on 5 and 6 September, 2008 after a ten year postponement due to organizational and logistical problems, and in Guinea-Bissau on 16 November, 2008 (Africa Press Agency, 26 March, 2008). Parliamentary elections were held in Djibouti and Equatorial Guinea on 8 February, 2008 and 4 May, 2008 respectively. In all, by the end of 2008, major elections had been held in at least 10 African countries counting Ivorian presidential elections held on 30 November, 2008 and Guinean legislative elections held in the latter part of 2008 (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guinean_legislative_election). Of these, Ivorian and Guinean leaders made clear their dependence on government and international funding for the elections. The number of elections held matter, as it shows the recognition of democratic and non-democratic leaders alike of the legitimacy elections confer, although the quality of these elections would ultimately play a role in advancing democracy in African countries or reversing it.

Kenya's elections on December 27, 2007 and the ensuing violence also provide some food for thought. Mwai Kibaki's re-election prospects were not on solid ground as he faced strong competition from his former allies; the most important opposition candidate was Raila Odinga of the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM). Kibaki's 46.4% of the vote and Odinga's 44.1% were the focus of the disputed elections. It was charged by Odinga that about 300,000 votes were falsely attributed to Kibaki in most remote constituencies and that the Western, Coast, Upper Eastern and North Eastern provinces saw vote rigging that was responsible for Kibaki's victory (Debrah 2008: 4). The flawed elections were also confirmed by international observers. Odinga refused to concede defeat and called for a recount or a re-run of the elections. The Electoral Commission of Kenya (ECK) failed to establish the credibility of the tallying process and failed to convince all the parties and candidates, raising serious questions about the effectiveness of the election process (Debrah 2008: 5).

The EC Chairman's admission on January 2, 2008 that he was pressured to declare Kibaki winner depicts the lack of independence and impartiality of the ECK, which is very important for the integrity of an electoral process. As there was a lack of faith in the justice system for redress, the opposition continued to accept the ethnic-related violence that ensued between Odinga's Luo and Kibaki's Kikuyu (Debrah 2008: 5), resulting in about 800-1,500 lives lost and about 180,000 people displaced (Al Jazeera, February 24, 2008). Luckily, in Kenya, the AU's Chairman, President Kuffuor, and former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan were able to collaborate with others and with the two sides (Odinga's and Kibaki's) to clinch a peace deal through constitutional engineering and compromise that created an office of a prime minister to be occupied by Odinga and a coalition government. Thus, on February 28, 2008, Kibaki and Odinga signed a power-sharing agreement called the National Accord and Reconciliation Act. The Cabinet headed by Odinga was named on April 13, 2008 and sworn in on April 17, 2008 (Al Jazeera, April 17, 2008). Not so in Zimbabwe.

On March 29, 2008, presidential and parliamentary elections were held in Zimbabwe. The two main contenders were incumbent President Robert Mugabe of the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) and Morgan Tsvangirai of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). While allegations of vote buying and election-day irregularities were made by the opposition, official results were not announced for more than a month (five weeks) after the elections, raising allegations of Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) co-option by the ZANU-PF government. After a recount and verification of results, the ZEC, on May 2, 2008, announced that Tsvangirai won 47.9% and Mugabe 43.2% of the vote, with Tsvangirai's percentage not enough to avoid a run-off.

The period following the first round of elections was marked by serious political violence, including farm invasions and arrests and intimidation of teachers who were electoral officials during the first round and who were accused of supporting the MDC (Daily Graphic, May 2008). Some 66 supporters of the MDC were killed, 3000 MDC supporters injured, and more than 25,000 displaced (Daily Graphic, June 14, 2008, p.5). Western governments and organizations blamed ZANU-PF for the violence.

The June 6, 2008 arrest of Morgan Tsvangirai by police ahead of the June 27, 2008 run-off elections in Zimbabwe, and the police ban on several future rallies, citing fears of MDC members' safety (Daily Graphic, June 7, 2008) raise serious questions about state sovereignty and the extent to which democratic rules can be flouted and civil liberties trampled upon without any external intervention by continental organizations such as the African Union (AU). To be fair, the AU Commission Chairman, Jean Ping, on May 4, 2008, arrived in Harare with the AU's Political Affairs Commissioner Julia Dolly Joiner, and its Peace and Security Commissioner, Ramtane Lamamra. Ping had "very constructive" talks with Mugabe and a working meeting with another official where they "reviewed the entire political process from the start" and "looked at all the scenarios for the coming weeks" (Africa Press Agency (AFP), May 5, 2008). It is hard to tell if these talks made a difference since political violence and intimidation continued. In Zimbabwe, the uneven and illiberal electoral atmosphere and violence went hand in hand with additional civil liberties abuse: a campaign against press freedom. On June 1, 2008, for example, Oliver Mutambara, the president of a faction of the MDC, was arrested for an article he wrote in "The Standard" newspaper in April 2008, while the editor of the same newspaper had been arrested in May 2008 (SAPA-AFP, June 1, 2008).

These two cases, in addition to problems encountered in Djibouti's and Equatorial Guinea's 2008 legislative elections underscore several challenges for African elections in 'the present'. First is the lack of consensus on the democratic rules of the political game that still exists among some African political elites, where democracy is not seen as the "only game in town" and competitive elections are regarded as more of a hindrance to incumbents' agenda to retain power. A second challenge is the seeping illiberalism associated with the electoral process in some countries, which has resulted in near non-competitive election contests. For example, in Djibouti, where all 65 legislative seats were won by members of the ruling Union for the Presidential Majority (UMP) coalition, none of the democratic rules were respected, the opposition boycotted the parliamentary elections and a presidential decree gave only two weeks for campaigning (from 25 January to 6 February, 2008).

Another important challenge is the lack of transparent, independent, and effective electoral bodies to oversee free and fair elections, as seen in the cases of Kenya and Zimbabwe. This can lead to arbitrary procedures in polling stations, as well as election result manufacturing to favor incumbents. A fourth challenge is the real need for funding and logistics to conduct elections. Most African governments are not able, by themselves, to fund elections and appeal to the international community to help. Finally, the flexibility of leaders, particularly the incumbents, to negotiate and compromise after disputed elections in order to avoid national disaster, is lacking in some cases. This makes a big difference between those countries that degenerate into post-election violence and conflict and those that are able to stabilize and go on to peace even after disputed elections.

4. The Ghanaian Example

Ghana held its fifth successive multiparty presidential and parliamentary elections on December 7, 2008. It passed the crucial electoral turnover test (Huntington 1991) in 2000, and has conducted largely credible elections since 1996. It has therefore been held as an example of credible election management in Africa¹, which is a necessary, if not sufficient factor, for free and fair, legitimate elections acceptable to all, and for the furtherance of democracy.

The satisfactory conduct and administration of elections in 1996, 2000, and 2004 can be attributed to several factors, which are also requisites for free and fair elections. First, the Electoral Commission (EC) became more professional, reliable, and independent of the government of the day, and benefited from the support of the donor community.

¹ Despite the outcome of the 2012 presidential electoral dispute (which exonerated the president and the EC of the charges of election rigging), which was heard at the Supreme Court of Ghana (from April 16 to August 29, 2013), in which Ghana's EC was one of the respondents accused of presiding over election malpractices and irregularities during the December 7, 2012 general elections, this view of credible election management in Ghana has been called into question.

Second, the phenomenon of domestic observers in the form of the Network of Domestic Election Observers (NEDEO) and the Coalition of Domestic Election Observers (CODEO) imbued the election process with legitimacy and the public with confidence as it added a local touch and prevented widespread fraud and cheating (Gyekye-Jandoh 2006). Third, no opposition groups were banned in any of the elections. Fourth, some electoral reforms, made in collaboration with political parties and donors, were also put in place that technically allowed things to function more smoothly: a new voter's register was put into place by 1996; photo identity cards were introduced; the Inter-Party Advisory Committee (IPAC) was created at the instance of the EC, and political party agents were trained by the EC, with emphasis on the rules and procedures at polling stations for counting and verification of results. The collation of results at each constituency even before they were sent to the EC served to hinder fraud and enhance political parties' and the public's confidence and trust in the electoral process. Fifth, there is also the significant phenomenon of consensus among political party elite on the rules of the democratic game to a large extent in Ghana, and this bodes well for democratic consolidation. For example, in meetings with political party leaders of the NPP, CPP, and NDC, prior to the 2004 general elections, all the leaders expressed a strong desire for peaceful, non-violent, and well-run elections, and promised that if they lost the elections they would accept defeat or seek redress only through legal means (Gyekye-Jandoh 2006).

In 2008, mechanisms were put in place to ensure that free and fair elections acceptable to all occurred in December. Thus, prominent civil society organizations, such as the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA), after meeting to review the Political Parties Code of Conduct, collaborated with the National Commission on Civic Education (NCCE), the Electoral Commission (EC), the National Peace Council (NPC), and political parties to set up a National Enforcement Body that monitored the pre-election, election-day, and post-election activities on the ground in all ten regions for an eight month period that began in July. This body consisted of members of civil society, the NCCE, and political party agents that were trained as monitors to note the instances of abuse of incumbency and any violent activities that would be detrimental to peaceful and fair elections (IEA Administrator, June 10, 2008).

At an earlier workshop organized by the IEA and at which the NCCE, NPC, EC, and NETRIGHT (Network for Women's Rights) also participated, eight political parties (NPP, NDC, CPP, PNC, EGLE, URP (United Reform Party), GNP (Ghana National Party), and ULP (United Love Party)) issued a communique that called on the IEA and other civil society organizations (CSOs) to establish a Centre for Monitoring Election Violence that would document all incidents of inter and intra-party violence and alert political parties and relevant security agencies to those incidents (Daily Graphic, June 3, 2008: 3). In addition, between March 14 and 23, 2008, the EC trained more than 5000 agents of the Commission to replace lost or destroyed voter identification cards (Daily Graphic, March 8, 2008: 1).

Very important also was the recognition by political parties, the EC, civil society organizations (CSOs), and the donor community of the importance of the 2008 elections that were to mark the end of two terms of office of both major parties – the NPP and NDC. Hence the call was made by major political parties (especially the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the New Patriotic Party (NPP)) for international observers, and for the EC's publication of a Framework for Domestic Election Observation in December 2007 which was launched on April 10, 2008.

This Framework was created by the EC to “ensure that the way domestic election observers go about their work is consistent with internationally acceptable standards of election observation” and to strengthen the democratization process by, among other things, calming particularly the nerves of the public and opposition politicians distrustful of the government (EC Framework 2007: 7) The Framework thus sought to educate local observers and the public on what election observation entailed, what they were to observe, how observers were to act, gather facts, and interpret facts through report writing. Most importantly, the EC put a premium on accreditation of all observers, which had the effect of ensuring that no dubious or extremely partisan persons (including political party activists) engaged in election observation (EC Framework 2007: 15-16). In the June 3, 2008 issue of the Daily Graphic, the importance of election observation was underscored by Prof. Andrea de Guttry, who emphasized that election observation reinforces respect for human rights and prevents conflict.

Notably, presidential candidates of the major parties in 2008 generally had faith in the EC's independence and capability of overseeing another peaceful election (in spite of the bloated register).

For example, the presidential candidate of the CPP, Dr. Paa Kwesi Nduom, asserted that the EC was capable of steering the country away from the kind of election debacle that engulfed Kenya recently, and that “I have dealt with the EC in three elections and they are very independent” (Ghanaian Times, June 11, 2008: 13). Such confidence in the EC is a significant affirmation of the improvements made in the electoral process by the EC and Ghanaian civil society as a whole. Such diligence by electoral bodies and stakeholder consensus is hard to come by, the lack of which accounts for disputed and flawed elections in some African countries. The 2012 general elections in Ghana, however, flag problems and give additional food for thought regarding disputed elections and electoral bodies in Africa.

4.1. Update: The 2012 General Elections in Ghana

The 2012 general elections in Ghana, held in December 2012, have raised questions about the hitherto relatively clear record of independence and competence of Ghana's Electoral Commission. Ghana's general elections were held on Friday, 7 December, 2012 to elect a president and members of parliament in 275 electoral constituencies. Due to the breakdown of some biometric verification machines, some voters could not vote, and voting was extended to Saturday, 8 December 2012. The main candidates for the presidency were incumbent president John Dramani Mahama of the National Democratic Congress (NDC), his main challenger Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo of the New Patriotic Party (NPP) (a former foreign minister of the 2001-2008 Kuffuor-NPP government), and six other candidates. An important point of note is that John Mahama was elected after less than five months in office as president after succeeding President Prof. John Evans Atta Mills who died suddenly in office on 24th July, 2012.

Though the system for the presidential vote is basically a two-round system where a second round or run-off is legal if necessary, that is when no candidate is able to win 50% plus one of the vote, president John Mahama was declared winner of the election with 50.7% of the vote, negating the need for a run-off election. Nana Akufo-Addo received 47.74% of the vote, according to the EC's declaration of the results on the 9th of December, 2012. The opposition New Patriotic Party (NPP) alleged that the EC had tampered with results and that there were myriad irregularities and malpractices, and filed a petition at the Supreme Court to review the election results.

The election petition, with the NPP presidential candidate and his party taking the Electoral Commission and the NDC presidential candidate to the highest court of the land, was decided on 29th August, 2013. The verdict went in favor of the incumbent president, John Dramani Mahama of the NDC. The petitioners, led by Lawyer Philip Addison, requested that 3,931,339 of votes be annulled because there were violations and malpractices at 10,119 polling stations in the country. However, President Mahama's lawyer, Tony Lithur, insisted that the NDC presidential candidate won the presidential elections and that it was free and transparent, and there were no violations, irregularities or malpractices. There were three possible scenarios: the Supreme Court could either declare Nana Akufo-Addo the winner of the polls or order a re-run of the election at affected polling stations or state that even if those 'invalid' votes (if any) were to be annulled they were not enough to affect the outcome of the presidential polls, and therefore uphold the EC's declaration of President Mahama as the winner of the December 2012 presidential election (www.modernghana.com, August 29, 2013).

In the end the third scenario played out, as Justice William Atuguba, the president of the Bench, in his reading of the decision, concluded that the overall effect of the individual decisions of the nine justices was that the president was validly elected and that the 2012 election petition was dismissed. The nine justices unanimously dismissed the petitioners' claims relating to duplicate serial numbers, duplicate polling station codes, and unknown polling stations. Five justices dismissed the claims of over voting and claims relating to the absence of presiding officers' signatures, and six justices dismissed the claims relating to voting without biometric verification. While three other justices consistently upheld the petitioners' claims, this was not enough to overturn the election results.

In the course of the petition proceedings at the Supreme Court, the NPP produced more than 11,000 so-called "pink sheets" to the judges who compared them to similar papers from the EC, NDC and other parties. These pink sheets stated the results as counted in single polling stations, before aggregating them to any higher level - municipality, district and region. The NPP claimed that there were differences between the results as stated immediately after their counting in polling stations, and those which were used in aggregations, and that this could be proven by the pink sheets. In addition, the EC was challenged to prove that 14,000 expatriate Ghanaians had indeed voted abroad.

The EC failed to produce any registered voters in foreign countries due to the fatal work of a virus in its computer, according to EC officials. The election petition at the Supreme Court was deliberated upon by nine judges based on the evidence provided by the petitioners (NPP) and respondents (EC and President Mahama/NDC) (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/; retrieved 2th July, 2013).

For the first time ever, the EC held a biometric system of voter registration for the Ghanaian electorate from 24th March, 2012 to 5th May, 2012. The aim was to prevent double registration and to eliminate ghost names in the old register. In a controversial move, 45 additional constituencies were added to the 230 constituencies of the 2008 general elections a few months before the elections. Voting therefore took place in a total of 275 constituencies and 26,002 polling stations. As has been its practice since 2000, the Coalition of Domestic Election Observers (CODEO) trained election observers and deployed 4,000 of them to monitor the elections nationwide.

Observers from the ECOWAS Observer Mission led by former Nigerian president, General Olusegun Obasanjo, also monitored the elections. The ECOWAS Observer Mission noted the technical problems caused by faulty biometric machines but added that this did not undermine the fairness and transparency of the election.

The outcome of the December 2012 elections petition was significant in that it was the first time in the country's history that the Supreme Court had delivered a verdict on the fairness and legitimacy of contested general elections. The rule of law was taken very seriously by Ghanaians who patiently followed the law and allowed the procedure to play out in court per the 1992 constitution, rather than resort to violence and mayhem in the streets and towns and villages in Ghana. An important consequence of the 2013 election petition in Ghana must be noted: although the verdict seemed to exonerate the EC of deliberately rigging the elections for the incumbent party's candidate, its hard-won reputation of credibility and competence was seriously called into question, since there was still a sizeable section of the Ghanaian public that believed that the verdict was partial and sought to maintain the status quo of political power at all cost. The EC itself, contrary to the previous perceptions of it as a competent electoral body, seemed quite incompetent this time around due to the delays in voting, irregularities, and especially the breakdown of some biometric verification machines and inefficient operations of other biometric verification machines. An important development since the verdict is the increase in calls from the general public, especially from the major opposition NPP, its supporters and other opposition parties, for a re-organization of the EC in terms of leadership structure, the organization of elections, stricter oversight of elections equipment and of election officials. This should be taken seriously by the EC and the government in order to bring back the public's perception of the EC as a credible, transparent, and efficient electoral management body.

5. Conclusion

This article concludes with eight key recommendations. First, the need is underscored for the African Union (AU) to play a major negotiator role early (in the pre-electoral period, not after the elections alone) in situations of gross human rights abuse and clearly uneven electoral playing fields, and if need be, an interventionist role to serve as a deterrent to other African governments that may be tempted to go the Zimbabwe route. Second, elections in post-conflict countries such as Ivory Coast are especially challenging. Ideally, for such countries, disarmament and re-integration have to take place before elections. Such post-conflict countries are also challenged in terms of organization and funding for elections. Continued financial and logistical support of elections by the international community is therefore needed. The successful conclusion of November 2005 Liberian elections, although imperfect, can offer a blueprint for other post-conflict countries seeking to democratize.

Third, there is need for revamping of the electoral process itself in several African countries. The electoral environment itself must be open and peaceful to allow free campaigning by competing parties, with sharp crackdowns on political opposition and state-sponsored limitations on the competitive process becoming things of the past. Fourth, election management bodies must be independent of governments of the day and must be seen to be neutral, objective, and effective. Electoral commissions can consult and cooperate with political parties and commit to an open tallying process and rapid announcement of election outcomes that leave minimal room for doubt.

The judiciaries in African countries also need to be professional and independent of executive branches, and must be strengthened in their capacity to enforce the rule of law through adequate funding and logistics. Sixth, some state funding of political parties is warranted in order to even out the playing field to offset the incumbency advantage enjoyed by ruling parties.

African countries should at least have policies in place that give political parties the option to obtain or refuse state funding which could come independently from a Consolidated or Public Fund. Seventh, the creation of separate election courts to tackle election malpractices and disputes (Debrah 2008) promptly and special funds reserved for post-election disputes (discussion with Ayee, May 2008) may be crucial for nipping any post-election violence in the bud.

The final recommendation is that electoral commissioners of the various African countries should meet from time to time to exchange ideas and experiences, and thereby gain knowledge about how to run free and fair elections in their individual countries. These are some of the recommendations that could enhance the process of organizing elections in Africa, and thereby enhance the democratic transitions as well.

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