



Elections in Africa: half-full, half-empty?

by Cristina Barrios

It is common for Nigerians to say of their country that ‘the best is impossible but the worst will not happen’. This aphorism found expression in opposition candidate Muhammadu Buhari’s victory in elections which were widely considered free and fair. Buhari, who has just been inaugurated, is an army general with a track record marred by a *coup d’état* and period of authoritarian rule. But the violence and conflict that some thought would engulf Nigeria in the event of Buhari’s victory did not materialise.

Nigeria’s election was good news in a continent where authoritarian governance is still widespread, as the recent round of ‘elections’ in Sudan shows. In a sham contest bereft of any real opposition, President Bashir and his fifty-strong entourage cantered home, ensuring that his unchecked, repressive rule continues. Half-way through a year that many dubbed ‘a milestone for African elections’, the picture of the continent that emerges comes in different shades of grey.

A mixed picture

Two other recent elections in the Gulf of Guinea show a glass half-full at best. In late April, Togo returned President Gnassingbé yet again for a third term, thanks to his own amendment to the constitution that in the past had restricted a president’s tenure to two terms. Accusations of fraud surfaced and geographical and religious divides

widened in the course of the campaign. Yet stability and the absence of electoral violence can be chalked up as positive signs (in 2005 at least 500 people died during the riots that followed the announcement of Gnassinbe’s first victory).

In neighbouring Benin, parliamentary elections took place largely without incident, but deficiencies in the distribution of electoral cards and other technical difficulties triggered violent clashes. The presidential camp topped the polls again but fell short of an absolute majority, winning 33 seats out of 83. The consolidation of democracy in Benin now depends on stronger checks and balances between the judiciary, the National Assembly and the executive. The country’s fledgling democracy will undergo a crucial test in the presidential elections scheduled for 2016, in which President Boni Yayi has vowed not to take part.

In Ethiopia and Burundi, by contrast, the glass is definitely half-empty. Ethiopia, the continent’s second most populous country and a heavyweight in East Africa, held parliamentary elections on 29 May, with final results to be announced by 22 June. The People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front has been in power since 1991 and currently holds all but one of the 547 seats in parliament. Provisional counts now give the opposition over 100 seats, which is a sign of progress in the slow and tightly controlled ‘democratisation’ of the country. Ethiopia has been

praised for improvements in human development, but repression remains severe.

In Burundi, a major crisis erupted after President Nkurunziza announced his intention to run for a third term, which most observers believe to be a violation of the Arusha Peace Agreement from which the constitution arose. The aborted *coup d'état* that ensued and growing authoritarianism on the part of the regime bode ill for the forthcoming elections, which have now been postponed.

Can't do much about it...

The international community has been an observer rather than an actor in these elections. In more powerful countries, such as Nigeria and Sudan, the international community plays a marginal role. Both were dominated by internal dynamics and politics, and little or no influence was exerted from abroad.

In Nigeria, many now hope that President Buhari will engage more with the international community. This feeling is especially strong in West Africa, where peers expect his support and guidance in the fight against Boko Haram. Buhari addressed the G7 last week and held a regional summit in Abuja this week, so for now, it appears that he will be more enterprising than his predecessor.

Sudan continues to appear completely immune to Western criticism. Indicted by the International Criminal Court since 2009, Bashir may be an international pariah but he is still ready to put down protests, with live ammunition if necessary. Sudan joined the Saudi-led coalition which intervened in Yemen, but it is equally open to engaging with Iran. The West is now careful not to antagonise the regime, which is somewhat sheltered by Russia and China. Moreover, Sudan may also be able to exert precious influence over the evolution of Islamist movements in the region. The US and Europe have also refrained from criticising Ethiopia, a key ally for counter-terrorism efforts in Africa.

...won't do much about it

By contrast, in places where the international community has leverage and can exert its weight in domestic politics, no such restraint is visible. Togo offers a case in point: the UNDP local office and the EU delegation – together with the representations from France, Germany and the US – could engage in more fruitful dialogue because they are crucial partners in sponsoring Togo's development. In Benin, donors have given a vote of confidence – the US confirmed its programmes under the Millennium Challenge Account and the EU through its 11th

European Development Fund – though more could probably be done to improve governance, according to Transparency International and the World Bank's *Doing Business* index.

In Burundi, it is now clear that only the international community can defuse a charged situation, which is descending into ethnic and political violence. This is happening in a country where foreign donors have spent decades doing mediation, conflict resolution and peacebuilding work, and in a region where genocides have occurred. Recent announcements that military cooperation and aid (which amounts to over 50% of the country's national budget) will be frozen are likely to carry weight in future negotiations, but the suspension of mediation by UN Envoy Said Djinnit illustrates the persisting local and international tensions.

Overall, while rigid *quid pro quos* have long been taboo, due to accusations of double standards and limited effectiveness, there is still room for partnership consultations – as foreseen, for example, in article 96 of the Cotonou Agreement – and cooperation with civil society. Indeed, international leverage could be used with Guinea Bissau and Guinea Conakry, where the political situation is deteriorating. More nuance might be needed to keep Burkina Faso on track for a successful transition, and to accompany the Central African Republic from a critical to a stable condition. In all these cases, elections will shape the political environment in the coming months.

Yet, in this year of African elections, it is not the West's principles and policies which should be the focus. Rather, it is African opposition parties and civil society who will use the polls to open up windows of opportunity that can be used to contest domestic policies and attract international attention.

The call for the respect of the rule of law, accountability and the democratic process predominantly concerns the African Union (AU) and organisations such as the East African Community (EAC). The AU described the Ethiopian elections as 'calm, peaceful and credible', yet 'not necessarily free and fair'. Both the AU and the EAC have shown some resolve regarding Burundi, but their options are limited. If democracy takes deeper roots in Africa, these bodies may well place more confidence in elections and take on a bigger role. That, however, remains a big if.

Cristina Barrios is a Senior Analyst at the EUISS.

