

# The case against elections in Africa

Africa is now a continent of elections. Routine and regular, from east to west and north to south. This, of course, is scarcely unique to continent; rather, it is a global phenomenon. In the post-Cold War global era, national elections have become a standard norm, an accepted *modus operandi* for ostensibly granting voice to citizens and ensuring public accountability.

In principle, an electoral process is arguably the best way to determine who governs and represents the interests of the people. There is a problem though. Elections cannot take place in a vacuum, nor can they occur under any conditions or circumstances. There are prerequisites and necessary conditions for a meaningful and consequential election process.

For one, there has to be considerable elite consensus on the basic rules and laws that govern the political playing field. The absence of broad consensus, not necessarily agreement on every detail, means the losing side is bound swiftly reject the outcome especially for a country's topmost job. Writing and implementing rules for conduct of elections, and to underpin democratic institutions, must come out of national consultations and conversations, not superficially dictated and driven by external actors keen on propping up democracy.

What is more, to have meaningful elections, there has to be a sound and functional state that is bureaucratically robust and competent in performing critical public tasks. In other words, power and authority have to be organised, aggregated and assembled in an institutionally coherent and logical manner

before they can be competed for in the open market place of elections. No less significant, minimum social consensus built around shared ideals and aspirations is a key sine qua non for productive and progressive electioneering. This speaks to the question of shared national identity and horizontal comradeship. To put it in plain terms, elections without a state and a nation will almost always be doomed to cause more problems than they solve.

International advocates, activists and exporters of democracy who make the case for rushed elections in Africa often proceed from a flawed set of assumptions. They transpose to Africa, with utterly different environments, their thinking of and experiences about politics in Western societies. It has now become standard practice for regional and international inter-government organisations, domestic and international civil society groups, human rights advocacy organisations, donor agencies and western governments to demand that elections are immediately conducted in country X whenever there is change of government through a nondemocratic process. This is regardless of the conditions and the environment obtaining at the time.

The most recent case is that of Mali, quite instructive, where the military seized power in August last year. Until the coup in that country in March 2012, Mali had been heralded as a promising and consolidating African democratic state on account of its routine electoral cycles and peaceful transfers of government. Yet elections and changes of government in Mali did little to grow the country's quality of government and its capacity to provide critical public goods and services. Matters were compounded by an armed jihadist insurgency that took root in a large swath of the country.

Consequent to a dismal failure to fend off an insurgency that thrived in the shadows of an absentee state, in a dramatic turn of events and utter shock to outside observers, the military toppled the civilian government in Bamako. The usual calls for a return to civilian rule through elections

followed. Eight years later, in August 2020 came a repeat coup fuelled by a corrupt ruling elite and unending political standoff between opposition actors and the government of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita. The coup makers promptly promised to hold elections as the regional bloc, ECOWAS, threatened sanctions and the African Union suspended Mali from the continental body.

Since 1990, the African continent has had more than 500 national elections in all but a handful of countries. Between 1990 and 2015, according to Jaimie Bleck and Nicolas van de Walle in a [recent book](#), Africa had 184 multicandidate presidential elections and 207 multiparty legislative election in 46 countries. On average, every year there were at least seven presidential elections on the continent. Some scholars have argued that the frequency and routineness of elections has a [democratising effect](#). That is, however flawed and inadequate elections do bring about democratic consolidation by sowing and spread the seeds of democratic practice and behaviour among the citizenry and the political class. This of course depends on what exactly one means by democratization. As matters stand, it is hard to see how the frequency and flurry of elections has increased accountability and the quality government in most African states.

African citizens need and deserve accountable leadership, but not in the manner and form that conventional, liberal wisdom has tended to foist and front it even where conditions and circumstances are clearly unpropitious. For many who are keen on advancing the cause of stability and prosperity on the continent, it is long overdue to have a truly radical, pan-Africa rethink and to question the fetish of elections as vended and propagated by Western actors. This is especially urgent at a time when Western-style liberal democracy has stumbled into a deep crisis of its own in the face of elite capture of political processes and the brazen use of democratic institutions to defend not the common good for all

but the narrow interests of the top classes.

Parroting the routine rituals of elections without due consideration to the quality and credibility of those elections serves a perfunctory role. But it also does worse: it greatly undermines the quest for genuine democracy that is organically anchored and locally rooted. Because elections have been reduced to a routine ritual, regardless of the actual substantive effects on the quality and consequence of government, political elites and incumbents rulers across the continent have mustered the art of gaming electoral outcomes.

Democracy understood as the system that serves the will and interests of citizens remains an appealing form of government despite its innumerable flaws. Yet presenting democracy in monolithic and uniform terms, with a one-size-fits-all frame, is itself antidemocratic! For African countries still grappling with the difficult tasks of constructing functional states and building viable nations, the promise of democracy through elections is a far cry.