

*Review*

## **Elections and electoral processes in Africa: A gimmick or a curse?**

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**This paper seeks to highlight the controversial way elections have been held in some countries, which have led to the loss of confidence with the results, in some cases, the disputed elections has led to civil wars, re-run of the electoral process or the formation of coalitions. Election time on the African continent has therefore brought about anxiety to both the contesting political parties and the electorate. In the battle for political hegemony, pre- and post-electoral violence has become commonplace. But the most susceptible victims of the battle for political supremacy have been the electorate who are swayed left right and centre by completing political parties. The aftermath of most elections has left citizens licking their wounds as they take stock of the brunt of supporting what-ever political party of their choice. To avoid outright defeat, most ruling political parties have been able to manipulate both the vote and state security machinery to their advantage. Legislation governing the conduct of free and fair elections has not been of much use either as it has also been manipulated. This paper explores the vagaries associated with elections on the African continent. The paper utilises available debates to support the argument of cases of flawed electoral processes on the African continent.**

**Key words:** Voters, election malpractice, elections, Africa, electorates, Kenya, Zimbabwe, South Africa.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Elections in Africa are a time of despair for contesting candidates, but more so for the general citizenry whose efforts to seek new leadership for their respective countries have been a worthless effort in recent years. It is a time of anxiety for a number of stakeholders (Vorobyev, 2010:41). It is a time when incumbent political ruling elites take stock of what achievements they will have attained for the citizenry and a time of beckoning and wondering whether they will survive the electoral encounter (Masunungure, 2009:156). For the opposition, it is in most cases a time when they will need to prove during campaign that they can do better than the ruling party. It is also a time for the opposition to endure all that comes with an uneven political playing field such as harassment of opposition political leaders and their

members as well as the abuse of state machinery to further intimidate (and in some case, murder) supporters of opposition political parties (Melber, 2002:18). For the electorate, it is again a time when they have to be fed on a diet of lies, misconceptions and falsehoods akin to folktales (Hammar, 2008). For liberation war movements, it is a time when war time escapades are revealed to the populace (mostly figments of imagination) to impress upon the electorate and to remind them that political emancipation came at a price and should therefore not be handed over to opponents on a silver platter (Mapuva, 2010:472). This intimation is an indirect war cry by those whose liberation war credentials are constantly referred to during such times. In short, the time for elections is one of unpredictable events and a time when one

wonders whether he/she will see the next day (Mapuva, 2010:471). That is election time in Africa.

### ELECTIONS: A TERRIFYING PROSPECT

Elections, notably on the African continent have been associated with vote-buying, politically-motivated violence, mud-slinging as different political parties seek to outwit each other (Chikwanha and Masunungure, 2007:6). Most importantly the period of elections has been one of uncertainty characterised by harassment and intimidation of political opponents. In a media article entitled "*Elections in Africa: A terrifying prospect*" Duodu has presented the period of elections on the African continent as bringing with it prospects of intimidation, threats, uncertainty and possible death. It is this scenario which has portrayed elections on the African continent as a curse to the electorate and a gimmick played by politicians who seek to legitimise the illegitimate practice of coercing citizens into voting for them on the backdrop of rampant electoral rigging. All this is done for the sake of the international community as well as the donor communities who in most cases wish to certify the electoral results should have international standard of free and fair elections before they can recognise incumbent political leaders involved.

Even in established democracies such as the US, elections have been fraught with challenges and uncertainty. It is on this premise that a perception had been coined where it has been presented that there is no political event more dangerous than a general election (Duodu, 2010). Even in what are called the "mature democracies", elections bring out hidden weaknesses in a nation's structure that can be stretched to breaking point, and if wise counsel does not prevail, no one can predict what might happen. The best example of this sort of situation is the US presidential election of November 2000. The result was extremely close - George W Bush, the Republican candidate, beat his Democratic opponent, Al Gore, by only 0.5% of the votes - 48.4 against 47.9%. Such a close vote always brings allegations of hanky-panky. Speculation became rife over what might have been, had it not been for... What follows the "for" is anybody's game. In the US election under question, there were reports about votes disallowed because of "hanging chads" and "pregnant chads" implying that they were irregularities that were identified on the aftermath of the elections, some of which were ostensibly 'caused by faulty voting machines'. There were also allegations of fraudulent counting, and many other misdeeds amounting to electoral fraud. So emotionally charged became the atmosphere that even when the matter reached the US Supreme Court, not everyone was prepared to accept the Court's judgement - predictably given in favour of George W. Bush - as a genuine judgment based on legal argument, rather than as a partisan judgement rendered by

the court in line with the known political leanings of Supreme Court members. The US is one of the few democracies in which judges are openly branded as "conservative" or "liberal", and where these judges almost invariably satisfy the cynics by voting in precisely the fashion that it has been predicted they will vote! Fortunately for the US (and this is why it is called a "mature democracy") at the point where the very existence of the Supreme Court became threatened because of the tension created by what many considered to be the usurpation of the American people's democratically-delivered verdict by the court - or more exactly, the conservative members of the court who voted in favour of a Bush victory - the person who stood most to gain from an opposite decision by the Court, Al Gore, called off further challenges of the alleged electoral verdict. What could have happened if Gore had gone on with more legal and political challenges? In an "immature democracy", Kenya, on the other hand, a "minor" civil war did occur, when, in December 2007, election results were declared in a manner that the populace clearly thought was manipulated to favour the tribe of the incumbent president, [the Kikuyu] Mwai Kibaki, who was seeking re-election.

Several thousand people were killed in inter-ethnic fighting that arose out of the dissatisfaction with the election's results as declared (Lowy et al., 1985). Thousands more were chased out of their homes, and for a while, it looked as if Kenya would be permanently divided along ethnic lines. It is therefore not surprising that the way the elections were conducted was very sensitive such that the result led to squabbles. Certain areas became de facto no-go areas to certain ethnic groups. The bitterness caused by the few months following the election, will remain a psychological scar on the entire populace for at least a generation, as ethnic oral history is recounted *ad nauseam* by those who lost relatives, or were themselves injured, during the post-election maelstrom. The Kenya situation was repeated in Zimbabwe in March and June 2008, and nearly replayed in Ghana in December 2008 (USAID, 2010). Zimbabwe emerged from the near-civil-war of the election's aftermath with an uneasy coalition that looks as if it may not take the country into the next election (USAID, 2010).

And in Ghana, what saved the situation, after an extremely close runoff between two candidates, Professor John Evans Mills and Nana Addo Danquah Akufo-Addo was that the outgoing president, John Kufuor, had the prescience to conclude from what he was hearing on the ground that any prolongation of the tension created by the electoral result pull-and-stretch, might toss the nation/baby out with the presidential seat/bath altogether (Hammar, 2008:6). What would the anxious crowds all over Ghana who were cursing the Electoral Commission for delaying the results have done, if it had known then, what had happened in South Africa's election of 1994, when a computer hacker managed to alter the results of

the election and add millions of votes to the numbers cast for three parties of the hacker's choice? The near-disaster that would have blown up in South Africa had the hacking not been detected and corrected has just been revealed in a report published in the Johannesburg Sunday Times of October 24, 2010. The report tells the world for the first time that the much-hailed general election in South Africa in May 1994 - in which the African majority formed beautiful, peaceful queues to joyfully cast their votes for the very first time ever - was nearly ruined when a racist computer hacker was able to change the results of three of the minority parties that contested the election against the African National Congress (ANC).

## THE POLITICS OF ELECTIONS

It has been deliberated at various levels why some countries able to organise 'free and fair elections' while are not. On the same note, one needs to ask what constitutes a 'free and fair' election. Is a 'free and fair elections' simply the absence of obvious and overt rigging or a reflection of the maturity of the political institutions; or a process which is judged by the citizens to be fair, honest, and reflects the will of the people (Bracking, 2005:7). The importance of elections lies in their traditional importance and to some extent in the way they promote or truncate democracy (Bratton and Masunungure, 2008: 45). As a tool of democracy, elections should be the only basis for choosing a government or representatives of the people (Bratton, 2008:54). It appears that discussions about having free and fair elections always assume certain certainties enumerated as 'global norms' (National Development Institute, 2000).

But within these global norms, certain facts begin to emerge which are believed to be African specific (Chitiyo, 2009:125). The widely held assumption that conducting a 'free and fair elections' is tantamount to having a democratic system of government is sometime overstated and indeed, recent events have shown that this may not always be the case (Melber, 2002). Secondly, such discussions always tend to ignore economic and social factors such as economic mismanagement, levels of poverty; unemployment, ethnicity (tribalism) and why elections tend to widen, not bridge the ethnic divide in some African countries (e.g. Kenya in 2007; Ghana in 2008). However, the importance of conducting free and fair elections can never be overstated.

Elections are the basis of 'representative democracy' and one of the many, but acceptable means of choosing and deselecting leaders in a democratic society (Tendi and Alexander, 2009). In past and recent African history, elections have become the mechanism for the transition from colonial rule to independence. In the military dictatorships of West Africa, elections became the basis for transition from military to civilian rule. Even when regimes have come to power through armed struggle (as was the case in Rwanda, Angola, Mozambique and

Uganda to mention a few), elections are often used for legitimising the role of the victorious guerrilla army. It has always been perceived that an election with observers who give their seal of approval is always a 'successful one' (Chitiyo, 2009:126). But organising free and fair elections requires more than a mass of election observers, whose presence, though reassuring, could also be used to mask undemocratic and unfair results - as in the case of West African transitions from military dictatorships to civilian regimes.

Popular democracy must create the basis for frequent democratic ways of changing the political leadership of a country; the promotion of a democratic culture, based on tolerance and respect for diverse views and opinions. The popular will of the people, expressed through popular democracy must be the foundation of any political system built on the rule of law and respect for human rights. This requires the active and responsible role of civil society and other mass movements. Elections form a core component of such a democratic society, recognising that elections on their own do not lead to fundamental change, but are part of a process that will lead to the strengthening of national institutions and democratic processes (Dzenga et al., 2000:12). Elections are therefore important democratic processes.

## ELECTORAL POLITICS IN AFRICA<sup>1</sup>

This section of the paper extensively draws from Zaya Yeebo's deliberations on the need for strengthening electoral institutions and processes on the African continent. The African continent's impediment to the democratization process has been the disconnect and mistrust that exist between citizens and political leaders. Due to the unprecedented high levels of mistrust and as political leaders continue to cling to power, and threat to dislodge them has not been taken lightly. This has in most cases resulted in politicians applying every trick in the book to remain in power, even if it means killing perceived and real opponents, as well as conducting fraudulent elections. The end result has been the existence of a culture of fraudulent electoral politics that have tarnished the image of the continent. With a focus on the role of 'free and fair elections' in promoting democracy, Zaya Yeebo takes a look at how electoral politics are shaping up across Africa. Zaya further provides a critical analysis of electoral proceedings in countries like Zimbabwe, Ethiopia and South Africa, as a microcosm of what happens in many African states prior to and on the aftermath of elections to choose political leaders as well as their deteriorating governance styles. In Kenya, the flawed elections conducted in 2007 left a trail of disaster which manifested itself through ethnic clashes, leading to the death of over 1000 people. In

<sup>1</sup> Zaya Yeebo is programme manager for the UNDP Civil Society Democratic Governance Facility.

Zimbabwe, the 2008 elections were a watershed and an eye-opener of what transpires when political leaders sense defeat (Masunungure, 2009:154). Politically-motivated violence that characterised these elections led to about 500 confirmed deaths and numerous displacements. The institutionalisation of violence and the politicization of the administration led to delayed release of election results, with George Chiweshe - former head of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission simply sitting on results once it emerged that President Mugabe was losing the vote in 2008) (Mapuva, 2010; Makumbe, 2009). The important consideration for the state, the media, civil society and political parties is to work within an African framework, and for international supporters and interlopers to recognise the local reality, and not impose conditions based on geopolitical and economic interest" (Yeebo, 2009).

In modern democratic systems of representative governance, elections are periodic contests which determine the next set of rulers in a nation state. In many ways, the notion of a free and fair election is subject to numerous interpretations and like most political concepts is always contentious. In essence, elections should be held in an atmosphere which is 'free from the clouds of traditional claims to political legitimacy based on perceived roles played in the independence struggle' and by extension free from colonial underpinnings or used as a cover for the protection of colonial and neo-colonial interest.

### **PRACTICALITIES OF ELECTIONS IN AFRICA**

Once adopted on the continent, elections became common practice, but with different consequences. With colonization came liberation struggles in most African states after which political independence was attained. This usually led to the first colonial elections in which, blinded by euphoria of the post colonial era, citizens voted with their feet more than with their minds. Lewis (1994:299) has argued that "...more than three dozen African countries long characterized by authoritarian rule have undergone political liberalization or transfer of power through competitive elections". This blind allegiance soon came to pass as liberation heroes of the continent committed most of their time in corrupt practices, resulting in loss of trust from the electorate. And at election time, they found themselves faltering and failing to secure additional tenure from the electorate. This has led to flawed electoral practices, commonly known as electoral rigging, a practice which has taken the continent by storm in recent times. The aftermath have seen other factors such as ethnicity re-surfacing as defeated political leaders fail to contend with the idea of reverting to being ordinary citizens. For political survival, in the face of imminent defeat, most political leaders have resorted to inciting violence, like what happened in Kenya in the aftermath of elections in 2007 in which close to 1000 lives were lost in

the politically-motivated violence that ensued. A replica of the story occurred in Zimbabwe almost at the same time when the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU PF), which has ruled the country for over three decades stirred defeat in the face. To avoid further bloodshed, a notorious arrangement was mooted-government of national unity (GNU) which pitted winners alongside losers within the same political formation, ironically in the Zimbabwean case, with the losers wielding more political power than the winners. In Madagascar, the then president Ravalomanana trounced Didier Ratsiraka resulting in a power struggle between the two. In Ivory Coast, a similar fate awaited Larrent Gbagbo who disputed his electoral defeat at the hands of Allasante Outtara whose electoral victory was confirmed by the international community as well as the African Union and the United Nations. In this latter case, the result was disastrous for Gbagbo, after a concerted effort by various military forces, was eventually arrested.

Elections have also been averted in most African counties as incumbent leaders have skirted or avoided them as a way of remaining in power. This has fanned winds of change which, as events in North Africa showed, are unstoppable. Tired of political leaders clinging to power for far too long with no signs of elections in sight, citizens of various countries, notably those in the African Arab world took it upon themselves and demanded political change. The fraudulent elections that were held in Egypt, the fraudulent elections that were held in the North African country did not go down well, resulting in mass protests against Mubarak's three decades in power eventually succeeded in ousting him from power. A similar scenario had played in Tunisia where Bin Ali was booted for having been in power for a long time without caring to ascertain his acceptability from the people of Tunisia through an election. Similar protests have also surfaced in countries like Libya, Bahrain, Yemen, Syria and indications are that there is simmering discontent in many other countries against their respective leaders who either tamper with the constitution to remain in power or avoid elections altogether. All these events are an indication that people are craving for changes and whether the incumbent political leaders suggest an elections, but the bottom line is that their people are fed up with them are want them to go. Unfortunately, many of these political leaders have cases of gross human rights violations and crimes against humanity starring them in the face.

### **ETHNICISATION OF ELECTORAL POLITICS IN AFRICA**

Africa is fraught with multi-ethnicity, a factor that has impacted on the conduct of free and fair elections on the continent. Most of the civil wars on the African continent are ethnic in nature, a factor with is carried to election

days when one ethnic group wants to lord it over other ethnic groups. Additionally, the political economy of African states, particularly, their colonial origins can provide a window to understanding why Africa is prone and vulnerable to elections malpractice and disputes (Brandt and Turner, 2003:26). There is sometimes a conscious attempt to deny the impact of colonialism and now neo-colonialism in certain events in Africa (Brandt and Turner, 2003:26). Elections cannot be one of them. Electoral politics in post-colonial African states is very much linked to the character of the post-colonial state as the basis for the primitive accumulation of capital and for amassing economic power and wealth (Chikwanha and Masunungure, 2007:5). In other words, the character of the post-colonial African state encouraged a winner takes all mentality to competitive electoral politics and by extension, the violation of the rules of democratic engagement, particularly political succession. The ethnicisation of politics in Africa has also contributed largely to the above.

In the anti-colonial struggle, ethnicity became an important factor as the colonial elite from different ethnic groups jostled for power and influence through anti-colonial independence movements (Birch, 2007). As colonial edifices collapsed, some politicians and activists found comfort as tribal warlords, with no discernable ideas about nation building, except to protect the land, economic resources and power they either grabbed or inherited from the departing colonial power (Human Rights Watch, 2011). Reflecting on this view "...ethnic followers vote along ethnic lines, believing that their *sons and daughters* can best act as gate keepers to protect their ethnic interests, if they are voted into power" (Bratton, 2008).

Ethnicity has been a key driver in elections with political leaders whipping up ethnic emotions among the electorate thus being the precursor to violence. This situation is not endemic to Kenya. Indeed, it is an African problem. Ethnic conflicts have played themselves in various forms in countries such as Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ghana, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Uganda and Sudan. What most conflicts in Africa illustrate is the character of neo-colonial state as one dominated by the largest ethnic groups, allowing these groups to use resources and sometimes state power to disadvantage their opponents opposition political parties.

## **POVERTY AND ELECTIONEERING**

Democracy is said to be expensive business, and nowhere is this reflected more than at election time. Elections are expensive; both at the level of maintaining democratic electoral management institutions and supporting political parties. In situations of severe poverty and deprivation as witnessed in Africa, individuals also become susceptible to manipulation and fall prey to financial inducements from politicians. Undoubtedly,

poverty makes the electorate susceptible to monetary influences and therefore remains a severe impediment to organising free and fair elections in Africa. This is also related to the high cost of electioneering on the continent and elsewhere. Both the cost of maintaining the electoral administration and high cost of electioneering are impediments to free and fair elections. Related to this factor is illiteracy, which poses its own problems. For instance, how are the electoral regulations or the use of ballot papers explained to illiterate voters?

In short, the limitations, imperfections of electoral administration must be realistically set against the problem of underdevelopment and the economic crisis of the state. In general, however, geopolitical considerations can also influence the perceptions of an election as being free and fair. For instance, the 2008 elections in Ghana were organised within the shadows of monumental flaws in Nigeria, Zimbabwe and Kenya, and political upheavals in Guinea and Mauritania. However, the Zimbabwean case became most outstanding, given the length of time it took to release the election results, the violence that ensued prior to and on the aftermath of the election, and most importantly, a thinly-veiled coup that saw the defeated refusal to relinquish power, opting to arm twist the victors—the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) into a government of national unity (GNU). What has even been disappointing in the latter case is the continued perpetration of politically-motivated violence against the civilian population for having shown sympathy with the MDC and showing disregard and 'disrespect' for ZANU PF, a liberation movement that liberated the country from colonialism in 1980. The need for an African success story means that similar flaws in any African country should be curtailed. Consequently, what Africa needs is a system where regional and international communities are mandated to supervise national elections whether the country's leaders approve such an arrangement or not, with the UN having the authority to enforce such provisions.

It has always been common practice that international observers and monitors are called upon by countries holding elections to help legitimising the electoral process and the subsequent winners, provided the ruling elites approve of such involvement of these international organisations. It does not therefore suffice that the onus rests with countries holding elections to choose to invite international observers or not. It should therefore be made mandatory by the international community that international and non-aligned organisations come to observe elections, if there is to have a semblance of being free and fair.

## **Institutional mechanisms and electoral management bodies**

For a nation or government to organise free and fair elections, certain institutional mechanisms should be in

place (Duodu, 2010). Political architecture and institutional support ensures that citizens are free to elect and be elected under rules and regulations that are clear to all contesting parties, that political parties are not only aware of these rules, but willing to abide by them in the spirit of democratic elections and fair play (Hammar, 2009:52). Some of the institutional and political mechanisms involve the establishment of independent (and non-partisan) electoral institutions that seek to preside over free and fair electoral processes. The role of Independent Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) or Electoral Commissions is crucial to the outcome of an election as these electoral bodies derive their powers and mandate from the national constitution (Makumbe, 2009:156). This will include administering and implementing laws regarding the registration of voters; overseeing the actual conduct of elections, supervising the ballot and the count; promoting transparency at all levels and being accountable to the public and parliament where one exists (Makumbe, 2009; Mapuva, 2010). The EMB should also actively advocate the open participation by all political parties and the public; and provide voter information and civic education to raise awareness of electoral laws and governance issues to help the populace make an informed choice.

But most important of all, its role is to ensure that elections are conducted in conformity with the laws of the country. In Africa, overwhelming evidence points to the fact that elections run by independent electoral bodies are more successful, and the results respected. In countries where election results have been respected the state has ceded greater responsibility to the electoral administration such as the Electoral Commission in Ghana. In the same way, in the absence of administrative clarity and the political will on the part of the Electoral Commission (EC) to enforce the rules, elections results will always be viewed with suspicion by the populace. In such an atmosphere, groups who feel swindled and abandoned by the electoral process will resort to non-democratic forms of protests.

### **CIVIL SOCIETY AND CIVIC EDUCATION IN ELECTORAL PROCESSES**

The role of civic education in promoting a free and fair election cannot be downplayed. Democracy requires informed participation of the electorate, but before this can happen, and to lessen conflict and confusion about the democratic process, citizens must remain informed and engaged. The electorate in any given situation needs knowledge, information and understanding of the competing political forces to make informed decisions about policy choices and avenues to voice their concerns. Civic education is the process by which the public is made aware of social and political rights and responsibilities, as well as the principles and practices of action. Civic

education is used to create awareness of the various issues posed by politicians and candidates during an election, but more than that, it empowers voters and community actors with the tools, information, mobilisation skills and understanding of the political dynamics necessary to influence change during the electoral process? In some countries, this role is reserved for government-approved institutions with the mandate to provide impartial civic education and awareness to the general public (e.g. Ghana), in others, this role is reserved for the Electoral Commission (e.g. Kenya).

Civil society organisations also provide civic education to large segments of the population using various creative methodologies. Civic education enables various interest groups - both state and non-state actors - to engage in a non-partisan education of voters using various methodologies, ranging from seminars and discussions to plays, poetry and drama. Civic education creates awareness of the electoral process, allowing political parties and competing candidates to set out their policies, thereby helping the electorate to make an informed choice? Elections remain the key avenues for changes of the guard. But this requires an institutional framework within the context of the country in question. Sometimes, 'global norms' are not enough and can overlook local realities. The important consideration for the state, the media, civil society and political parties is to work within an African framework, and for international supporters and interlopers to recognise the local reality, and not impose conditions based on geopolitical and economic interest (Pamabuzuka News, 2010).

In addition to the institutional mechanisms for managing elections, civil society organisations - here defined to include non-governmental and faith organisations, trade unions - play a very significant role in promoting free and fair elections. For example, in the period leading to an election, they provide civic education, creating awareness of the democratic and electoral processes and sometimes in reassuring a restive public. In recent elections in Kenya, civil society has led the advocacy for electoral reform, arguing for more effective mechanisms to ensure free and fair elections. Kenya civil society continues to engage with democratic institutions to advocate for mechanisms for a free and fair elections.

During an election, civil society continues to play this role as elections observers and/or monitors, ensuring that rules laid down by the electoral body are followed, and that the election meets local and international standards of objectivity and fairness. In most countries, civil society organisations are active in pre-election periods, when they undertake civic education, promote awareness of the electoral process and promote public debates between candidates - government and opposition.

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### **LEGITIMISING FREE AND FAIR ELECTORAL PROCESS THROUGH ELECTION OBSERVATION**

Election observers are a key element to the fostering of a legitimate electoral process. And can election observers divorce themselves from dominant political parties or conduct themselves in a non-partisan way? Additionally, to what extent are election observers key to a 'free and fair election'? To respond to these and other questions, one needs to explore the environment in which the elections are located. Building opposition politics on the African continent has proven immensely difficult largely because of the oppressive nature of most post-colonial states and the extremely difficult structural conditions under which opposition forces have to mobilise and

reproduce their support (Guess, 2009:14). In countries that have undergone an extensive liberation struggle, such as Zimbabwe in Southern Africa, the development of opposition politics presents specific challenges (Matlosa, 2005:54). In particular, the strong legacy of legitimacy enjoyed by former liberation movements and their capacity for revived nationalist mobilisation have presented opposition forces with immense obstacles in developing alternative programmatic positions (Makumbe, 2009:145). Moreover, the often-repressive nature of post-colonial states, compounding the longer repressive histories of colonial politics, has presented democratic forces with few precursors of alternative democratic forms (Mapuva, 2010:467). These obstacles must be set within the context of a global political environment that presents strong structural limits on the positioning of post neo-liberal alternatives. It is therefore not surprising that civic and opposition forces on the continent generally and in Southern Africa in particular have struggled to locate themselves firmly within the historical legacies and contemporary demands of their particular national contexts.

In most cases, it is acknowledged that the sole purpose of election observation is firstly, to help reduce irregularities, and also offer impartial advice to election officials where necessary. Some election observers have stayed within these professional boundaries. As the Kenya Domestic Observation Forum (KEDOF) report noted: 'Election observers are not supposed to interfere in the electoral process and have no authority to change, improve or correct any shortcomings, or to request changes during the election process'. Thus, 'observer missions are, strictly speaking, mandated to collect verify information concerning the election process, to analyse the observations and then, after the elections, to publish their findings'. In Zimbabwe, civil society organisations, notably the Zimbabwe Election Supervisory Network (ZESN) a consortium of pro-democracy civil society groups, have endeavoured to seek for the conduct of free and fair elections through assuming the election monitoring role and has been active in discrediting and elections that they perceived to have been flawed. Similarly, in various African countries, such electoral bodies have been visible but their efforts have been compromised by politicians who have sought to politicise and in some cases, militarise such bodies through staffing them with military personnel in civilian clothes.

Allowing observers to monitor an election has become part of the accessory of any election. An election where these observers are barred is considered fraudulent from the beginning. The activities of these supposedly 'neutral' election monitors have become an important part, first as a way of validating an election, and secondly, as a legitimising exercise. In Africa, no election is thought to be free and fair without a horde of foreign election observers. There are two types of election monitors: international and domestic. International election observers or monitors usually comprise international organisations,

regional organisations (e.g. Africa Union), and international organisations (e.g. the Commonwealth) groups outside the host nation. The role of international election observers or monitors was given a boost by the United Nations when in October 2005, the UN international democracy organisations signed on to the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation.

This declaration encourages countries to allow for both international and domestic election observation. In most African elections, the presence of international observers reassures the weak opposition and politicians that the process will be free and fair. A review of the Ghana elections of 2008, noted: 'The large and visible presence of foreign media, and diverse groups of international observers including the EU, the Carter Centre, the Africa Union, the Pan African Parliament the Commonwealth and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) contributed to increased public confidence in the process as well'. The role of foreign observers has been usually complemented by domestic elections observers. Domestic observers also play a similar role. In the 2008 general elections in Ghana, and the 2007 elections in Kenya, local election observers contributed immensely to managing peaceful elections.

But more than that, those observers can help to reduce or deter fraudulent election practices. Domestic election observers usually involve non-governmental organisations. Domestic election observers have a longer history of election observation in Africa than international observers. In South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana and Senegal, domestic observers have been essential to successful elections. Experience in Africa and Asia has demonstrated that domestic election monitors have certain advantages over their international counterparts. In both Kenya and Ghana, and to some extent in Zimbabwe, domestic organisations are rooted in the society, have a longer history of engagement and have cultural advantages (e.g. language) over their international counterparts, most of whom tend to be election junkies or tourists. Domestic election observers also have the advantage of lessons learned over a long period of time.

## CONCLUSION

Based on what has been discussed in this paper, free and fair elections on the African continent continue to present numerous challenges. But the most victims in the ensuing scenario are the electorate who are not only presented with electoral environments not conducive to the conduct of free and fair elections, but either end up being targeted as voters bent on regime change. Additionally, in recent times, the electorate has been faced with prospects of being 'given' political leaders that they will not have voted for, through the government of national unity (GNU), a sinister political arrangement that pits electoral winners with those who will have lost the

election. What further insinuates the electorate is the prospect of having to face those political leaders who they will have voted out of office. What of the vindictiveness of being voted out of office by an electorate that seeks to transform the political landscape? As a result, the African political landscape, fraught with irregularities as it is, will continue not only to short-change the electorate, but cheat them out of their political choices. Electoral observers, powerless as they are, have not helped the situation either, except to make recommendations which are in most cases binding and are ignored by political parties. Unless and until recommendations of election observers are taken seriously, electoral processes on the African continent will continue to be manipulated and trampled upon by powerful politicians.

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