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# Democracy and Elections in Africa

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## Recent Trends and the Role of the International Community

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## Introduction

When an election in Africa draws international attention, the news is seldom good: elections in Kenya, for example, fueled violence that left 1,500 dead and 300,000 displaced, while elections in Zimbabwe suffered from massive fraud and brutal suppression. Accordingly, Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, former Chairman of the African Union, suggested last year that multiparty democracy in Africa can only lead to bloodshed—even some supporters of democracy in general agree that most African countries are not ready for elections.

Recent headline-grabbing electoral failures, however, do not justify abandoning efforts at developing electoral democracy in Africa. Although elections are often marred by fraud or incompetence and do sometimes result in violence, no other means have brought about nonviolent transitions of power with the same consistency. Most Africans agree—according to a 2005 Afrobarometer survey, 60 percent of Africans believe democracy is preferable to all other forms of government. Even in the countries that have suffered most from failed or flawed elections—or even from the failure to hold elections entirely—the people have responded not by abandoning democracy but by increasing their demands for accountability and reform.

Indeed, the very purpose of elections is to achieve participatory governance without violence—through political rather than physical competition—and this has succeeded in a number of African countries. South Africa and Botswana, for example, have proven themselves among the continent’s most stable democracies, while Ghana, Mali, and Benin have emerged as democratic strongholds in West Africa. Moreover, countries such as Sierra Leone and Liberia, among the poorest in the world and only recently emerged from civil war, have demonstrated the power of elections to foster and solidify peace.

In reality, then, Africa’s experience with electoral democracy has been mixed: progress has been made, but challenges remain. The various elections in the past several years—from Kenya and Zimbabwe to Ghana and Sierra Leone—have become historical landmarks for different reasons, varying drastically in their conduct and outcome. This mix of electoral experiences has generated considerable debate and passion on the subject of transparent, free, and fair electoral processes among election stakeholders, especially as democratic progress itself can come with further challenges; as more elections are held, and as these elections become increasingly competitive, one-party and military regimes face potentially destabilizing challenges that could increase the risk of fraud and violence.

It is thus difficult to identify a general trend in elections for the continent as a whole. In the broadest of terms, Sub-Saharan Africa is certainly more democratic and holds more free and fair elections today than several decades ago, but gains in some countries have been offset by losses in others, while a number have remained democratically stagnant since independence. Therefore, to understand recent trends in African elections, it is helpful to examine individual countries along with those others that have shared similar experiences and will thus face similar challenges and opportunities in the coming years. These various electoral experiences can serve as positive examples or critical warnings to other

countries in Africa and can help the international community, including the United States, more effectively engage with elections across Africa by learning from past failures and successes.

Despite the importance of elections, President Barack Obama was right when he remarked in Ghana that democracy “is about more than just holding elections.” To be a genuine representative democracy, a country must go beyond holding free and fair elections. Democracy requires good governance, which prevails when government officials efficiently and transparently manage public institutions so as to address citizens’ concerns. Democracy also requires rule of law, including judicial independence and enforcement; a transparent, accountable, and open government; and freedom from corruption. Moreover, representative democracies must include the voices of all citizens, particularly through the engagement of civil society organizations and the media, and be populated by citizens who know their rights and responsibilities. In order for all these conditions to be met, democratic governments must respect basic human rights, such as freedom of speech and assembly, without which democracy cannot thrive.

While these conditions are nominally independent of elections, elections represent an essential piece of the democratic process and serve as means to these ends—while elections do not guarantee democratic progress, they tend to advance the overall goals of democracy. For example, elections discourage mismanagement and corruption by holding leaders accountable for their actions, and democratically elected governments are far more likely to uphold human rights and serve the basic needs of their people. Moreover, elections, oftentimes even if flawed, help to motivate citizens to engage with their government and become more involved in the democratic process, as well as to increase citizens’ understanding of democratic principles and processes.

Elections are not only integral to all these areas of democratic governance, but are also the most visible representations of democracy in action. They are also, in most cases, the most complicated and expensive single event a country will ever undertake. The attached list of African elections in 2010 reveals how many of these complicated and expensive events are scheduled to take place in 2010 alone. Thus while support to all aspects of democratic governance is crucial, particularly fostering good governance, upholding rule of law, and supporting civil society, this testimony examines all these areas in the context of elections. International support to electoral processes is crucial if democracy is to continue developing on the continent, and each country can benefit from such support, regardless of where it stands in the democratic spectrum. What follows is an overview of democratic and electoral trends in Africa, as well as considerations and recommendations as to how the United States and other members of the international community can productively support democracy and elections in a variety of contexts.

## About IFES

The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) is an independent, nongovernmental organization providing support to electoral democracy. Through field work, applied research, and

advocacy, IFES strives to promote citizen participation, transparency, and accountability in political life and civil society. Since its founding in 1987, IFES has worked in over 100 countries worldwide, including over 15 in Sub-Saharan Africa. IFES currently has programs in Burundi, the DRC, Guinea, Liberia, Rwanda, Sudan, and Togo, as well as a program with the African Union, all detailed in the attached document about IFES's programs in Africa.

Almami Cyllah has nearly 30 years of experience in democracy development, conflict resolution, political affairs, and human rights advocacy. He has worked at IFES for the past nine years, currently as Regional Director for Africa and, before that, as Country Director in both Haiti and Liberia. He spent 12 years at Amnesty International, where he was in charge of African Affairs. Mr. Cyllah also served as Election Commissioner in Sierra Leone's Interim National Electoral Commission (INEC) for two years leading into the general elections of 1996. His work and travels have brought him to every country in Sub-Saharan Africa.

## Key Recommendations of IFES

### Foreign Policy

First are recommendations as to how the United States and other members of the international community should approach elections in terms of foreign policy—how to encourage free and fair elections and discourage movement away from democracy:

- **Allow no country a free ticket to forego democracy:** Democratic governance and free and fair elections are human rights and are enshrined as such in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Every country should guarantee its citizens these rights, and there is no acceptable excuse for failing to do so. The international community should thus increase pressure for free and fair elections in all countries.
- **Take a strong stance against democratic setbacks:** If rulers abolish term limits, coup leaders overthrow elected rulers, and political leaders orchestrate election violence without consequences, such transgressions are likely to continue. The international community must condemn attempts to undermine democracy and punish their perpetrators.
- **Do not rush countries to elections after conflicts:** Although elections play a critical role in building legitimate governance following conflict, countries still reeling from civil war should not be rushed to hold elections before they are ready. Elections should not be held until at least two years after a conflict to allow a country to regain stability, begin electoral preparations, and develop the capacity to hold elections.
- **Reward democratic progress:** The international community should commend and reward countries that progress along the road toward democracy. Less democratic countries must see the benefits of moving away from autocracy.

### Electoral Assistance

Second are recommendations as to how the United States and other international donors can most effectively provide support to elections:

- **View elections as processes, not events:** IFES upholds that elections do not begin and end on election day. Too often, international support spikes just before an election and plummets immediately afterward. Such short-term support discounts the advanced planning and complex activities that must begin years before an election and ignores the importance of post-election support to reform and capacity building. Long-term support to the electoral cycle as a whole, bridging the gap between elections, will result in more successful elections and greater local capacity to run future elections.
- **Transfer capacity to local electoral institutions:** Related to the above, support to elections should focus not solely on ensuring the success of an election or elections but on ensuring a country's electoral institutions have the capacity to manage future elections on their own. Without such transfer of capacity, elections will falter once international support begins its inevitable decline.
- **Promote efforts to prevent, mitigate, and prevent election violence:** Election violence has proven one of the most serious threats to democracy in Africa and will only become a more serious problem as elections become increasingly competitive and contentious in the coming years. Numerous avenues of support can help reverse this trend. For example, because a well run election is less likely to result in violence, the international community must promote the development of independent, impartial, upright, accountable, transparent, and capable election management bodies. At the same time, it must build the capacity of local civil society groups to continuously monitor, prevent, and mitigate election violence throughout the electoral process. To prevent election violence from emerging in the first place, the international community must also support the strengthening of election complaint and adjudication mechanisms.
- **Support all elections, but tailor the approach to the specific context:** Even if not entirely free and fair, the mere process of holding an election can help lay the foundation for democracy. Even in the most unlikely places, targeted support tailored to the specific political context can improve this electoral process, facilitating a gradual move toward genuine democracy.
- **Do not prematurely end support to elections:** Elections are extremely complicated and expensive, and substantial international support over several electoral cycles is necessary before any country is ready to manage elections on its own. This is particularly true in post-conflict countries, where electoral support should continue at least through the second and third post-conflict elections. A lack of long-term commitment can seriously undermine democratic gains.
- **Support regional organizations promoting democracy:** Some regional organizations, such as the African Union, are beginning to develop mechanisms to promote democracy on the continent. The international community should provide support to the development of such mechanisms, which allow Africans to share electoral experience among themselves and coordinate electoral support.

## Trends in African Elections

## 1. Continued Use of Elections to Legitimize Autocratic Regimes

The concept of elections has become so globally predominant that almost all countries hold elections for at least some level of political office. This is certainly true for Sub-Saharan Africa, where nearly every country includes a mandate for national elections in its legal framework. Many of the countries holding elections, however, fall far short of representative democracy. Elections often serve as mere charades to legitimize rulers or regimes in the eyes of the international community and their people. Elections held for this purpose are almost guaranteed from the outset to be neither free nor fair.

### Legitimizing the Status Quo

Overall, nearly ten countries in Sub-Saharan Africa have had the same ruler for over 20 years. Most have held elections at some point in time during these rulers' tenures, and these elections have invariably resulted in lopsided incumbent victories. These victories are achieved in any number of ways, whether by suppressing or banning opposition parties, acting in such a way that opposition parties boycott the election altogether, monopolizing state resources or media, intimidating voters, or conducting outright fraud.

For example, Equatorial Guinea's President Teodoro Obiang Nguema has been in power for more than 30 years, having deposed his uncle in 1979, making him the longest serving ruler in Sub-Saharan Africa and one of the longest serving in the world. President Nguema won elections in 1996, 2002, and 2009, each time with around 97 percent of the vote. This latest election, like those held before, was largely boycotted by opposition parties, which have refused to accept the results. The government has achieved such wide victories through a variety of means, including suppressing opposition parties, exploiting state media, manipulating results, and constraining international observers. A number of additional countries, including Burkina Faso and Cameroon, face comparable situations.

Some other countries, wary of the challenges to the status quo that elections could engender, have avoided holding elections altogether, promising to hold them but repeatedly pushing back the scheduled date. Côte d'Ivoire, for example, has postponed its elections countless times; originally scheduled to take place as early as 2005, these elections have been delayed again and again, most recently postponed in November 2009 to mid 2010.

In all likelihood, most of these countries will not experience political change or viable elections in the near future—perhaps not until the death of their current rulers and possibly not even then. The death of Gabon's President Omar Bongo after 42 years in power, for example, led to the election of his son in a vote overshadowed by accusations of fraud and violence. It may take dramatic events, such as the 2007 elections in Zimbabwe, for the forces of change to gain momentum, and one can witness in Zimbabwe how hard the defenders of the status quo will fight to halt any momentum gained.

This determination to hang on to power is usually driven by these leaders' total dependence on state power and the access to economic wealth and social dominance this power provides. When poverty and marginalization increase, however, political opposition strengthens, threatening incumbents' rule. Under such conditions, incumbent rulers often use the electoral process to hang on to power, while the

opposition mounts movements to displace these rulers. The antagonism and animosity during these competitive periods are transferred and superimposed on the electoral process, as longtime incumbent leaders who fear losing power become even more determined to hang on.

In countries such as these, therefore, international involvement may seem fruitless or even counterproductive. How can the international community engage governments that lack the will to hold free and fair elections? If an election is doomed from the outset, might international involvement beyond election observation serve only to lend credibility where it is least deserved? These are critical and sensitive questions, and foreign policy priorities, as well as distribution of limited resources, are certainly relevant factors. Moreover, many such countries may not be receptive to international involvement in their domestic political affairs. These democracies-in-name-only, however, should not be completely overlooked solely based on these concerns. While direct budgetary support to elections would, needless to say, be counterproductive, targeted international assistance can still be of value, and no country should be allowed a free ticket to forego democracy.

First, although uncommon and rarely resulting in regime change, relatively free and fair elections can occur even in states not generally regarded as democratic. These elections tend to occur in single party–dominant states where the incumbent regime does not fear losing power. For example, the 2008 legislative election in Angola, where President José Eduardo dos Santos has been in power for over 30 years, was considered relatively free and fair, notwithstanding the considerable benefit the ruling party derived from its position of incumbency.

Moreover, this election, which IFES supported through critical technical assistance to Angola’s National Election Commission, was itself intrinsically valuable. According to some recent studies, the mere act of holding elections, even if not entirely free and fair, can lay the foundation for developing a democratic tradition; in going through the motions of voting, voters develop a greater understanding of the process and become better prepared to advocate for and participate in free and fair elections in the future. In the case of Angola, the 2008 election also helped develop a tradition of peaceful elections, especially important considering that the previous election had sparked a return to civil war. In this sense, then, even elections in relatively autocratic states can have some intrinsic value.

Second, in addition to supporting the electoral management process, or where working directly with the government in support of elections is not possible or desirable, the international community can focus its energies instead on other electoral stakeholders, including civil society and the media. These groups should play a central role in the electoral process of any country, but they become even more important where resistance to free and fair elections is strongest or where years of suppression have left them weak and disorganized. International support to these stakeholders can develop the voices of those advocating and fighting for legitimate electoral democracy. In addition to these groups, support should target the population at large through civic and voter education and other awareness programs that contribute to the building of a democratic culture.

Finally, to address the problem at its core, the international community, especially regional organizations in Africa, must strongly discourage rulers from extending or eliminating presidential term limits. States that allow their presidents to remain in power for decades or for life invariably move away from democracy toward autocracy. Recent developments in this area are encouraging, as, for example, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) suspended Niger from its membership and imposed sanctions after President Tandja Mamadou held a referendum allowing him to stay in power beyond the legal limit of two terms. Such strong responses from the international community can help discourage continued democratic regressions in the future.

### **Legitimizing Illegal Transitions of Power**

Related to the use of elections to legitimize the status quo but with its own unique problems is the use of elections to legitimize rulers or regimes that have come to power illegally or violently. Since 2008 alone, Africa has witnessed successful coups d'état in Mauritania, Guinea, Madagascar, and Niger. Following each of these coups, the coup leaders immediately and repeatedly promised elections, seeking to legitimize their rule. In Mauritania, this election occurred less than a year after the coup, resulting in the victory of the coup leader amid accusations of fraud by opposition parties. In Guinea, the assassination attempt against the coup leader has resulted in a transfer of power and elections scheduled for June and July 2010. In Madagascar, the coup leader has tentatively set an election for October 2010, 19 months after the coup, while talk of elections is ongoing in the wake of the February 2010 coup in Niger.

As most recently demonstrated by the post-coup election in Honduras, elections such as these pose a considerable diplomatic challenge to the international community. How can the United States and other countries approach these elections so as to ensure they are free, fair, transparent, and peaceful without legitimizing the violent takeover?

In spite of promised elections, the international community must take a strong and unified stance against coups d'état and other illegal transfers of power to discourage them from the outset, regardless of the circumstances under which they occur. Regional organizations have a particularly crucial role to play in this respect and, promisingly, have begun taking on this role. ECOWAS, for example, has suspended Guinea from its membership and imposed sanctions, while the African Union expelled Guinea, Madagascar, and Niger and imposed sanctions on all three countries following their coups. The United States should support the strong actions of these regional organizations and itself continue to take a strong stance against any illegal transfers of power.

When coups lead to elections, however, the international community should not forsake these elections any more than elections in other difficult political contexts such as described previously. While returning to the pre-coup situation would in some cases present the most desirable option, eternally holding out for this possibility is not always reasonable or possible, particularly in cases where a coup follows the death of a former leader. Rather, the international community should exert pressure on the coup leader to schedule an election as soon as possible and to refrain from partaking in this election, thereby overseeing a peaceful transition to normalcy. In this case, the international community should provide

support to this election to ensure that it is free and fair, thereby expediting the country's emergence from political chaos.

As the case of Guinea clearly demonstrates, however, such pressure is not always successful. After staging a coup following the longtime President's death, Captain Moussa Dadis Camara promised to hold an election from which he would abstain. It became increasingly clear, however, that Captain Camara intended to partake in the election despite his promise. The situation subsequently became ever more complicated, as Captain Camara's despotic and erratic rule led to the shooting of protesters and an assassination attempt that left him unfit to govern. Guinea's interim leader has now proposed a definite date for elections later this year and has pledged not to run. Support to post-coup elections such as this can play a critical role in directing countries back toward democracy, and IFES is continuing its democracy building work in Guinea by strengthening the capacity of civil society and media to build peace and move their country forward from its current political crisis.

## 2. Increasingly Competitive and Contentious Elections

Even while some countries face little prospect for political change, elections in many countries are becoming increasingly competitive. Notwithstanding certain exceptions, such as the recent elections in Equatorial Guinea, candidates are unlikely to continue winning with so vastly disproportionate shares of the vote as seen in the past.

For example, in Uganda, where President Yoweri Museveni has been in power for 23 years, the opposition has gradually gained strength; in each of the past three elections, President Museveni's share of the vote has declined, from 75 percent in 1996 to 59 percent in 2006, while that of the main opposition party has steadily increased. Following the 2005 legislative election in Ethiopia, the longtime ruling party lost 154 seats, representing a drop from 88 to 60 percent of the total seats in the legislature. In Zimbabwe, President Robert Mugabe, who has been in power since 1987, actually lost the first round of the 2008 presidential election to Morgan Tsvangirai, his main opponent, and would have lost the run-off as well, absent widespread fraud.

### Upside: Multiparty Elections

On the one hand, this increased competitiveness in many countries represents a positive step forward for multiparty democracy on the continent. As opposition parties grow more organized and coherent, they can provide a more viable alternative to parties that have, in many cases, been in power since independence. Indeed, several countries have witnessed handovers of power in recent years following opposition victories, including Senegal, Mali, Sierra Leone, and Ghana.

To further the development of multiparty democracy, the United States and other members of the international community should encourage the continued strengthening of political parties. Such support has been insufficient, as many countries are reluctant to be seen as supporting particular parties or politicians. The obvious and sensible solution is to offer support to all political parties, thereby eliminating accusations of bias. In many cases, political parties lack the most basic organizational infrastructure, such as an office or a list of party members; international support can help these parties

develop a permanent infrastructure and the capacity to self finance over the long term. In addition, international support should be provided to help these parties develop and publicize policy platforms so that their membership is based on issues rather than ethnicity.

### **Downside: Election Violence**

On the other hand, however, increasingly competitive elections raise the risk of increased election violence. Increased competitiveness can raise the risk of violence in two ways. First, closer elections can increase tension throughout the electoral process; when the outcome of an election is in doubt, all stages of the process, including the appointment of the members of the electoral management body; the registration of parties, candidates, and voters; campaigning; voting; and vote counting and tabulation, become more heated. For example, Kenya erupted in chaos in 2007 when incumbent President Mwai Kibaki was sworn in hours after being declared the winner in the country's closest presidential election ever; the ensuing violence left 1,500 dead and 300,000 displaced.

Second, as long-term incumbents witness the growing strength of opposition candidates, they may feel increasingly imperiled and crack down more fiercely on perceived threats. For example, after losing the first round of Zimbabwe's 2008 presidential election and subsequently manipulating results to force a run-off, President Robert Mugabe presided over a wave of widespread and brutal violence against supporters of Morgan Tsvangirai to ensure himself victory in the second round.

The issue of election violence raises two primary questions for the United States and the international community: how does the international community prevent and mitigate election violence, and how does it resolve this violence when it does occur?

One key way of preventing and mitigating election violence is by building the capacity of key institutions that participate in the electoral process. One such institution is a country's electoral management body. While election violence is often blamed on the mere occurrence of elections, such violence usually occurs not simply because an election takes place but because of shortcomings or failures in the electoral process. Countries that experience well run, free, and fair elections rarely experience election violence. Promoting the greater independence, impartiality, integrity, accountability, transparency, and capacity of a country's electoral management body, therefore, can help ensure that elections are better run and therefore less prone to violence.

Such support must be truly comprehensive, as efforts to prevent and mitigate violence can be carried out at any stage of the electoral cycle. During the voter and candidate registration process, for example, the procedures must be clearly and fairly defined so as not to block or disadvantage certain groups from participating. During the campaign period, when violence is most common, political parties should be encouraged to commit to codes of conduct that the electoral management body is legally empowered to enforce. Throughout the entire lead-up to election day, voters should be educated on the importance of voting and encouraged not to support candidates or parties that resort to violent tactics. To prevent tension from rising due to suspicions of results tampering, a system for counting, tabulating, and

announcing the results as transparently and quickly as possible should be put in place prior to the election.

IFES provides such comprehensive support to election management bodies throughout Africa and around the world. For example, IFES has conducted trainings using the innovative Building Resources in Democracy, Governance, and Elections (BRIDGE) program for the election management bodies of countries ranging from Nigeria to Burundi to Angola. These trainings, as well as continuous technical support and advice, help promote the sorts of best practices that contribute to elections that are not only more likely to represent the will of the people but also less likely to result in violence.

A country's security forces, whether police or military, represent another institution critical to preventing and mitigating election violence, particularly as they have the ability to directly initiate or exacerbate this violence. In some cases, such as Liberia in 2005 and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in 2006, international security forces, such as United Nations peacekeeping missions, are available to provide security for elections. For countries holding elections immediately following conflicts, such international security is often necessary to ensure a peaceful transition. In the long-term, however, countries must provide their own security so as to establish national ownership of the electoral process. The international community can provide support to ensure that these security forces are adequately prepared to manage election security so as to prevent violence. Such support should build the capacity of security forces to act impartially, transparently, efficiently, and with respect for the rights of all involved in the electoral process, as well as to plan the security operation well in advance to ensure that adequate human, financial, and material resources are available.

A second way to prevent and mitigate election violence is through increased monitoring of this violence throughout the electoral process. Monitoring election violence is distinct from monitoring elections in general and must take place over the long term. For this reason, it is a task best undertaken by local civil society organizations. IFES has emerged as a leader in this method of election violence prevention through its Election Violence Education and Resolution (EVER) Project. Tailored specifically to each individual country, the EVER Project empowers local civil society organizations to better monitor, publicize, and mitigate violence throughout the electoral cycle. IFES provides local partners with tools to map potential and ongoing violence, trains community-based monitors to collect information on this violence, and generates alerts and produces reports on the data gathered to ensure the perpetrators are held accountable. This process raises awareness of election violence, allows for direct and rapid responses to prevent and mitigate this violence, and fosters the development of civil society networks and constructive partnerships among electoral stakeholders.

Regardless of efforts to prevent and mitigate violence, however, such violence will inevitably continue to occur and may even increase in coming years. For this reason, the international community must examine how best it can help resolve instances of violence and the tangled political situations they create. The two most horrific cases of election violence in Africa in recent years—Kenya in 2007 and Zimbabwe in 2008—were both resolved in the same way: the international community pressured the two disputing parties to enter into power-sharing agreements whereby the “victorious” incumbent

candidate remained president while the “losing” opposition candidate became prime minister. This was viewed as a way to immediately end the violence and ensuing political impasse. Over the long term, however, neither of these power-sharing agreements has proven successful. Tensions between the President and Prime Minister in Kenya have remained high, while the coalition government in Zimbabwe has nearly fallen apart on several occasions, with the opposition recently withdrawing from the government for several weeks.

The failures of these coalition governments to provide lasting political solutions indicate that the international community, including election experts, should begin exploring alternative means of restoring political stability following election-related conflicts. One alternative is to integrate a clear and widely accepted election complaint and adjudication mechanism into the legal framework prior to elections; with a viable dispute resolution system already in place, ad hoc solutions such as power-sharing agreements may prove unnecessary. The international community must provide support, however, to ensure that dispute resolution bodies have the structure and capacity to resolve disputes, lest they prove incapable of fulfilling this function. Following the disputed 2007 presidential election in Nigeria, for example, the dispute resolution courts responded so slowly to election complaints that some disputes are yet unresolved. International support should build the capacity of electoral dispute resolution bodies to resolve disputes impartially, objectively, effectively, and efficiently. In addition, the international community should encourage traditional dispute resolution mechanisms, which can serve as viable alternatives when formal legal mechanisms prove unsatisfactory. Such support to dispute resolution can provide a means not only of resolving conflicts but also of preventing them, as aggrieved voters or parties can channel their frustrations through legal or traditional mechanisms rather than through violence.

### **3. Continued Use of Elections to Emerge from Conflicts**

While these above examples demonstrate the potential of elections to create conflict, elections are often used as a means to end conflict and solidify peace. For this reason, elections usually form a key part of the agreements ending civil wars or conflicts. The basic principle behind these post-conflict or transitional elections is that of ballots over bullets: citizens choosing their political leaders by voting rather than fighting.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, post-conflict and transitional elections have met with a mixture of results. Despite their key role in ending conflict and solidifying peace, the politically charged atmosphere and unreasonably high expectations surrounding these elections make them among the most vulnerable to violence. The most infamous example of a failed and ultimately disastrous post-conflict election in Sub-Saharan Africa was that of Angola in 1992; intended to end the civil war, this election instead reignited conflict for another ten years. Cases such as this have led many to argue that elections are not appropriate for post-conflict environments.

As with elections in general, however, there is no viable alternative to post-conflict elections as a means of achieving legitimate governance; a nonelected government is far more susceptible to accusations of illegitimacy than one chosen by the people, and legitimate governance must be achieved as soon as

possible following a conflict. Moreover, elections have the potential to create governments broadly representative of all disputing political factions. Demonstratively, several countries have recently held remarkably successful post-conflict elections. For example, Liberia's elections in 2005, intended to end over a decade of civil war, were remarkably peaceful and were hailed as generally free and fair. The DRC's 2006 elections, the first multiparty elections in 46 years, were also relatively successful, especially when considering the tremendous logistical challenges that had to be overcome. In these cases, therefore, elections facilitated an ongoing transition from devastating conflict toward greater stability and development.

How, then, can the international community, which generally plays a pivotal role in post-conflict and transitional elections, ensure that these elections resolve rather than exacerbate conflict? In answering this question, it is helpful to examine separately the first election following a conflict and then the second and third elections that take place thereafter, which have distinct problems.

### **First Post-Conflict Election**

Elections are generally written into the peace agreements ending conflicts, and many of the provisions for these elections are thus contained therein. As members of the international community, such as the United Nations, generally play a key role in the discussions leading to these peace agreements, they have a responsibility to ensure that the electoral provisions contained within the agreements follow best practices.

One of the most important considerations in planning post-conflict or transitional elections is the scheduling of these elections. While elections represent a crucial step in moving from conflict toward peace, many post-conflict elections have failed after being scheduled too soon following the end of a conflict, not allowing enough time for the country to regain a certain level of stability. In these cases, the warring factions have simply transformed themselves into warring parties, while the underlying animosity remains. Generally, at least two years should separate the end of a conflict from the first elections so as to ensure the adequate development of a conducive and stable political environment. This also allows more time to build the capacity of a country's election management body, effectively plan and budget for the election, and implement essential but time-consuming activities such as voter registration. Fortunately, the United Nations and other international actors have begun to realize that elections should not be held immediately following a ceasefire and to recognize the need to balance the importance of elections with their risks.

Another consideration is the conduct of the election itself. As post-conflict countries prepare for their first elections, they must build all the necessary institutions from scratch and therefore require vast international support. This support has usually been forthcoming due to intense international interest in post-conflict situations. The 2005 elections in Liberia and 2006 elections in the DRC, for example, both took place under the auspices of large UN peacekeeping missions, and these international forces managed nearly all electoral logistics. In addition to such direct logistical support from actors like the UN, support should also incorporate other areas of electoral assistance, such as working with election management bodies to budget and plan for elections, conduct voter registration and boundary

delimitation, implement civic and voter education, train electoral staff, and manage the election itself. The international community should also closely monitor and observe these elections to ensure they are in keeping with best practices.

Liberia presents one of the best examples of successful post-conflict elections. These elections took place two years after the end of the civil war, which allowed enough time for the United Nations to restore the country to relative stability and for IFES to build the capacity of Liberia's National Elections Commission to manage these elections. In the years leading up to 2005, IFES assisted the Commission with voter registration, boundary delimitation, voter education, election planning and budgeting, election dispute resolution, and other key aspects of election management. As a result, the 2005 election was free and fair, resulting in the peaceful election of Africa's first woman president.

IFES's election support in Liberia, however, did not focus solely on the short-term goal of the election itself. All electoral assistance, both in post-conflict situations and otherwise, should have as its ultimate goal a country's increased capacity to manage elections on its own. Therefore, while substantial direct support is necessary for any transitional election, support should also be provided to develop the long-term capacity of local institutions working with elections. In Liberia, for example, IFES not only provided direct support to the National Elections Commission in managing the 2005 elections but also provided support and training to promote its development into an autonomous and professional entity capable of managing future elections without external support. Similar capacity building support should be provided to political parties, developing them beyond ethnicity-based political parallels of former warring factions; civil society organizations and the media, which play a key role in the continuous and long-term monitoring of the government and elections; and other local institutions.

Moreover, the international community must consider the long-term sustainability of the electoral process. Oftentimes, for example, international donors purchase expensive, high-tech registration or voting systems for countries that lack the expertise, infrastructure, or resources to manage and maintain these systems for future elections. This same problem also affects other areas of assistance; it is equally unsustainable, for example, to fund the construction of a state-of-the-art hospital whose long-term maintenance could consume the majority of a country's health budget. Ultimately, all countries must fully manage and fund elections on their own, and thus the sustainability of election support must be taken into consideration.

### **Second and Third Post-Conflict Elections**

Post-conflict countries cannot, however, be expected to fully manage and fund elections on their own immediately after holding one successful election. Indeed, the second and third post-conflict elections are even more difficult than the first in a number of ways. International interest in these elections tends to fall precipitously as donors reason that, after one successful election, the country should now be capable of managing on its own. Moreover, voters tend to have high expectations based on the success of the previous, internationally assisted election, and these expectations are difficult to meet when compounded with reduced levels of international support. This combination of factors could cause a country's second post-conflict election to reverse everything gained by the first. Afghanistan's recent

election, the second since the US invasion, did just that, completely reversing the relative success of the first elections in 2006.

To ensure that such a reversal does not occur, the international community must focus on long-term support that spans the entire electoral cycle and give the second and third post-conflict elections the same level of attention given the first. Support should never end the day after a country's first post-conflict election—or any election, for that matter. The period following this election is an ideal time for reviewing lessons learned, revising the legal framework for elections, and further building the capacity of local institutions. This support should continue throughout preparations for and conduct of the second election, and even the third; a country cannot fully develop the capacity or garner the resources to independently manage elections before then, considering that an election is perhaps the most complicated and expensive single event a country will ever undertake.

#### **4. Africans Helping Africans**

This final trend—increased collaboration among African countries in working toward free and fair elections—is one the international community should actively seek to develop and encourage. While assistance from outside Africa is often necessary, African countries should support and learn from each other whenever possible. This support can come from the relatively consolidated African democracies, as well as from regional organizations within Africa.

##### **The Role of Consolidated Democracies**

Despite the bad news that often dominates headlines on elections in Africa, some countries have succeeded in holding a series of successful elections on their own. South Africa and Botswana, for example, have affirmed their position among Africa's most stable democracies, having repeatedly held free and fair elections without international support. Ghana, likewise, has emerged as a democratic bastion in West Africa; Ghana fully funds its own elections, and its 2008 election resulted in the country's second peaceful transfer of power between political parties. Even Mali, one of the least economically developed countries in Africa, has built a tradition of peaceful elections, demonstrating that a country does not have to be wealthy to be democratic. These countries can all serve as positive examples to the region and provide hope for the future of democracy in Africa.

That said, it must be noted that nowhere in Africa should free and fair elections be taken for granted, even where democratic progress seems surest. Before its horrific 2007 election, for example, Kenya was seen as among the most democratic countries in East Africa; this election revealed to the world how fragile Kenya's democracy really was. Ghana could easily have gone the same way in 2008 if the various stakeholders, led by the Electoral Commission and international community, had not learned from the failures of Kenya and taken steps to ensure a peaceful election. The consolidation of democracy in any African country is relative, and thus the electoral process in all countries must be carefully monitored and support provided where needed.

Nonetheless, these more developed democracies can and should play a key role in fostering free and fair elections in their less democratic neighbors. On the most basic level, they can do this by serving as

positive examples to other countries in Africa as to how elections can and should work. Coming from fellow African countries with similar histories and contexts, these examples can be more meaningful than those provided by developed democracies elsewhere in the world. One important way for more developed democracies to share their success is by sending electoral experts to train their counterparts in less democratically developed neighbors. For example, Ghana recently sent an information technology expert from its Electoral Commission to assist with the voter registration process in Guinea. Similarly, election stakeholders from countries working toward free and fair elections should travel to observe free and fair elections elsewhere in Africa. IFES regularly supports such exchanges, having brought, for example, members of Liberia's National Elections Commission to observe the 2007 election in Sierra Leone and 2008 election in Ghana.

Beyond encouraging such collaboration, the international community outside of Africa should not only criticize and condemn flawed elections but also reward and acknowledge those that succeed. President Barack Obama was doing exactly that when he chose Ghana as the destination for his first trip to Africa as head of state, denying the honor to less democratic countries such as Nigeria and Kenya. As a result, Ghana has struggled to further solidify its democratic gains, and hopefully other countries will strive to emulate its success.

### **The Role of Regional Organizations**

Regional organizations within Africa are also striving to play a greater role in elections on the continent, and the international community should encourage the continued development of this role. For example, IFES has provided support to the African Union in setting up a Democracy and Electoral Assistance Unit, which became operational in 2007. This Unit's objectives include disseminating and promoting the AU's instruments relating to democracy; facilitating capacity building of national electoral institutions through training and exchanging resources; coordinating, developing systems for, and implementing trainings in election observation; and processing requests for electoral assistance. This Unit has now fully assumed responsibility for AU election observation, and will be coordinating all observation missions for the upcoming elections in Ethiopia. ECOWAS set up a similar Electoral Assistance Unit in 2006, likewise deepening its commitment to building democratic electoral processes in the West Africa region.

The Association of African Election Authorities (AAEA) presents an additional example of indigenous efforts to promote democracy on the continent. This organization, to which IFES has provided extensive capacity building support, is dedicated to the professionalization of election administration through information exchange and regional networking. Similarly, the African Statesmen Initiative, a select group of former African leaders, seeks to encourage former heads of state to continue playing a constructive role in efforts to strengthen democracy on the continent.

Programs such as these help African countries coordinate among themselves and more effectively share electoral experiences, expertise, and sometimes even material. The international community should provide support to such indigenous African endeavors and encourage the development of similar

coordination mechanisms in other regional bodies. Ultimately, these regional organizations could develop into key resources for and providers of electoral support.

## Conclusions

The above examples illustrate the wide range of democratic experiences among the countries of Sub-Saharan Africa—while some have faltered, others have made tremendous progress. The examples of progress and success, however, should demonstrate that free and fair elections are achievable in Africa. Not only that, they are essential. While elections do not constitute democracy, representative democracy is not achievable without elections. Moreover, instilling a culture of democratic elections goes hand in hand with integrating democratic values such as equality and other rights at all levels of society, including in everyday life and within the family.

Considering the importance of elections, the United States and other members of the international community must engage every country to ensure that elections are held and, where held, are free, fair, and transparent. The style of engagement will vary depending on the political context—countries that lack the political will to hold free and fair elections must be pressured to do so; those that have the will but lack the capacity must be provided support to develop this capacity, and this support must focus on the electoral process as a whole.

Ultimately, however, this engagement will have the same basic goal: ensuring that all people have a say in the way they are governed. Indeed, this is a fundamental human right and is enshrined in Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: the will of the people “shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.” Elections, in this sense, have become a universal concept to which every human is entitled.

Electoral democracy, moreover, is not only a fundamental right and desirable end in itself but also tends to develop in conjunction with other human rights. This is true in part because certain rights, such as freedom of speech and assembly, are prerequisites for free and fair elections. Once developed, a tradition of free and fair elections can also bolster these other rights, as governments are held more accountable to their citizens’ demands for greater freedom from repression and want.

Africa has a long path to follow before democracy can be said to have firmly taken root on the continent. This path will not get any easier in the years to come and may, in some cases, seem impossibly daunting; the United States, after all, has been holding elections for over 200 years, while many African countries are holding their first. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of Africans to take themselves down the path toward democracy, but the international community can play a key role in providing much needed pressure and support to help build an adapted democratic culture. Without this support, democracy on the continent would surely falter, but with it, more Africans can realize the benefits of a democratic future, which lies in the best interests of all.

## About IFES

The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) is an independent, nongovernmental organization providing support to electoral democracy. Through field work, applied research, and advocacy, IFES strives to promote citizen participation, transparency, and accountability in political life and civil society. Since its founding in 1987, IFES has worked in over 100 countries worldwide, including over 15 in Sub-Saharan Africa. IFES currently has programs in Angola, Burundi, the DRC, Guinea, Liberia, and Sudan, as well as a program with the African Union, all detailed in the attached document about IFES's programs in Africa.

Almami Cyllah has nearly 30 years of experience in democracy development, conflict resolution, political affairs, and human rights advocacy. He has worked at IFES for the past nine years, currently as Regional Director for Africa and, before that, as Country Director in both Haiti and Liberia. He spent 12 years at Amnesty International, where he was in charge of African Affairs. Mr. Cyllah also served as Election Commissioner in Sierra Leone's Interim National Electoral Commission (INEC) for two years leading into the general elections of 1996. His work and travels have brought him to every country in Sub-Saharan Africa.



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## IFES IN AFRICA

### OVERVIEW

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### CURRENT PROJECTS

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#### AFRICAN UNION

IFES is implementing its USAID-funded Technical Assistance for Elections Support program through the African Union in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Specifically, IFES is working closely with the newly established Democracy and Electoral Assistance Unit (DEAU) within the AU to effectively support national election commissions across the continent, as well as to create a pool of trained African electoral experts capable of effectively monitoring elections throughout Africa. Under IFES's guidance, the Unit has become fully staffed and has taken charge of AU election observation missions since 2008. The Carter Center and the Electoral Institute of Southern Africa (EISA) are partnering with IFES on certain aspects of the program.

#### BURUNDI

IFES most recently worked in Burundi from 2007–2008 while implementing a program to build the capacity of anticorruption institutions. Currently, IFES is providing targeted and strategic support to the principal Burundian stakeholders in the course of the 2009–2010 electoral cycle. With funding from USAID, IFES's two-year Burundi Electoral Assistance and Technical Support program seeks to build the professional capacity of electoral administrators at the national, provincial, and communal levels to lead and manage the electoral process professionally and transparently; inform and educate the general population and marginalized groups on their rights and responsibilities in the electoral process while promoting public awareness and active civic engagement in support of transparent and peaceful elections; and build the capacity of and provide support to targeted electoral stakeholders for the establishment of a sustained election violence mitigation system.

#### DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO (DRC)

IFES has been working in the DRC for over a decade, most recently with programs aimed at tackling corruption and building the capacity of civil society. Currently, IFES is implementing the USAID-funded Voter Opinion and Involvement through Civic Education (VOICE) project to improve the capacity of the Congolese people to participate in the decentralization and electoral processes. IFES will conduct a range of activities aimed at enabling Congolese stakeholders to better understand and engage in democratic processes; motivating citizens, particularly excluded groups, to engage with the government and participate in elections; and fostering indigenous capacity to implement civic and voter education campaigns. Building on a solid foundation of activities and tools, as well as lessons learned from the 2006 elections, the VOICE project is introducing a number of innovative components, including a contest leading to the production and broadcast of three popular songs promoting political participation, production of a comic book and other media programming on decentralization, and civic education outreach through non-traditional civic education actors such as health workers and community leaders.



Sierra Leone - IFES staff teach school children about elections.

Kenya - IFES has played an integral part in leading electoral reform in Kenya following the 2008 elections

## GUINEA

IFES has been working in Guinea since 1991 and has since conducted several technical assessments and provided technical assistance to a variety of electoral stakeholders, including Guinea's Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI). With USAID funding, IFES has supported the CENI in preparing for transparent, credible, and participatory legislative and presidential elections in 2010. This support focused on strengthening commissioners' operational capacity and commitment to electoral integrity on the national and local level, as well as on assisting the CENI in its efforts to keep the population informed about the electoral process through a national public awareness campaign targeting women and a series of electoral stakeholder roundtables. Recently, IFES has begun working toward fostering a peaceful electoral environment in Guinea.

## LIBERIA

IFES has a rich experience in Liberia, where it has worked over the past 15 years to support democracy and elections, including the landmark 2005 elections, which set the country on a path toward stability and development. IFES's current five-year, USAID-funded Building Sustainable Elections Management in Liberia program will support the various upcoming elections in Liberia, including the constitutional referendum, 2011 general elections, local elections, and by-elections. Ultimately, IFES aims to increase the capacity of the National Elections Commission (NEC) to efficiently, effectively, impartially, and sustainably manage elections in the coming years. This support will focus on boundary delimitation, voter registration, civic and voter education, and general capacity building.

## SUDAN

IFES is currently implementing a three-year USAID contract for Election Administration Support aimed at helping the Sudanese National Electoral Commission deliver technically sound and credible elections as called for in the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. This support will cover the presidential, gubernatorial, and legislative elections planned for 2010, as well as the Southern Sudan and Abyei referenda scheduled for 2011. IFES's program is designed to accompany all phases of the electoral process and aims to support election management and build the Commission's capacity in the areas of the regulatory framework, organizational set up, operations, and training, as well as to provide support in procuring electoral commodities.

## TOGO

IFES' project in Togo focused on the country's March 2010 elections. IFES has been strengthening the capacity of civil society organizations to conduct a voter education campaign on the voter registration process and a get-out-the-vote campaign prior to the election. This program helped prepare the Togolese for effective political participation and enabled civil society organizations to build local capacity to continue conducting public outreach using effective tools and methodologies to reach the entire electorate, particularly women, youth and persons with disabilities.

For more detailed information, visit [www.ifes.org/africa](http://www.ifes.org/africa)

March 2010



## RECENT PROJECTS

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### ANGOLA

As Angola prepared for its first elections in 16 years, IFES provided technical assistance to the country's fledgling National Electoral Commission (CNE) with funding from USAID. Once the date for the 2008 election was set, IFES opened a permanent field office in Luanda and deployed a number of local and international technical experts to assist the CNE. This assistance focused on electoral operations, the design and establishment of an election observation unit, assistance with election logistics, and expansion of the scope and reach of the civic and voter education campaign. Under a sub-award from Search for Common Ground, IFES also strengthened the capacity of journalists to engage in the electoral process and facilitate the media's role in supporting the flow of elections-related information between the provinces and the capital. After election day, IFES supported the CNE in assessing election operations and conducted several trainings to build CNE capacity in election management.

### NIGERIA

In preparation for Nigeria's 2007 elections, IFES provided technical assistance and strategic capacity building to the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and a range of CSOs and coalitions working on electoral issues. IFES also strengthened political party participation in the election by giving particular attention to party finances and the transparency and accountability of political parties. Following the problematic elections, IFES monitored the election complaints tribunal process, initiated a conference to determine a plan for moving forward democratically, and assessed the impact of voter education through a national survey.

### KENYA

IFES has worked in Kenya since 1992, conducting a number of electoral assessments and working to create more transparent and competitive electoral processes and build the capacity of the Electoral Commission of Kenya (ECK). Following the 2007 elections, IFES, with support from the Open Society Institute of East Africa (OSIEA), conducted an evaluation and compiled a report based on a review of the Kenyan electoral process, making recommendations for credible, accountable, and effective electoral reforms. The thorough evaluation of the Kenyan electoral process was presented to the Independent Review Committee (IREC) in August 2008 in order to provide recommendations alongside the findings of the IREC. IFES was able to draw upon lessons learned from the last several years of providing technical assistance to the ECK in the compilation of the evaluation report.

### SIERRA LEONE

Since 1999, IFES has conducted various activities in Sierra Leone aiming to build the capacity of the National Electoral Commission (NEC) and the Political Parties Registration Commission (PPRC). Through strengthening and advising these bodies, IFES facilitated the work of other stakeholders, such as civil society organizations, political parties, and, ultimately, the electorate of Sierra Leone itself, with a particular emphasis on women participation. IFES's support has included voter education trainings for NEC staff and political party representatives, assistance to civil society trainers, roundtables with stakeholders including the District Code of Conduct Monitoring Committees, and the development of regulations for transparency in campaign finance. These efforts contributed to peaceful elections in both 2007 (national) and 2008 (local).

### MALAWI

In preparation for Malawi's 2009 elections, IFES assisted the Malawi Election Commission (MEC) in its civic and voter education efforts. IFES worked with the MEC to develop a voter education and voter information strategy, a detailed operational plan, and materials that accurately portray the electoral process. This technical assistance provided a framework and methodology for the MEC and civil society groups to reach potential voters and society at large, potentially vastly improving the quality of participation in democratic processes and ensuring the sustainability and vitality of democratic participation.

### DJIBOUTI

From 2007–2008, IFES implemented a USAID-funded program in Djibouti with the goal of building an inclusive public dialogue on the electoral system and increasing civil society participation in the peace and governance processes. A series of workshops were held at the end of 2007 aimed at increasing the participation of women and other members of civil society in the country's political process. In early 2008, IFES focused its programming on support the February legislative elections in the form of training for poll workers and members of Djibouti's Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI).



## ELECTIONS IN AFRICA — 2010

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São Tomé and Príncipe	February	Parliamentary
Togo	March	Presidential
Central African Republic	March	Presidential/Parliamentary
Sudan	April	Presidential/Parliamentary/Local
Lesotho	April	Local
Ethiopia	May	Parliamentary/Regional
Tunisia	May	Local
Burundi	June	Local
Burundi	July	Presidential/Parliamentary
Mauritius	July	Parliamentary
Rwanda	August	Presidential
Ghana	August	Local
Tanzania	October	Presidential/Parliamentary/Local
Madagascar	October	Presidential
Mauritius	October	Local
Burkina Faso	November	Presidential
Egypt	November	Parliamentary
Namibia	November	Local
Guinea	TBD	Presidential/Parliamentary/Local
Côte d'Ivoire	TBD	Presidential/Parliamentary
Chad	TBD	Parliamentary
Somaliland	TBD	Presidential/Parliamentary/Local

# ROLL CALL

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## Forgoing Democracy Is Forgoing Human Rights

Dec. 16, 2009, 3:31 p.m.

*By Almami Cyllah*

*Special to Roll Call*

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When most of us think of human rights, we think of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. But the declaration in which the American founders proclaimed those rights asserts another fundamental right: the right to government by popular consent. That means the right to vote.



Like the Declaration of Independence, the Universal Declaration states that the will of the people “shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.” Because having a say in the way that we are governed is a human right and representative government is a necessary foundation for all other human rights to flourish, no country should be allowed a free ticket to forgo democracy.

While individual elections often receive good media coverage, few think of democratic governance or free and fair elections as human rights. Some consider democracy a “Western” concept rather than a universal right, or an ideal for which some countries are not yet prepared.

Looking at the governments of Africa, it’s easy to agree with the skeptics. Many elections, including recent ones in Tunisia and Equatorial Guinea, serve only to legitimize incumbent rulers. Sometimes elections seem ineffective, as in Mauritania, and sometimes democratic processes slip rapidly away, as in Niger.

Even worse, the 2007 elections in Kenya and the 2008 elections in Zimbabwe splashed casualty figures across newspapers, and some people argued that they were not only futile but dangerous. Libya’s Col. Muammar Gaddafi said earlier this year that multiparty elections in Africa led to bloodshed, and similar things have been said of Afghanistan and Iraq.

But specific failures of democracy do not justify its absence. If a government persecuted a group of people for its religious beliefs, few would proclaim that country unfit for religious freedom. We should view elections similarly: their failures warrant not despair but redoubled efforts to ensure that all people have a say in how they are governed.

Nor do elections begin and end on Election Day. They are part of a broad, complicated and sometimes challenging democratic process and the foundation of a healthy society.

Indeed, even in countries that have suffered most from failed or fraudulent elections or refusal even to hold them at all, from Iran to Nigeria, people have not forsaken democracy. They have responded by increasing their demands for reform and accountability, and for recognition of their fundamental human rights, even at risk to life and limb.

Earlier this fall in Guinea, thousands of people marched peacefully in the streets of the capital, calling on the military junta to step down and for free and fair elections to be held. The junta responded brutally, killing a reported 158 people in the streets of Conakry and injuring thousands.

Yet across Africa, South Asia and many other parts of the developing world, the protesters cannot be deterred. As the world becomes ever more interconnected, they are seeing the alternatives, and they know they deserve better.

In many countries, elections are bringing governments that represent the will of the people. Even in the volatile region of West Africa, Ghana has emerged as a bastion of democracy, while Sierra Leone and Liberia have demonstrated the power of elections to help solidify peace after civil war.

Electoral democracy is not only a fundamental right and desirable end in itself, but it's a means of advancing other human rights. Free and fair elections necessitate freedom of speech and assembly. And although elections sometimes result in violence, no other processes have so consistently delivered nonviolent transitions of political power. Once developed, a tradition of free and fair elections bolsters other rights, enabling citizens to hold their governments more accountable.

Although free and fair elections seem a distant goal in some countries, the mere act of holding them can improve overall respect for human rights. Liberia and Sierra Leone have experienced marked improvements in freedom of speech and the press. In simply going through the process of voting, citizens become more aware of their rights, which in turn encourages them to demand more of their governments.

As we debate whether some countries are ready for democracy, we must recognize the centrality of democracy and free elections to preserving human rights. Just as millions are denied their right to speak and associate freely or receive a fair trial in court, millions are also denied the right to participate in or choose the governments of their own countries.

As Thomas Jefferson and his fellow founders understood well, without the recognition of that human right, governments can deny other rights, too, and destroy the hopes and aspirations of peoples everywhere.

**Almami Cyllah is the International Foundation for Electoral Systems regional director for Africa. A native of Sierra Leone, Cyllah has more than 25 years experience in elections, conflict resolution, political affairs and democracy development.**

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