

Democracy Beyond Elections

LSE alumnus Olivier Bucyana explores the idea of elections as only the starting point of democracy. **This post is part of our *African Elections* series.**

The wave of democratisation that swept through Africa and other regions in the early 1990s paved the way for multi-party elections. People were given the choice to elect politicians whom they believed would take their country forward. As a result, today we see vibrant electoral campaigns manifested by political party supporters in rallies excitedly waving banners, and packing into stadiums chanting and dancing their party's name in fervor. But we also see the ugly: the contestations, the violence and the looting.

With a number of important presidential elections coming up this year – Nigeria, Guinea, Cote d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso – one cannot help but wonder what impact they will have on the West African political landscape. Most importantly, how will the upcoming elections affect the living standards of those who line up for hours to cast their ballot in hopes of a better future? Will the newly elected improve the lot of those barely surviving on one meal a day and those who walk for hours just to fetch a pail of water? How will these elections improve the lives of those who struggle to pay for their children's health care and education?



One of the challenges in all democracies today is keeping the population informed and constructively engaged in the various political decision-making processes that affect their daily lives. Free, fair and transparent elections are vital for the consolidation of democracy. Democracy, however, is more than just elections; it is also about performance and the effective delivery of public goods and services once elected.

Elections: A Pillar of Democracy

Democracy, as defined by Abraham Lincoln, is “*the government of the people, by the people [and] for the people*”. Free, fair and transparent elections are organised on a regular basis to renew elected leaders and most importantly to provide the people with an opportunity to elect those they believe will improve their standards of living. A renewal of the political elite is important for a number of reasons. One is the competitive nature of free and fair elections, which forces political candidates to remain in-tune with the needs and demands of their citizens. The virtue of elections

is also their ability to limit abuses by providing citizens the opportunity to change their representatives.

As a key pillar of democracy, elections also serve as a forum to discuss issues of importance to the nation. Candidates and political parties use this platform to present their political agendas, which they believe will lead their country towards economic and social development. Incumbents and other candidates who have previously been exposed to the public eye are also required to defend their track record during elections, which exerts pressure on elected leaders to stay demonstrably responsive to the needs of their citizens.

The assumption today is that if elections are transparent, free and fair, then elected leaders will respond to the people's needs by improving their living standards. Is that always the case?

Empty Promises

Nigeria, Guinea, Cote d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso have been holding elections regularly in the past decades and all four countries are endowed with natural resources. From large reserves of oil to iron ore and gold, these countries have the assets to improve the lives of their citizens. Unfortunately, what we see today is a reality that fails to live up to its potential.

In her most recent **Op-Ed**, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie describes what many Nigerians identify with today: the scarcity of electricity. This is not particular to Nigeria, as frequent power and water cuts are a reality throughout West Africa. Just last year, hundreds protested in the streets of Conakry against a series of frequent blackouts, often attributed by officials to "technical difficulties". Yet, this issue remains unresolved, and it comes with consequences. The inadequate supply of electricity prevents small businesses from thriving and subsequently has repercussions on households' incomes and their ability to provide for themselves. In fact, the most recent poverty survey conducted by Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics indicates that the country's poverty rate has increased from **54.7% in 2004 to 60.9% in 2010** despite being the continent's best performing economy. This begs the question as to who, if not the general populace, is reaping the benefits of the country's economic growth.

When it comes to education, the United Nations Development Program's (UNDP) latest Education Index (2014) shows that Nigeria's index in this sector has not improved between 2010 and 2013. Nigeria is ranked 152nd (out of 187) in the overall Human Development Index, which assesses achievements in key indicators of human development such as education, life expectancy and other income indices. Just last year, it was reported that approximately **US\$20 Billion** in oil revenues had not been paid by the National Petroleum Corporation to the Nigerian Government. This colossal amount could have been reinvested into schools, hospitals, infrastructure and other areas to improve the lives of Nigerians. Moreover, with the country expected to lose half of its oil revenues this year due to the recent global slump in oil prices, how will its elected leader cope with the costly fight against Boko Haram in northern Nigeria, and raise the standards of living of Nigerians?

In spite of being one of the continent's fastest growing economies (close to 9%) and having improved its business climate, Cote d'Ivoire also figures in the bottom 35 of the UNDP ranking. Guinea and Burkina Faso find themselves in the bottom 10 of the same ranking.

"Fine words do not produce food"

What the above-mentioned challenges indicate is that the electorate in the four upcoming presidential elections will have one common expectation: a significant improvement in their living standards. This means food on the table, a roof over their heads, medicine in their cabinets, and a job to bring value to their lives. The economic growth seen in recent years has to be more inclusive and has to trickle down to the poorest in the form of consistent and effective delivery of public services. Electoral candidates will have to go beyond the empty rhetoric and emotional speeches given during campaigns. Their promises have to be clearly laid out and backed up with a clear road map for timely implementation. Elected leaders need to be more responsive to the needs of those they represent while in office.

These set of challenges also tell us that elections are not sufficient for elected leaders to be responsive to the needs of the population they were elected to serve.

Way Forward

A series of measures could be put in place to make sure elected leaders keep their promises and work towards improving the lives of citizens.

What if, at the stage that many development countries are today, a widely accepted twenty-year (or so) national development program reached by consensus with civil society organizations and political parties was the way forward? Such a widely accepted program or long term vision could serve as a road map for a fixed number of years for each and every elected Head of State. It would avoid having successive elected leaders and Governments putting forth opposing programs and views on how to improve the lives of citizens. Such a program would make sure an elected leader builds on the work of his or her predecessor with respect to the widely accepted national program. This program would encourage a bottom-up approach to governance and would bring stability, a key element in the development trajectory of any given country struggling to improve the standards of living of its citizens. Such a shift in the approach developing countries have to social and economic development could pave the way forward.

Civil society organisations would also have their role to play in monitoring the effective implementation of such a program. Although not accessible to everyone, the use of information technology (IT) could help in monitoring government promises. Initiatives like Mackymetre.com set up by a group of Senegalese engineers helps keep track of the fulfillment of promises made by current President Macky Sall during the 2012 Presidential campaign. In Kenya, Mzalendo.com, a term meaning Patriot in Swahili, is a platform that seeks to inform citizens on the work of the Members of Parliament in hopes that it will enhance public participation in decision making processes. In Nigeria, BudGIT simplifies the country's national budget with the use of infographics to make it more accessible and comprehensible to those who have no background in public financial management and accounting. [Follow The Money](http://FollowTheMoney), in Nigeria as well, helps citizens track funds allocated to various projects nationwide. These initiatives inform ordinary people about the way funds are allocated to various sectors that have a direct impact on their lives (i.e. health, education and infrastructure...). They also make complex political information more accessible with the aim of increasing citizen participation in public policy debates.

What if elected leaders were required to be qualified for the job? Many constitutions list qualifications – citizenship, age and number of years lived in the country – for the Presidency. Most constitutions do not require the individual attaining the highest position of the State to have acquired a certain level of education. The reason for not having such a requirement is because the position of Head of State is one of representation and such a requirement would discriminate against many, as university education is still not accessible to all. However, given the importance of the responsibilities vested in most Presidents, it is only logical that the individual at the head of the state is able to do the job effectively. Qualification is not always about education, it can also be a proven record in the public or private sector. Qualification can also be a proven record in leading large unions as former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of Brazil and others have done. Requiring all presidential candidates to have a demonstrable record in the public and/or private sphere will certainly increase the quality of leaders elected.

What if elected leaders signed contracts and were given a probation period equal to half their constitutional mandate to achieve a part of the national development program? After all, they are state employees. Performance contracts, with key deliverables based on the national development program mentioned above, could possibly sway elected leaders away from the time-consuming politics they do to get re-elected. These contracts could also prevent them from making promises they know they cannot keep and that are not in line with the national program. However, it must be said that, while presiding over a country, difficult decisions have to be made to deal with unexpected and unfortunate events such as epidemics (i.e. the recent Ebola outbreak), conflicts (i.e. the recent rise in global terrorism) and other unfortunate events. Such situations often require emergency funds that may have been budgeted for other projects, which can limit their full

implementation. To account for that, emergency funds could be set aside and performance contracts could require the elected leader achieve only a given percentage of the promises they made with regards to the implementation of the national plan. Measuring results against set objectives increases the likelihood that goals will be met.

Free and fair elections are important for the consolidation of democracy, however, they are not sufficient for elected leaders to be responsive to their citizens. An active citizenry and a public sector with a sense of purpose, direction and one that is accountable for its performance could be the solution to many of our problems.

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