THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON DEMOCRATIC ELECTIONS IN AFRICA
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Almost all African countries rolled out significant measure in response to Covid-19. From border closures through to the use of personal protective equipment (PPEs) to restricted gatherings and contact tracing, a combination of diverse public health safety strategies was employed. These same strategies nonetheless would make preparations toward holding smooth and timely elections cumbersome. Ghana's electoral commissioner announced an indefinite postponement of its voter registration exercise, it is still in consultation with stakeholders on carrying out the exercise with only six months to its presidential and parliamentary elections if the timeline stays the same. Niger also suspended its voter registration exercise; Ethiopia postponed its elections entirely. Other countries that have had some forms of election postponement include Zimbabwe, Nigeria and Kenya.

Elections are very integral for any functioning democracy, for many African young democracies 2020 is a busy election year; citizens go to polls to decide who steers the affairs of their respective countries for the next ruling term. 22 out of 54 African countries have some form of national elections either presidential, parliamentary or local and regional council elections. The African Union puts this figure at 18. Elections in Africa this year, however, takes on a different dimension as the global impact of the novel Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic continues to leave its devastating mark.

Yuval Noah Harari opines the Covid-19 crisis presents two critical choices, the first is a choice between totalitarian surveillance and citizen empowerment. The second is a competition between nationalist isolation and global solidarity. With respect to African countries, the first has acute resonance as it is inextricably linked to holding elections amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. For some African countries, this would be a test of democratic resilience and continuous citizen empowerment while in other countries this pandemic could be exploited especially where incumbents seek to retain power. Dr. Christopher Fomunyoh, Regional Director for Central and West Africa at the National Democratic Institute (NDI) calls this authoritarian opportunism.

GLOBAL POLITICAL TRENDS CENTER

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Another worrying trend regarding digital surveillance is how incumbents employ internet shutdowns—a direct antithesis to citizen empowerment efforts—to both silence critics and curtail opponent political party efforts. African countries such as Uganda, Chad, DR Congo, Sudan, and Mauritania etc. are all notable culprits. Regarding Covid-19, it has already affected elections in African countries that have held them in significant ways. The area of election observation from independent and external bodies have suffered the most obviously due to the travel restrictions ushered in as part of containment measures to reduce Covid-19's spread. I expatiate further on this and other areas of concern in the subsequent paragraphs with a recommendation to thread on a more balanced approach in order to solidify the tenets of transparency, peaceful and orderly elections as enshrined in both international and regional instruments particularly the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG) which enjoins countries to adhere to these in its Articles 3 and 17 respectively.

Limited or No Election Observation

To increase credibility of elections, independent and external observers have played a huge role in African elections especially in sometimes helping the opposition accept election results. With Covid-19 international and domestic travel restriction have made this task difficult. Burundi whose president passed away recently, for instance, went to the polls to elect its presidential, parliamentary and district council representatives on 20 May in the absence of election observers. In fact, Burundi indicated it would subject any external election observing entity to a mandatory 14-day quarantine. In Guinea too, there was a referendum in March 2020 under similar circumstances. This referendum appears to have paved the way for the incumbent president Alpha Conde to run for another term even though he had already served twice per the legal stipulation of the Guinean Constitution. The opposition boycotted this referendum citing an atmosphere of unrest coupled with absence of election observers. Malawi on the other hand, continues to grapple with the re-run of its annulled election with a set date of 2 July 2020, however, should it be run under Covid-19 circumstances especially, with no external observers, there would be more contestation of any attendant results.

Delays and Difficulty with Election Logistics

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In terms of logistics, there would be competition for PPEs, which would be necessary in complying with public health safety guidelines due to Covid-19. Delays are additionally to be expected as the pandemic has disrupted several supply chains meaning the procurement of sensitive bulk election materials from abroad would be challenging especially with manufacturers facing border closures and a restricted work force. The electoral commission of Liberia for example, delayed its senatorial elections on 6 May due to problems encountered in securing electoral materials. In Côte d'Ivoire, even though voter registration has been ongoing, it has been on a slower pace with about 130,000 voters registered thus far as the electoral body aims to register over 6 million eligible voters.

Amount involved in Running Elections

Covid-19 would add additional costs to the running of elections in a myriad of ways, from budget allocated to PPEs such as sanitizers for cleaning election equipment, face masks for election officials to improvised trainings for electoral officials—PPEs would have to be procured in good time likewise training of electoral officials. This would, however, not be enough to guarantee high voter turnouts which thrusts in its own added costs, because same electoral services would have to be rendered at every polling station irrespective of voter turnout.

Legal Constrains

Another critical area of consideration would be the legal ramification involved should elections be postponed in certain countries. When this happens, expected scenarios could be but not limited to the following: increased tension where there are no constitutional arrangements regarding possible term extensions for incumbents, loopholes regarding electoral emergency laws as Ethiopia currently grapples with owing to the postponement of its elections due to Covid-19, the sort of power the executive branch of government would have when the legislative branch is not in session would also be keenly contested etc. At the time of writing, Ethiopia's parliament had just voted to allow Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to continue in office beyond his mandate until elections are held again.

Political Campaigns

With large public gatherings proscribed, political campaigns would never be the same. Online campaigns come in handy, however, Africa has a large chunk of its population offline. In fact, it has an offline population of over 71 percent in comparison to only 17.5 percent in Europe. But even with online and offline campaigning, there is the added worry of fake news, hate speech and dissemination of false information altogether. Traditional media such as radio and newspapers could be resorted to but there is the tendency for incumbent government advantage in certain African countries where the information, technology and communication landscape is largely influenced by the government. An intriguing tactic for instance, has been employed in Côte d'Ivoire. Prime Minister Amadou Gon Coulibaly put pictures of himself on food packages meant to support families harshly suffering from the pandemic, a tactic that the opposition has vehemently decried as unfair.

Other General Concerns

Lockdowns have somewhat weakened opposition political parties, in Somalia leaders of the opposition insist not using the pandemic as a decoy to postpone its 2021 elections, a suit has been filed in a Uganda High Court seeking to postpone its 2021 elections until such a time as deemed appropriate, the applicant requested a five-year suspension. Moreover, opposition figures are being apprehended under the pretext of Covid-19 restrictions according to Mausi Segun, Africa director of the Human Rights Watch. He adds that such methods have been employed in countries such as Rwanda, Nigeria and Somalia.

A Balanced Approached should be Adopted Going Forward

While all the above present genuine concerns and put the impact of Covid-19 on elections in Africa into perspective, countries running elections under these circumstances would do well to adopt a new modus operandi such as: Clear, concise and timely dissemination of any change in election time tables to all stakeholders, a combination of online and traditional media, a mixture of online and classroom training for election officials and more importantly compliance with public health and safety measures at polling centers on election day. Regarding trust and in likely cases where there is absence of external or independent election observers, the onus lies largely on domestic bodies to assume the roles of monitoring voting processes, compliance of election rules, media and political party transparency against accepted practices.

Countries, which have held elections in this period, include Mali, Benin, and Burundi in March, April and May respectively. In all these elections, some form of protective measures was put in place by the government.

Among such measures were regular cleaning of polling stations, mandatory use of masks and gloves for election officials, temperature checks at polling centers, provision of handwashing facilities for voters and social distancing in queues. Benin is lauded to have taken the most advanced measures in terms of precaution; it prohibited gathering of over 50 people, hence candidates relied on campaign posters and media appearances. Other methods that could be used include special voting mechanisms. South Africa for instance, permits invalid, and the elderly to vote ahead of the general populace. These arrangements somehow already exist in certain African countries, Ghana also allows security members who would be deployed to guard the sanctity and orderliness of elections on polling days to vote in advance.

What this mechanism mean is that, voting days could be slightly expanded to accommodate these considerations. Even though they may delay the tally and release of results, it would ensure that elections are run with utmost respect and regard for the safety and health of citizens without whom there would be no people to govern. Finally, while different countries have different circumstances, South Korea's election success could be looked at as an inspiration in addition to any arrangements rolled out by respective African countries. South Korea in its mid-April elections recommended its citizens to vote in advance of voting day across all its 35,000 polling stations. Around 27 percent of voters representing 12 million people took this opportunity, this reduced the number of people on voting day and further contributed to an increased turnout in almost 30 years and above all ensured the safety of voters, the latter of which should be the prime concern of all African countries set to hold elections amidst this pandemic.

Global Political Trends Center

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