



ISS seminar

Make or Break: Analysis of the 2008 Ghana Elections

Pretoria, Friday, 12 December 2008

11:00- 13:00

Speakers: Dr. David Zounmenou, Senior Researcher, ASAP, ISS

Mr. Sandile Zeka- Research Specialist (West Africa), Africa Institute of South Africa (AISA)

Chair: Mr. Issaka K. Souaré, Senior Researcher, ASAP, ISS

Rapporteur: Ms Namhla Matshanda, Intern, ASAP, ISS

MR Souaré opened the seminar by briefly introducing the two speakers and welcoming the guests to the seminar. He also briefly introduced the topic of the seminar and touched on its relevance. He then gave the floor to the two speakers. Dr Zounmenou provided a general overview on the theme of electoral violence in Africa before making a comparative analysis between the December 2008 general elections in Ghana and elections that have been organised in other parts of Africa over the last year or so. As for Mr Zeka, his presentation focused solely on the Ghanaian elections, which he critically analysed using what the 'mental model' theory.

Elections and Violence in Africa: Some Lessons from Ghana by Dr. Zounmenou

Dr. Zounmenou's focus was on the phenomenon of electoral violence in Africa. He unpacked it and related it to the recent election in Ghana. His presentation was structured in a way that led the audience to ponder whether we can honestly say that electoral violence has become a trend in Africa.

Dr. Zounmenou contextualised the electoral process within the broader democratisation process currently underway in Africa. He argued that elections in Africa usually take place in conditions of strained democratic transitions, with weak institutions and mechanisms for popular participation. He further noted that there was a need to transform elections into a peaceful mechanism for devolution and transfer of power; as well as restoring public confidence in state institutions and the political process as a whole.

The presentation then moved on to deal with the nexus between democracy and elections. Dr. Zounmenou stated that the two should not be separated, and that the latter is an integral part of the former. He argued that democracy as a political system is resisted by leaders who perceive it as a threat to their survival. In his views, democracy has become both a symbol of hope for African people and a cause for fear for some leaders. While the citizens might see democracy as a mean to take part in the decision-making process, the political elite might see it as threatening some of their privileges.

After setting the context, the presenter turned to the phenomenon of electoral violence. Dr. Zounmenou talked about its nature, its manifestations, the actors and its dynamics. He indicated that elections themselves do not necessarily create conflicts. It is power or the pursuit of power that exacerbates the existing and underlying deep-rooted social, economic and political tensions within a given society. He also made an important distinction between what he called instrumental vs. spontaneous violence. The latter refers to sporadic incidences of violence resulting from minor, usually technical or logistical glitches with the actual voting. Instrumental violence on the other hand refers to organised and planned violence by groups or individuals that want to influence the electoral outcome. One important point that Dr. Zounmenou also made is that electoral violence is not only limited to weak or fragile states.

Dr. Zounmenou then focused on the specific case of Ghana. He noted that Ghana got it right, mainly thanks to certain institutional mechanisms that the Ghanaians have put in place over the years. For him, the pre-electoral period saw a number of violent incidences that raised concerns over the peaceful nature of the electoral process. However, the existence of strong mechanisms helped Ghana overcome the challenges associated with this highly contentious electoral process. Among other things, Ghana has put in place:

- Code of ethics accepted and respected by all political actors
- Intensive voter education
- Relatively efficient judiciary
- Credibility of the Electoral Commission (EC)
- Pre-election televised debates between the main presidential candidates
- Lessons from Kenya and Zimbabwe

In wrapping up his presentation, Dr. Zounmenou looked at some lessons from the past and action for future elections on the continent. He argued that Kenya and Zimbabwe will remain points of reference for rigged elections and the consequences thereof. But that Kenya will also be remembered as a positive reference because of the swift actions taken to avoid repetition; such actions include the establishment of two commissions of inquiry to investigate the post-election violence, and the reports coming from those commissions. Dr. Zounmenou rejected claims of an emerging trend of electoral violence in Africa. He argued that countries such as Angola, Guinea-Bissau and Ghana demonstrated in 2008 that African countries can hold violence-free elections.

In his conclusion, Dr. Zounmenou noted the importance of credible elections as a way of promoting democracy in divided societies as well as in post-conflict countries affected by political instability. He also cautioned that irregularities in elections could undermine the legitimacy and stability of African countries' democratic systems.

His proposal was for the continuation of strengthening the independence and capacity of electoral commissions as well as civil education and citizen participation.

Mental Models in Electoral process: the case of Ghana by Mr. Sandile Zeka.

Mr Zeka began his presentation by yet again highlighting the importance of elections in the political systems of all modern states: developed, transitioning and developing countries. In his presentation, he tried to counter the popular view that democratic governance, power dynamics and organisational relationships are the key drivers that determine the destiny of states. His argument was that individual and organisational mental models are the key drivers that play a primary and pivotal role in influencing both governance and electoral processes. Mr. Zeka's presentation was firmly rooted in the theoretical framework of mental models. This is a politico-psychological theory which asserts that mental models are deeply held internal images of how the world works, which have a powerful influence on what we do, because they also affect what we see.

After laying the theoretical foundation for his presentation, to the presenter moved on to contextualising the electoral process in Africa. He noted that like in other parts of the world, electoral processes remain catalysts of democratic power in Africa. However, the failure to abide by election outcomes and persistent rigging of elections has become the nemesis of democratic processes in Africa. It was evident that he differs here from Dr Zounmenou's argument on this issue. Mr. Zeka also expressed regret at the increasing popularity of hung parliaments or coalition governments; he views this as an 'added ingredient' that is used to undermine electoral processes, including the electorate. He noted that these emerging trends continue to lower transactional costs of democratic systems on the continent and minimise the potential power of the electorate.

He then looked specifically at Ghana's transition to the Fourth Republic. He noted that the transition from military rule to a democratic state in 1992 faced a number of challenges, and that it was Ghana's ability to overcome these that has strengthened the present democratic dispensation in the country. Some of these challenges were listed as follows:

- Integrating and welding together several ethno-cultural groups into a large, cohesive political community called 'nation-state';
- Developing viable and appropriate democratic political institutions that will be resilient to violent disruption and violence;
- Dealing with traditional moral standards that are threatened by rapid social change;
- Reinvigorating Kwame Nkrumah's philosophy of pan-Africanism, peace and stability, and sustaining relations in the continent and the Diaspora.

Mr. Zeka noted that voting in Ghana can be defined on a regional basis. The National Patriotic Party (NPP) has more support in the Ashanti region; whilst the National Democratic Congress (NDC) has support in the Volta, Northern, Upper East Central and Brong-Ahafo regions. He also noted that Ghanaian electoral alignments are driven by ideological cleavages. The NPP positions itself as a centre-right party, and the NDC claims the centre-left as its ideological territory.

Regarding the 7 December's election in Ghana, which has resulted in a run-off election to be held on the 28 December 2008, Mr. Zeka expressed a sense of pride in the way Ghanaians have voted. He argued that the Ghanaians demonstrated political maturity as they voted for critical issues such as employment, food security and health service. The electorate also split their votes between one party's presidential candidate and the other party's parliamentary candidate. Overall, it was issues that dominated the 2008 voting patterns in Ghana and not geography or ethnicity. Mr. Zeka also praised the youth of Ghana for actively participating

in this very important political process in their country; he noted that the vote of the youth is important in Ghana.

In his conclusion, Mr. Zeka noted the return to the democratic dispensation in 1992 as an important turning point in Ghana's political history. The return to democracy established new opportunities for the rise of collaboration within the electorate. He argued that these opportunities for collaboration emanate from a shared mental model of injustice which prevailed during the military rule. Ghanaians do not want to return to a situation of no democracy. The speaker also noted that the 2008 elections reflect a shared mental model on jobs, quality of education and other social needs.

Both Dr. Zounmenou and Mr. Zeka agreed that they do not foresee any problems with the coming run-off election on 28 December, judging from the relative peace that prevailed in the first round. However, they could not make any predictions regarding the outcome. Dr. Zounmenou however believed that there is possibility for coalition building going to the run-off.

One of the questions coming from the floor addressed to the two speakers sought a way forward on how African countries can avoid electoral violence. Both speakers agreed that one of the main things is to strengthen the institutional framework in different countries, particularly the independence of electoral commissions. Also, that voter education is important, in teaching the citizenry the importance of the electoral process as part of the democratisation process

In closing the proceedings, Mr. Souaré alerted the audience to yet another possible explanation of whether electoral violence is possible or not in a given context. He noted that in instances where the incumbent president is not vying for another term in office and had not attempted to meddle with the constitution in view of elongating his stay in power (like Obasango in Nigeria in 2006/07), there is usually no violence. He explained that this is because when the incumbent is seeking another term, they usually have access to all state resources, and obviously has a vested interest in determining the outcome of the elections.

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