



Seminar Report

Can Election Settle a Political Contest Devoid of a Political Compromise? The Ghanaian Experience

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Objective

Using Ghana as a reference, the central objective of the seminar was to interrogate if *elections can settle a political contest devoid of a political compromise*. Within the realm of conflict prevention, the prevailing discourse seems to be that a free and fair election is a conflict prevention mechanism. While not entirely disputing this thesis the seminar seek to examine how political culture can influence the conduct and management of an electoral process. The seminar concluded that, election is not an event; rather it is part of a broader body polity. Thus, if election is a political contest, its effect on conflict prevention and management cannot be assessed without recourse to the political culture and context within which it is carried out. As a consequence, the relationship between electoral process, democracy and conflict prevention is symbiotic and self-reinforcing. A sound electoral process will enhance democracy, and democracy has the potential of producing a free and fair election.

Context

In 2009, about twenty elections are going to be held in Africa. As the case of Kenya and Zimbabwe seems to suggest, disputed elections are now the triggers of violent conflict on the continent. Thus the future political economy of Africa to an extent will depend on how elections are carried out and the results managed.

Choosing Ghana as a case study was not an attempt to use its election as yardstick to assess other elections on the continent. Rather the Ghana experience was used merely as a reference point to examine some of the good practices that can be emulated and adapted in other elections. While not downplaying the credibility of other elections on the continent especially those in Zambia, the Ghanaian election is important as a case study on two counts. First, the margin between the two candidates was very small which in some instances would have been a course for violent contestation. Moreover, oil has just been discovered in Ghana, thus increasing the stake of controlling the state.

Summary of Discussion

The following are the salient points discussed at the seminar:

A) Political context/culture

1 In order to begin to ascertain the impact of election in managing political contest, it is important to take an historical analysis of the political context and culture: How did the decolonization process, shape the political elites, the culture of political culture and elections? Democracy and elections as mechanisms to manage political contest is a compromise set out by the political elite as a measure to manage their difference. Elections are won or lost on the basis of differences, thus having a critical appraisal of when and why elections and democracy was chosen as mechanisms to manage the political ambition of the political elites provides one with a nuisance understanding of why the political elites will continue to abide by the rules of the game. Elections and conflict management is a path dependence process that is contingent on some of the critical decisions that are antecedent to the actual electoral process.

2 While exceptions might exist like in the case of Ethiopia, there is an emerging trend in Africa where, presidential elections are the most contentious. For example as the

case of Kenya and Zimbabwe suggest, there is little squabbling over the results of parliamentary elections vis a vis presidential elections. This is a reflection of the nature of state and the distribution of power within the state. Control of the presidency amounts to control of the political and economic future of a country. Thus, the contest for the presidency has become a zero-sum game.

3 Strong democratic governance can ensure time consistency with regards to respecting the rules of the game.

4 Distributing power across the various institutions of the state is critical as it might lessen the stake of controlling the Presidency.

5 Managing the electoral results is important as it might make politics not a destructive zero sum game

Managing the Electoral process

1 Election is a process that involve much more than the political parties who are taking part. It is a process that involves many stakeholders of which the principal one is the citizen. Political parties are merely agents thus there is need to ground the electoral process in citizen ownership.

2 It is important for the Electoral Commission to be impartial and to exercise integrity and professionalism. The public perception on the impartiality of the Electoral Commission is important and thus essential for the Electoral Commission to acquire its independence based on the way it carries out its mandate. Independence can also be assured through job security of the members.

3 The role of the outgoing President is critical as it might either compound incumbency advantage or it might minimize it.

4 The media can play a positive and a negative role for the outcome and management of elections.

5 Voter education is critical.

6 Election observation is important. Election observation is not an event that observers should appear on the Election Day. It is important for observers, preferably technicians and not politicians to be present from the start of the electoral process.

Decentralisation of observation is also critical; any qualified interested party should be given the chance to observe the election.

7 Decentralization of the electoral process is important. The headquarters of the Electoral Commission should be a place to certify results.

8 Civil society participation is important for citizen ownership and awareness.

9 Releasing the results of the elections in a timely fashion is important. But this should not be at the expense of refusing a party's right to challenge the results.

10 The practice of conceding defeat builds a culture of compromise, credibility and integrity to the electoral process

11 There is need for sustained partnership with development partners in regards to resource mobilization.

12 There is need for the international community to be constructively feasible and present in the electoral process. But importantly a sound electoral process should be reward beyond diplomatic appreciation. It is critical that sound election should be seen as delivering on human security.