



Report on the Roundtable Workshop on Elections and Conflict Management

**Organised by the Institute for Security Studies
Held in the Institute for Security Studies
Addis Office Conference Room, Addis Ababa
June 19, 2008**

1. General

The Institute for Security Studies organised a roundtable workshop titled 'Elections and Conflict Management in Africa'. The roundtable workshop was held for half-a-day on June 19, 2008, in the Institute for Security Studies Addis Office Conference Room, Addis Ababa.

The Roundtable Workshop on Elections and Conflict Management began with the opening remarks of Mr. Kenneth Mpyisi, the Director of the Institute for Security Studies Office in Addis Ababa. Mr. Mpyisi welcomed the participants, introduced the work of the Institute for Security Studies in general and the Direct Conflict Prevention programme based in Addis Ababa and its work with the AU in particular. He also outlined the objectives of the roundtable workshop, stressed its significance, and expressed the hope that deliberations at the roundtable workshop would help enhance peace, security and development in Africa.

The roundtable workshop brought together over 55 participants including AU officials, diplomats of governments from each of the five regions of Africa, experts and academicians from research centres or universities, representatives from relevant international organizations and civil society organizations, Africa's development partners and the general public. Efforts were made to ensure that background documents on the roundtable workshop's programme and the papers presented were distributed to the participants in attendance.

2. Roundtable Workshop Programme and Speakers

The roundtable workshop was organised around 2 sessions, besides the opening and closing sessions. A summary of the programme and of the papers presented is as follows.

Session One: Elections, Conflict Management and Development

Mr. Berouk Mesfin presented a paper entitled 'Democracy, Elections and Political Parties: A Conceptual Overview'. Mr. Berouk defined the challenging concepts of democracy, elections and political parties. He highlighted that there is much overlap in these concepts which are persistently used in both academic and policy-making circles. He asserted that democracy denotes a form of political system in which citizens choose their leaders in competitive elections. Mr. Berouk argued that elections, which need to be administered by impartial and accountable institutions, should not only be seen as the primary prerequisites of democracy. He also maintained that, despite falling short of both international and local expectations, African elections constitute a necessary condition for democracy to prosper. He also expounded that a political party is a political institution which is responsive to the demands of particular constituencies, and has the ability to contest several elections. He finally underlined the argument that a credible democratic political system requires credible elections which require the participation of credible political parties.

Dr. Ismaila Fall presented a paper entitled 'Elections and Conflict Management: Experience from West Africa'. He stressed that the wave of elections described in his paper seemed to signal a significant change in Africa's political landscape. Dr. Fall underscored that elections have become, by themselves, sources of conflict in West Africa. For him, the definitions of laws governing elections and the failure to respect election calendars could be cited as potential sources of electoral controversy. Furthermore, he contended that the management of electoral processes is poor. Dr. Fall also insisted that opposition parties in West African countries had never accepted election results. He subsequently indicated that sweeping generalisations about the African landscape ignored the fact that African states are diverse both in terms of their historical experience and local context.

Building on the examples of Ghana, Senegal, Cote d'Ivoire, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Liberia, he briefed the audience about the diverse application

of electoral laws, and the origins and operation of electoral administrations. Pertaining to institutional mechanisms that manage elections in West Africa, Dr. Fall categorized election commissions in West Africa into two. The first type of election commissions are those which are found in Benin, Nigeria and Burkina Faso where political parties are represented in the commission. The power of the commission is so wide that it involves itself among other things in registration and the announcement of electoral results. The second type of electoral commission is found in Senegal and Mali, is autonomous and is in charge of controlling and monitoring not organizing elections.

Dr. Fall also mentioned the role of ECOWAS in handling election-related problems including its 2001 ECOWAS Protocol on Governance and Democracy. The protocol laid down provisions for the interference in the internal affairs of member states. Furthermore, the ECOWAS Electoral Assistant Unit is responsible for observations of elections upon the request of states.

Professor Kay Mathews presented the session's third and final paper entitled 'Elections and Conflict Management in India'. Professor Mathews outlined the development of electoral democracy in India, and discussed thoroughly how elections were conducted in India taking into account the country's recent experience. He underscored the imperative need to make use of technological developments and inputs of electoral processes, such as the use of electronic voting system. He further noted that the existence of dedicated and efficient electoral commissions at both the national and local levels constituted the most important asset to the biggest democracy of the world that is India.

Session Two: Elections in Africa and the Way Forward

Mr. Ibrahima Kane presented a paper entitled 'Operationalising the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance'. Mr. Kane said that the Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance was an instrument that will contribute for the consolidation of democracy in Africa. He further provided general observations on the Charter's rationale and key provisions, and provided a critical analysis of its limitations and merits. He pointed that the major problem with this Charter is that it does not recognize the fact that democracy is a right to Africans. There is no one paragraph in the Charter that ensures this statement. On the other hand, the Charter, in its Article 20 Section 5, gives recognition to the rights of particular section of societies like immigrants and marginalised groups. The notion of sustainable development and human security are also addressed in this Charter.

He also gave an assessment on how the Charter's enforcement mechanisms can practically pave the way for democratic and peaceful change of governments in Africa. Finally, he stressed that election, being a right, is a fundamental instrument for bringing democracy, but also a source of conflicts in many African states. So, there is a need for the AU charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance to be binding on all states in Africa which need to implement the guidelines and principles that are stated in this Charter into their own jurisdictions.

Mr. Simon Badza then presented a paper entitled 'Zimbabwe's 2008 Elections and their Implications for Africa'. He began by going through the principles of SADC pertaining to the conduct of democratic elections, and then their application to the Zimbabwe's 2008 elections. He explained that elections can add fuel to existing conflicts especially in post-colonial societies. He added that state institutions could be used to prevent the release of the authentic electoral results. Mr. Badza also touched upon issues related to the institutional and legal framework of Zimbabwe, the political actors and their relationship, and the conduct of 2008 elections. He analyzed the fairness of the 2008 election in Zimbabwe by separating the election process into two phases.

The first phase of the electoral process, up to 29 March 2008, was conducted in accordance with SADC Principles and Guidelines and went well. It gave, to many, the impression that the 2008 elections were going to be free and fair. But this optimism did not last long after the polling day due to certain irregularities. He then explained that the major source of the problems in the 2008 Zimbabwean elections the lack of autonomy and impartiality of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission; changes in laws and regulations governing the electoral process during elections; problems with the judiciary; the delay in releasing results; the biased accreditation of foreign observers and media teams; and SADC's failure to mitigate the election crisis in Zimbabwe, especially with regard to the failed approach of the 'quite diplomacy' pursued by President Mbeki.

He then noted that the flawed elections in Zimbabwe could set a negative precedent which could undermine democratic stability in the entire African continent. Thus, according to Mr. Badza, to have free and fair elections in Southern Africa, there is need to at least stick to the SADC Principles and Guidelines.

Discussion Points

A number of points were discussed during the roundtable workshop. It was raised that elections had been considered as the political translation of differences within a society, and as the major prerequisite for democracy. It has also been argued that elections have got the potential of being sources of conflicts in Africa. In addition, it was argued that the electoral systems in Africa were exclusive since they excluded some groups in a specific society. In order to do away with these problems, it was stated that African states have been trying to devise institutional mechanisms at the state level as well as at the regional level. For instance, ECOWAS's role could be taken as a case in point during the Liberia and Sierra Leone elections. But its shortfalls have also been recognized during the elections of Cote D'Ivoire.

It has been noted that, since the 1990s witnessed the wider implementation of multiparty politics in Africa, there are three phases of elections, namely: the transitional phase of an election (elections that are held in countries, which just pulled out of a conflict), the consolidation phase of an election (which designates a road from transitional phase, where democratization process starts, to a more developed institutionally well-equipped election process) and the routine phase where the consolidation of democracy reached its climax, and elections become routine, predictable and credible . Most countries of the continent have passed through transitional elections. But, they face difficulty in reaching the consolidation and routine phases of elections. However, this could be attributed to a number of factors. The institutional framework of elections in Africa is generally weak and is also subject to manipulation, consequently unable to guarantee the consolidation of democracy.

Furthermore, discussions centred around the responsiveness of systems of government, whether presidential or parliamentary, and their associated attributes with regard to election-related crises. It was mentioned that most states in Africa pursue presidential systems and a president has virtually all state powers in his or her grips. Thus, elections held in presidential systems have the potential of being sources of conflicts. It was also stressed that governments of national unity should not be encouraged as they constitute the acceptance of illegal practices, since it will have a tendency of being developed as a best practice in Africa.

There was a general concern among participants that existing electoral systems and state institutions were used by ruling parties to stay in power and extend one-man rule indefinitely. There was a general agreement

that weak opposition parties were indicative of structural problems that have been impeding African's transition to democracy.

3. Closing Session

Mr. Mpyisi gave a brief summary of the main points raised at the roundtable workshop, and thanked the speakers and participants for contributing to its successful proceeding. Then, the panellist and participants discussed and proposed a number of recommendations:

- There is a need to bring into force the African Union's Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance.
- The African Union should be consistent and comprehensive in terms of election observations.
- Constitutional reforms should be done at the national level and in accordance with the continental framework.
- The institutional framework related to elections that exists at the continental level needs to be respected at the national level so that African countries implement its principles and guidelines.
- Exchanging information and learning from the experiences of various and diverse electoral systems will help to create credibility.
- Political parties in Africa need to have concrete agendas and manifestos, and should be able to go beyond individuals in order to embark on a deeper democratization process.
- There needs to be a stronger channel through which the African Union and the United Nations can exchange information and their experiences in different settings.
- Think-tanks and other civil society organizations should carry out extensive research on the dynamics of elections in African countries in order to complement the works of organs such as the Peace and Security Council of the African Union.