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The Central African Republic at another turning point

The Central African Republic (CAR) is scheduled to hold the first round of its legislative and presidential elections on 27 December 2020.

In the run-up to the elections, political manoeuvrings have started by both the government and the opposition, which include former presidents Francois Bozizé and Michel Djotodia. Bozizé returned to the CAR in December 2019, after nearly six years in exile in Uganda and a short stint in Cameroon. He is believed to still wield significant power on the political scene as he enjoys some level of popularity among the people.

The country has been plagued by instability and violence since the end of 2012. This has deepened the destruction of its already weak state, severely damaged national cohesion and adversely affected the social fabric in the CAR.

The African Union (AU) has led mediation in the country since 2017, with its efforts culminating in the signing of a peace agreement on 6 February 2019 in Khartoum between the government and 14 armed groups.

Recent political developments

A number of political developments can explain the current political and security tensions, which could in turn negatively impact the smooth organisation of elections and further destabilise the country.

Bozizé's return to the CAR, a year prior to the elections, was to comply with the constitutional requirement of having resided in the country for at least a year in order to be eligible to contest the polls. While still under United Nations (UN) sanctions, he has expressed his intention to play a role, including as a potential candidate, in the presidential elections.

There is also an international warrant for his arrest, issued by the CAR authorities for crimes against humanity and incitement to genocide. The International Criminal Court has been investigating crimes of this nature in the CAR since 2012. Meanwhile, the Special Criminal Court, established in the CAR in 2015, has been investigating similar crimes committed since 2003.

As founder and leader of the former ruling party, Kwa na Kwa (KnK), Bozizé allegedly still enjoys a sizable level of popularity. His rapprochement with opposition parties (gathered around Anicet-Georges Dologuélé) in the run-up to the elections was therefore seen by the ruling coalition as a source of major concern. It should be noted that President Faustin-Archange Touadera was Bozizé's prime minister for five years and vice president of KnK.

The tension in Bangui was considered serious enough for Congolese president and former Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) mediator in the CAR crisis, Denis Sassou Nguesso, to meet Bozizé and

Current PSC Chairperson

His Excellency Joel Nkurabagaya, ambassador of Burundi to Ethiopia and permanent representative to the African Union.

PSC members

Algeria, Benin, Burundi, Cameroon, Chad, Djibouti, Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Nigeria, Senegal

another opposition leader, Abdoul Karim Meckassoua. Held in Oyo, Sassou Nguesso's hometown, the meeting aimed to defuse political tensions. Meckassoua was president of the CAR's national assembly from May 2016 to October 2018, when he was voted out. He has attributed his political demise to Touadera's ruling coalition.

Though divided over leadership ambitions, several opposition parties have created a platform called *Coalition de l'Opposition Démocratique* (COD-20-20). The coalition, which came into being in February this year, includes important political leaders and parties such as Bozizé (KnK), Meckassoua (*Chemin de l'espérance* [Way of Hope]), Nicolas Tiangaye (*Convention Républicaine pour le Progrès Social* [Republican Convention for Social Progress]), Mahamat Kamoun (*Be Africa Ti E Kwe*) and Dologuélé (*Union pour le Renouveau Centrafricain* [Union for Central African Renewal]).

The tension in Bangui was considered serious enough for Congolese president Denis Sassou Nguesso, to meet Bozizé

Although members of the ruling coalition consider it a major challenge, it remains to be seen whether this platform will survive the vagaries of the electoral campaign and the individual political ambitions of its leaders. In the same vein, parties allied with the presidential majority on the platform *Be Oko* or *Les Cœurs Unis* (United Hearts) have tried to extend their alliance in order to bolster Touadera's candidacy for the next elections.

Meanwhile, using the COVID-19 pandemic as a motive, the ruling coalition tabled a constitutional amendment in the National Assembly that would have enabled it to postpone the elections in case of force majeure, and do the same in similar future occurrences.

The constitutional court, however, dismissed the application, stating that the case for a constitutional amendment was not strong enough. The judges argued that in case of a health emergency or any other force majeure the president should rather consult political and other leaders in order to find a consensual solution. While the opposition welcomed the court's ruling, constitutional experts believe that the country's constitution still does not provide for force majeure. Observers view this as a positive sign of the gradual entrenchment of democratic practices in a country where political battles have often been settled through violence.

Continued insecurity

While the peace agreement signed on 6 February 2019 by the government and armed groups had, for a time, raised hopes of a permanent return to peace, clashes between armed groups or targeting civilians have multiplied and are now taking place with worrying regularity.

Despite the signing of the peace agreement, the balance of power remains, de facto, in favour of various armed groups that control a disproportionate

6 February
2019

THE LATEST PEACE
AGREEMENT IN THE CAR

part of the territory. Some of them have continued their criminal and other illegal activities, attacking civilians as well.

Among the incidents involving signatories to the February 2019 peace agreement are the killings of around 50 people by the 3R armed group in May 2019. There have also been bloody and regular clashes between Nouredine Adam's *Front Populaire pour la Renaissance de la Centrafrique* (Popular Front for the Rebirth of Central Africa) and the *Mouvement des Libérateurs Centrafricains pour la Justice* (Movement of Central African Liberators for Justice) in the Vakaga prefecture. The number of displaced persons in the country has risen to 697 000 as of May 2020, with 615 000 refugees in neighbouring countries.

Political leaders must break old habits of using dividing tactics to achieve their political ambitions

This has taken place despite efforts to ensure the implementation of the 6 February 2019 peace agreement. This agreement provided, among other things, for the total cessation of hostilities and the establishment of mixed security units (CAR armed forces and armed groups). While notable progress has been made, the establishment of the mixed security units remains unsatisfactory.

There are now growing calls to reprimand those who violate the peace agreement. However, the position of the CAR authorities and the international community has always been to avoid a confrontation that is likely to bury the peace agreement. This gives rise to persisting insecurity and instability.

As the elections draw near, they must be prevented from being used as an additional motive to spread violence and chaos. Political leaders must break old habits of using dividing tactics and resorting to arms to achieve their political ambitions. Armed groups, if they do not participate in elections, should avoid derailing the electoral process through violence and intimidation.

The guarantor of the 6 February peace agreement, the AU, and other partners should not shy away from holding peace spoilers to account. The AU in particular has been slow in providing the necessary support to implement and monitor the peace accord, particularly when it comes to assisting with the deployment of mixed security units. Beyond that, the latest peace agreement, if properly implemented, is only a piece of the CAR's peace puzzle and perhaps the condition sine qua non for anything else to take place and flourish. Much of the work will be about rebuilding the economic, social and societal fabric of the country.

The coming elections will be a turning point for the CAR, one that can either preserve the status quo or worsen an already complex situation.

This article is an extract from a forthcoming research paper on the CAR. The ISS is grateful to the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie for its generous contribution to this research.

697 000

INTERNALLY DISPLACED
IN THE CAR

The African Union should support Somalia–Somaliland talks

The leaders of Somalia and the self-declared independent region of Somaliland held a landmark Consultations Summit in Djibouti on 14 June 2020. The meeting was chaired by Djibouti's President Ismaïl Omar Guelleh and attended by Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, who facilitated informal talks between the two leaders in Addis Ababa in February 2020.

A meeting of the newly established 14-member Joint Ministerial Committee, expected to oversee technical-level negotiations, took place from 15–17 June. The meeting was led by Somalia's minister of interior and Somaliland's minister of foreign affairs. Djibouti's foreign affairs minister mediated the talks, while facilitators from the United States (US) and European Union (EU) were present.

The African Union (AU) was not invited to the initial meeting and its absence was conspicuous, especially as external actors such as the US and EU were in attendance. However, according to Djiboutian Foreign Affairs Minister Mahmoud Ali Youssouf, 'other partners may join the process' going forward.

The AU's lack of engagement has been driven by its principle of respecting the territorial integrity of member states

It is not the first time the AU has been absent from Somalia–Somaliland negotiations. While the Organization of African Unity (OAU)/AU has been engaged in national peace and reconciliation processes for Somalia since the civil war broke out in 1991, the AU has done little to bring Somalia and Somaliland together for negotiations. It has also not helped to address the outstanding dispute between Somalia and its self-declared independent region.

The AU's lack of engagement thus far has been driven by its principle of respecting the territorial integrity of member states and recognising colonial borders. However, changing regional geo-politics, as well as serious political developments in Somalia and in the region, dictate that it reconsider its engagement in the negotiations, which are expected to resume in July.

While Somaliland's independent statehood is at the centre of the dispute between the two parties, there are several issues of common interest they may agree on. The AU can play an instrumental role in helping not only Somalia and Somaliland but also regional actors in reaching agreement on key issues that impact the peace and security of the whole region.

14 June
2020

SUMMIT MEETING ON
SOMALIA–SOMALILAND

Outcome of the latest negotiations

Many see the resumption of formal dialogue between Somalia and Somaliland as the major breakthrough of these meetings. Unlike previous talks, there seems to be a sense of urgency to reach an understanding on certain issues, particularly related to humanitarian access, security and the aviation sector.

Significant outcomes of the meeting include the authorisation of the Joint Ministerial Committee to lead subsequent negotiations between Somalia and Somaliland. So far the parties have agreed on the process for further negotiations, confidence-building measures and the need to refrain from actions that could derail negotiations.

Unlike previous talks, there seems to be a sense of urgency to reach an understanding on certain issues

According to the communiqué from the Joint Ministerial Committee, the parties have also agreed not to politicise humanitarian assistance and foreign aid, and not to impede non-political and social interaction between Somalia and Somaliland.

The negotiations are expected to lead to an understanding on the final status of Somaliland.

AU's position on the dispute

Successive AU and OAU summit decisions since the 1990s have viewed Somaliland's quest for independent statehood as a separatist movement, which is not regarded favourably by the continental body.

In addition to its respect for colonial boundaries, the AU is also apprehensive of engaging Somaliland as it might set a precedent for Somali states such as Puntland and Galmudug. These states are increasingly asserting their autonomy within Somalia, alongside other movements for self-determination across the continent.

In the face of the major peace and security threat from terrorist groups such as al-Shabaab, the dispute between Somalia and Somaliland has been deprioritised by the AU for more than a decade.

While the Somali Federal Government is in full agreement with the AU's position, Somaliland rejects the AU's consideration of its de facto statehood as contradicting the AU's principle on the inviolability of colonial boundaries. Somaliland holds that its colonial territorial borders upon independence from British rule in 1960 and before it chose to join the united Somali Republic are identical to the territorial borders it currently claims. It maintains that this claim is supported by the AU's 2005 fact-finding mission to Somaliland.

Puntland
Galmudug

ALSO ASSERTING
THEIR AUTONOMY

External involvement

The gap created by the AU's disengagement has resulted in non-African actors leading a number of negotiations between Somalia and Somaliland.

The United Kingdom, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates, all with vested interests in the strategically located region on the Gulf of Aden, have for many years attempted to bring the two sides together in high-level dialogue. In 2019 a Swiss non-governmental organisation also tried to bring the two sides together for negotiations in Nairobi, Kenya.

Some of these actors have competing interests in the region.

Negotiations hosted by regional actors (including twice by Djibouti and more recently Ethiopia) have not led to a significant breakthrough in the negotiations between the two parties.

Since all of these actors have vested interests in these negotiations, the AU can become a relatively neutral mediator between the two parties.

Areas for collaboration

Counter-terrorism is one major priority area in which Somalia and Somaliland could collaborate. The AU, through the AU Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), has the biggest counter-terror operation in the region. It can help both parties to reach an agreement on possible collaboration in the areas of intelligence sharing, border control and joint operations, especially as terrorist attacks in bordering areas of Puntland are on the rise.

The AU can also help settle the border dispute between Somaliland and Somalia over the Sanaag and Sol regions, which are claimed by both, irrespective of Somaliland's political status. This will be important for the joint exploration and peaceful development of natural resources in the border areas. It will also help prevent armed skirmishes between Somaliland and Puntland over their common border.

In addition, overcoming trans-regional crime and enhancing the free movement of people requires that the two parties can agree on modalities for cross-border collaboration.

Maritime security and development of the blue economy is another important regional priority that cannot be fully realised without cooperation between Somalia and Somaliland, which control vast areas bordering the Gulf of Aden. Militarisation of the region, piracy, illegal fishing and instability created by the war in Yemen are issues that should be responded to at the regional and continental levels.

The AU is already helping Somalia to secure international debt relief. As this can also benefit Somaliland, the AU can help the two parties reach an understanding on maximising these benefits. The two parties can further reach an agreement on accessing international financing and development aid. These are issues of contention from time to time as Somaliland currently cannot access financing and loans for development projects from international institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The two parties are more likely to respect agreements if a regional organisation such as the AU act as guarantor and hold each party accountable

International relations, foreign investment, the utilisation of ports and Somaliland's airspace are interrelated issues that have escalated tensions between Somalia and Somaliland in the past. While these issues are very much related to Somaliland's status, the AU can support the two parties in reaching a framework agreement.

In the past the two parties have accused one another of disrespecting agreements reached in various negotiations. For instance, while Somaliland accuses Somalia of nullifying their previous agreement to co-manage Somaliland's airspace, Somalia accuses Somaliland of breaching their understanding on the development and use of Berbera Port.

The two parties are more likely to respect agreements, regardless of changes in government in Somalia and Somaliland, if a regional organisation such as the AU act as guarantor of their agreement and hold each party accountable.

Coordinated action needed in the Sahel

Decision makers have underestimated the challenges facing them in the Sahel. Given the sheer size of the region and of the terrain occupied by armed groups, international responses have been inadequate.

This was the frank assessment of the security situation in the Sahel by Mohamed Ibn Chambas, Special Representative of the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General and Head of the UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel, during a webinar hosted by the Institute for Security Studies earlier this month.

Chambas painted a bleak picture of the situation facing the region. Worsening security has led to an increasing number of displaced people and there has been a new trend of attacks against humanitarian workers.

The COVID-19 pandemic has aggravated the situation, since governments have been forced to move resources to the health sector. Borders have been closed to stem the pandemic, but this dealt a heavy blow to cross-border traders, who have lost their livelihoods. In addition, climate change has impacted already marginalised areas.

The COVID-19 pandemic has aggravated the situation, since governments have been forced to move resources to the health sector

Terror groups, instead of heeding the call by the UN secretary general for a ceasefire during the pandemic, were taking advantage of what they saw as a weak moment and increasing their attacks, he said.

At the same webinar, African Union (AU) High Representative for Mali and the Sahel Pierre Buyoya said people were rightly frustrated with the lack of results, given the many initiatives launched over the years. However, he said this terror threat was something 'completely new' on the continent and states had to adapt their strategies as they went along.

Buyoya agreed with Chambas that the international community was not doing enough to assist the Sahel countries and that only France had come to the rescue when Mali was attacked in 2012/2013. The type of international coalition against terror seen in places such as Afghanistan has not been forthcoming. Whether such a coalition would have made a difference in the Sahel remains an open question.

AU troops to beef up security

A decision was made at the 33rd AU summit in February this year to look into the deployment of 3 000 AU troops for six months to strengthen existing

3 000

TROOPS PLANNED
FOR THE SAHEL

military responses. Several meetings have been held and a technical working group has been put together that includes the AU, the G5 Sahel and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). A Peace and Security Council meeting to discuss preparations for the force's deployment is planned for 30 July.

The AU Office for the Sahel, headed by Buyoya, is also participating in various non-military efforts to address the root causes of the crisis.

Coordinating responses

Decision makers are clearly aware of complaints about the multiplication of strategies for the Sahel and the resultant overlapping. However, according to Buyoya, for the first time a 'global vision' is starting to emerge of how to address the various aspects of and responses to the threat.

Strategies such as those drawn up by the Sahel Alliance at a recent meeting in Nouakchott identified the need to look at all the challenges in a holistic way

The strategies include efforts to improve governance, economic development and states' territorial control, as well as the provision of basic services to marginal areas and military assistance.

Plans are afoot to institute regular meetings – once or twice a year – between the various role players. These include national governments, which have all drawn up national plans; regional initiatives such as the G5 Sahel; international initiatives such as the recently launched *L'Alliance Sahel* (Sahel Alliance); and the World Bank, UN and European Union strategies for the Sahel, according to Chambas.

'We need to scale up addressing the root causes and underdevelopment in marginalised areas where there are few basic services,' said Chambas. He said strategies such as those drawn up by the *Alliance pour le Sahel* at a recent meeting in Nouakchott identified the need to look at all the challenges in a holistic way. This included human rights, which have been a problem for all the governments in the region.

There has been a tendency to raise militias and volunteers to respond to the security crisis – creating a risk that untrained and unskilled people will commit human rights abuses. Concurrently, this could 'push populations in[to] the hands of the forces of destruction', he said.

The need for coordinated action in the Sahel cannot be overstated. Nor can the situation be resolved without appropriate national government leadership and community involvement.

Coastal regions threatened

At the ISS webinar Mohamed Abdoulaye, the deputy executive secretary of the *Conseil de l'Entente* created in 1959 by Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Togo, Niger

30 July
2020

THE PSC TO DISCUSS
THE SAHEL

and Burkina Faso, said coastal states are increasingly threatened by the insecurity in the Sahel.

Part of the reason for this is the highly centralised ways in which these countries are governed, leaving peripheral areas without any meaningful state presence. They are at risk of falling into the hands of terror groups, trans-border traffickers and criminals.

On a positive note, the coastal countries have in the past few years benefited from the experiences of those in the Sahel and have beefed up border security to stem the infiltration of terror groups.

Finding a settlement that will satisfy a movement made up of diverse interests and groups will not be an easy task

Abdoulaye said it was important to mobilise actors at all levels, including local levels such as mayors and village chiefs, to deal with an increasingly complex situation. Communication between the international, national and local levels was also crucial.

As people do need the government to address this threat, this could be 'a historic opportunity to reconstruct the state' to make it more responsive to the needs of the people. He added that 'putting in place intelligence services that are adaptive to the current security realities in the region is indispensable in state responses to the situation'.

Political upheaval in Mali

The political situation in Mali, where opposition groups have been organising protest actions to call for the resignation of President Ibrahim Boubakar Keita, is also of concern. According to Buyoya, the situation is the direct result of an election gone wrong, when more than 30 parliamentarians lost their seats owing to changes to the results of the legislative elections held earlier this year. The results were changed by the constitutional court.

Buyoya said this crisis aggravated an already difficult context in Mali resulting from the security threat, the COVID-19 pandemic and the socio-economic crisis. The crisis following the elections was 'the final straw'.

A mission by ECOWAS to Mali, led by former Nigerian president Goodluck Jonathan, proposed that elections be re-run in places where the results were contested and suggested the creation of a government of national unity. However, the coalition leading the protests – *Mouvement du 5-Juin – Rassemblement des Forces Patriotiques* (M5-RFP) – rejected ECOWAS' proposal.

A delegation of ECOWAS heads of state comprising Nana Akufo-Addo (Ghana), Mahamadou Issoufou (Niger), Macky Sall (Senegal) and Alassane Ouattara (Côte d'Ivoire) was also expected to meet the Malian protagonists in Bamako on 23 July to try to break the deadlock. However, finding a political settlement that will satisfy a movement made up of diverse interests and groups, carried by street protesters with genuine grievances, will not be an easy task.

The international community, which includes ECOWAS, the AU, the UN and some UN Security Council members, has created a contact group for Mali to try to find solutions to the crisis.

They are aware that the situation in Mali poses a huge risk to the country and the region since there is an attack on institutions, said Buyoya. The same happened just before the coup d'état in 2012, which plunged the country into chaos. If the instability persists the situation may become unmanageable.

'The challenge is not only economic or developmental, but governance is of capital importance,' he said.

Elections should be free and fair

A number of key elections are being held in West Africa in the coming months and there is increasing concern that these could aggravate an already dire situation (See article on page 11).

As in Mali, there is a lack of trust between citizens and governments. These elections need to be free, fair and well organised so as not to aggravate the legitimacy crisis or deepen the existing trust deficit, said Chambas.

Political governance challenges are clearly one of the root causes of insecurity in the Sahel. Improving governance is one possible solution to the deepening regional crisis.

COVID-19 further complicates holding free and fair elections in Africa

Africa is severely affected by the COVID-19 crisis. Not only has the pandemic impacted the continent's development agenda, but it could also reverse the gains already made in terms of respecting the rule of law by holding regular, free, fair and transparent elections.

Since the start of the pandemic, some elections – such as those in Ethiopia, Somalia and Uganda – have been postponed. However, the legislative elections in Mali, the presidential and legislative elections in Burundi, and fresh presidential elections in Malawi were held despite the presence of COVID-19.

No fewer than 12 countries are scheduled to hold elections later this year. The question is whether they should go ahead as planned and under what conditions, given the increasing spread of the virus.

So far there is no clear evidence that holding elections have contributed to a spike in the number of COVID-19 cases. This is despite the fact that in many of the polls, such as in Mali and Burundi, social distancing and other precautionary measures were not observed.

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These elections were in the most part marked by a low voter turnout. While COVID-19 was not the only factor, people's fear of contracting the virus is thought to have contributed to the low level of voter participation.

Mixed results for elections held during COVID-19

The first election held on the continent during COVID-19 was in Guinea, where President Alpha Conde forged ahead with his controversial plan to combine legislative elections with a referendum to amend the constitution to allow him to run for a third term later this year.

The elections and referendum took place on 22 March and were marred by violent protests, as well as several deaths. According to official results, the constitutional amendment received over 90% approval, and the ruling party won a two-third majority (79/114 seats) in the National Assembly.

In Mali, legislative elections were held on 29 March in a tense atmosphere, marked by ongoing instability in the northern and central parts of the

Ethiopia
Somalia
Uganda

POSTPONED ELECTIONS

country. Soumaïla Cissé, the country's main opposition leader, was kidnapped by jihadi insurgents while campaigning in the central region.

Cissé is still missing and Mali has seen sustained protests over the past few weeks over the country's poor governance, including corruption and embezzlement, as well as the results of the legislative elections. President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta is under increasing pressure to institute fundamental reforms, with protesters demanding his resignation. There are also talks of forming a government of national unity.

Burundi's presidential and legislative elections took place on 20 May, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. The government downplayed its significance and few preventative measures were taken against the spread of the virus. Following former president Pierre Nkurunziza's decision not to run for a fourth term, his chosen heir and the ruling party's candidate, Évariste Ndayishimiye, won in the first round, without much of a surprise.

Political tensions around the elections were compounded by concerns over the government's response, or lack thereof, to COVID-19

Political tensions around the elections were compounded by concerns over the government's response, or lack thereof, to COVID-19. Nkurunziza died on 8 June, officially of a heart attack and allegedly after having contracted COVID-19. There are signs that Ndayishimiye is now taking the disease much more seriously.

Meanwhile, Malawi made history after opposition candidate Lazarus Chakwera defeated incumbent Peter Mutharika in a re-run of the May 2019 presidential elections. These had been annulled by the country's High Court in February this year. Under Mutharika, the government's response was characterised by a significant degree of denialism about the existence and seriousness of the virus.

Chakwera is now expected to place Malawi on a different governance path, including dealing with COVID-19 and its impact on the social and economic life of his country.

In all four cases, the common thread is the fact that election- and governance-related issues existed prior to the COVID-19 outbreak. Electoral processes made the observance of social distancing protocols difficult. This is also likely to be the case with the elections scheduled to take place in the second half of 2020.

Ethiopia and Somalia postpone elections

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic and under the state of emergency it has declared to fight the virus, Ethiopia has announced the postponement of elections initially scheduled for August 2020. The announcement has heightened existing political tensions and poses a further risk to peace

May
2020
ELECTIONS IN
BURUNDI, MALAWI

and stability in the country. The recent assassination of singer Hachalu Hundessa and ensuing protests during which close to 250 people were killed and 3 500 arrested, are testimony to Ethiopia's volatile political climate.

Somalia, with all its long-standing problems, has also opted to postpone its elections from November 2020 to August 2021. The national electoral body has cited 'significant technical and security challenges' as the reason for this.

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The constitutional question arises in both these cases, as the incumbents would have to extend their mandate. This same challenge is posed in many other African countries currently pondering the option of postponing their elections.

If constitutional provisions to extend officials' terms in office do not exist, consensual interim arrangements involving all sections of society must be found.

Many elections to take place before end-2020

Countries scheduled to hold elections before the end of 2020 include Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic (CAR), Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Egypt, Gabon, Ghana, Guinea, Liberia, Niger, Seychelles and Tanzania. Each of these countries is facing distinct socio-political and economic challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated.

Guinea will be particularly important to monitor. Following the controversial referendum, Conde is set to run for a problematic third term. After boycotting the legislative elections and the referendum, opposition parties and civil society now argue that the constitutional text submitted to and voted for by Guineans during the referendum does not match the one that was promulgated in the government gazette. Allegedly, the regime has secretly, and therefore illegally, inserted additional provisions into the final constitutional text.

The October polls, if they take place, will therefore be extremely contentious. Any upheaval will also largely depend on the (economic) impact of COVID-19 on the country.

Niger is another case where a precarious security situation, coupled with recent revelations of the embezzlement of millions of dollars from the defence budget, has led to public outrage. Although incumbent Mahamadou Issoufou will not be running for re-election, the ruling party's candidate, Mohamed Bazoum, who was minister of interior (one of the pillars in organising elections) until 29 June 2020, is the front runner.

October
2020

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS
IN TANZANIA,
CÔTE D'IVOIRE, GUINEA

Meanwhile, in Côte d'Ivoire the sudden death of ruling party candidate Amadou Gon Coulibaly on 8 July has also plunged the October 2020 polls into more uncertainty.

Presidential and legislative polls are also scheduled to take place in Burkina Faso – a country that has been the victim of increasing terrorist attacks over the past couple of years. A proposal to postpone the legislative elections due to the high levels of insecurity was shot down by parliamentarians earlier this month.

If elections go ahead in some of these countries, the relevant governments will have to ensure that they are held under optimal health security conditions. This means taking all possible precautions to prevent the spread of the virus during the electoral campaign and subsequent electoral process.

One of the biggest challenges for these elections, and therefore for their democratic nature, will be voter turnout. This is all the more important insofar as these polls will, in principle, be a kind of referendum on the governance of incumbent regimes, and, more particularly and immediately, their management of the pandemic.

If elections go ahead, the relevant governments will have to ensure that they are held under optimal health security conditions, which means taking all possible precautions to prevent the spread of the virus

Added to this is the fact that problems with, in particular, electoral management bodies will have to be resolved in any case. Many of them have a credibility deficit because of their perceived partiality and bias in favour of incumbents.

Elections observers under scrutiny

Election observation missions, including those of the African Union (AU), will also be affected by COVID-19. These have shown their limits, as was recently the case in Malawi, where observers had given the 2019 polls a green light before they were judged irregular by the courts. No observers were present during the recent re-run, nor were there any present at the presidential polls in Burundi, owing to COVID-19.

Because AU observer missions have failed on numerous occasions to point out massive electoral fraud, their relevance is being called into question more than ever before.

Given the economic and social reconstruction that Africa will need at the end of this pandemic, fair elections and the quality of leaders they will bring to power will be crucial to the continent's recovery efforts.

Burundi
Malawi

HELD ELECTIONS
WITHOUT OUTSIDE
OBSERVERS

Can the AU protect citizens against COVID-19 abuses?

Lockdowns and curfews to fight COVID-19 across Africa have been designed as an abuse of fundamental rights. This was the view of Mélanie Sonhaye Kombaté of the West Africa Human Rights Defenders Network during a webinar on human rights hosted by the African Union (AU) last month. Crackdowns by security forces in Nigeria, for example, caused 18 fatalities in the first week of lockdown compared to 15 due to the pandemic, she said.

Representatives of human rights networks and institutions from Africa's five regions were invited to raise their concerns at the meeting. These included the rights of prisoners to protection against COVID-19, the protection of women and girls from sexual abuse during lockdowns and the provision of basic services.

Some representatives from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Africa, Ghana and Algeria, among others, noted the lack of information about COVID-19 in rural areas. They also mentioned unfair action against informal traders and the exclusion of migrants from COVID-19 assistance in many countries.

New APRM report

The webinar came shortly after the publication of a new draft report by the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) on governance during COVID-19. The report assesses the impact of lockdowns and states of disaster or emergency on the pandemic. It cautions against the abuse of these powers and aims to guide governance reforms.

There is general consensus that President Cyril Ramaphosa, as 2020 AU chairperson, is doing well to coordinate AU efforts to combat the disease and mitigate its economic impact. But ordinary citizens want to see their rights respected – not only in protecting basic liberties of life and freedom of speech, but also the right to water, sanitation, health services and education.

This is increasingly difficult on a continent where the space for civil society is shrinking. Now the pandemic has given security forces and authoritarian governments free rein – out of sight of opposition parties and human rights defenders – to prey on citizens, especially those who disagree with them.

Activists believe they should be regarded as 'essential services' so they can move around and monitor security forces during curfews and lockdowns. Many say the AU

should help them obtain this from their governments. But does the AU have the capacity and influence to make such a call and ensure its implementation?

The AU has long struggled to win the trust of the continent's citizens. It is still generally seen as an elitist project serving the needs of governments and a handful of bureaucrats in Addis Ababa. But COVID-19 could change things for the AU.

Some issues – such as support to civil society and validation of crucial norm-setting documents – are being fast-tracked, without necessarily going through the lengthy processes dictated by the 55 AU member states. In the past, good ideas were often sabotaged due to infighting among regions, linguistic blocs or interests

Speeding up processes in a digital era

The APRM, an AU organ notorious for its slow pace of releasing country assessment reports, seems to have seized the opportunity to speed up its processes in a digital era. Its report includes valuable peer learning on how various countries have handled the pandemic. This includes innovative responses such as information portals, staggering lockdowns, allowing moratoriums on utility payments and upscaling health research facilities.

It also shows the relatively limited buy-in from citizens in some countries. Afrobarometer surveys noted by the report show that initially, Africans generally accepted the lockdowns, but 62% of people in the 34 countries questioned the legitimacy of these measures.

The report notes the threats posed by poor service delivery and highlights disparities such as the lack of running water to enable basic hygiene in most African countries. It notes the disproportionate impact on women and the risk that lockdowns and restrictions will further aggravate the plight of already marginalised groups.

On a positive note, the report shows that some African countries dealt with the pandemic effectively from early on, compared to many countries around the world.

‘The manner in which national public institutions have acted with effectiveness, transparency, sharing information and accountability in Africa reflects a stronger societal value inclination towards inclusiveness. Although African countries have been constantly criticised for being poorly governed, Africa’s governance responses to COVID-19 indicate, to a great extent, a much better degree of institutional preparedness than had been assumed earlier,’ notes the report.

The APRM report is a step in the right direction if governments are to learn lessons from how their peers are handling the pandemic

The APRM’s assessment also deals with elections in the coming months. Polls could threaten the health of voters if they are expected to attend rallies and stand in queues with little social distancing measures to cast their votes.

Guidelines for elections

AU Commissioner for Political Affairs Minata Samate-Cessouma told human rights groups during the webinar that the AU was working on guidelines for elections during this time. The APRM could help draw up lessons from elections held during the pandemic in Malawi, Burundi, Mali and Guinea.

The APRM’s draft can also be improved by more detailed information on specific abuses in African countries and how AU instruments such as the African Charter on Democracy, Governance and Elections can be applied. The report is also thin on concrete measures citizens can take to prevent abuses by their governments.

But it’s a step in the right direction if governments are to learn lessons from how their peers are handling the pandemic. Collaborative approaches should be prioritised over security measures to ensure people comply with restrictions. Open debates on these issues among citizens, decision makers and AU officials are crucial. Human rights defenders should be able to voice their concerns without fear of reprisals.

Despite low internet penetration in many parts of Africa, going online with these types of AU events has made them more inclusive than merely giving a voice to the few privileged officials able to travel to meetings.

COVID-19 has been devastating for the health of Africa’s citizens and economies. However, perhaps for the AU it could signal a move away from being an elitist undertaking to becoming more people-centred – one of the aspirations of Agenda 2063.

62%

OF AFRICANS QUESTION
LOCKDOWN MEASURES

Governing in West Africa and Lake Chad Basin during COVID-19

As countries in the region navigate the uncertainties of the COVID-19 pandemic, their governments should learn lessons from the management of the crisis so far. This will help inform policy choices and societies' responses to future crises.

Among the eight worst affected countries in Africa, three – Nigeria, Ghana and Cameroon – are in West Africa and the Lake Chad Basin. Despite variations in individual countries' situations, Africa so far maintains relatively low declared morbidity and high recovery rates. Governments face both healthcare and socio-economic problems in dealing with COVID-19. Most states initially adopted stringent preventive healthcare measures, but in some countries this led to social tension and fiscal stress that resulted in some restrictions being lifted. This despite the rising number of COVID-19 cases.

These contradictions make citizens question what drives the decisions their governments make – and what they reveal about certain countries' governance generally. This is particularly true when it comes to restrictive measures, and elections that are held during the crisis.

Following a worldwide trend, governments in West Africa and the Lake Chad Basin have resorted to various measures that restrict mobility and social contact in trying to curb the spread of COVID-19. Other responses include border closures, curfews, isolation of urban centres considered to be pandemic epicentres, public transport bans or restrictions, closure of bars, restaurants, schools and places of worship.

The danger of politicising the pandemic

In some countries, like Senegal, initial government-led consultations ensured a wide social consensus about the restrictions. In contrast, measures taken in Cameroon were contested by some opposition parties in an attempt to discredit the government's management of the crisis. Politicising the pandemic has probably contributed to confusing citizens and blurring the state's voice at a time of uncertainty.

In Mali, a curfew was challenged by the population. The country is going through a deep and protracted crisis that sees government decisions generally questioned by an aggrieved citizenry. The pandemic added complexity to already tense social relations, and in response the

government kept mosques and other places of worship open. This suggests that a lack of consultation and communication on COVID-related decisions undermines public trust in governments.

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, elections have taken place in Guinea, Mali and Benin. Polls in some countries were inherently risky, and the pandemic added an extra layer of conflict, or more opportunity in the case of some governments. In all these countries, the political context has strongly influenced COVID-related decision making.

In Guinea and Mali, actors disagreed on whether to hold elections irrespective of the pandemic. This was aggravated by popular perceptions that voters wouldn't be properly protected at polling stations. Voter turnout figures have been contested, and even when they have been comparatively low, it's unclear whether this is linked to the pandemic.

In Senegal, initial government consultations ensured a wide social consensus about the restrictions

In Guinea, the elections took place amid political agitation around a possible constitutional change aimed at paving the way for a third term for President Alpha Condé. Opposition parties suspect Condé restricted political freedoms to achieve his goals.

In Mali, the double threat of terror attacks and the spread of COVID-19 probably contributed to keeping voters away from polling stations. The abduction of opposition leader Soumaïla Cissé by unknown groups compounded an already volatile situation.

In Benin, legislative and local elections were held amid a political crisis linked to the structural reforms introduced by the charter of political parties and the revised electoral law, both adopted in 2018.

In the absence of a tracking system, it's hard to say whether holding elections has contributed to the spread of the virus or not. These examples illustrate the dilemma faced by governments that had to choose between respecting an electoral schedule on the one hand, and ensuring the safety of citizens and the integrity of their basic democratic rights on the other.

As Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Ghana and Niger are scheduled to hold elections this year, numerous lessons should be drawn regarding voter registration, innovative campaigning, sanitised polling stations, consultations and consensus building, among others.

Existing trends in insecurity continue

United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres' call for a ceasefire during the pandemic didn't resonate with most violent extremist groups in the Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin. Available data doesn't indicate an increase in the number of attacks, but shows a continuation of the existing trends.

Violent extremist groups continue to stage attacks in Nigeria, Chad, Mali, Burkina and Niger against civilian and state targets. More empirical research is needed on whether movement restrictions affected violent extremist groups' modus operandi, supply chains and recruitment in the region. Studies could also show whether restrictions have changed state responses to counter-terrorism and preventing violent extremism.

Various observations can be made about how African states have reacted to previous health crises and the current one. One is that health considerations don't always play the most important role in government responses to pandemics. Political, religious and socio-economic considerations as well as security factors are important variables in understanding policymaking during a pandemic. Corruption, or perceptions thereof, are also key lenses through which responses can be analysed.

The past few months show that citizens' compliance with government measures isn't static; it can change as the situation evolves. Evidence gathered in fighting previous epidemics indicates that citizens and community leaders generally have a good sense of appropriate responses to what affects them. Where there's been sufficient consultation, the rate of voluntary compliance to restrictive measures has been higher.

Another observation is that responses haven't been conflict-sensitive enough and have contributed to aggravating existing political and security problems in some countries. The brutality used to enforce restrictive measures has generated additional tensions in others.

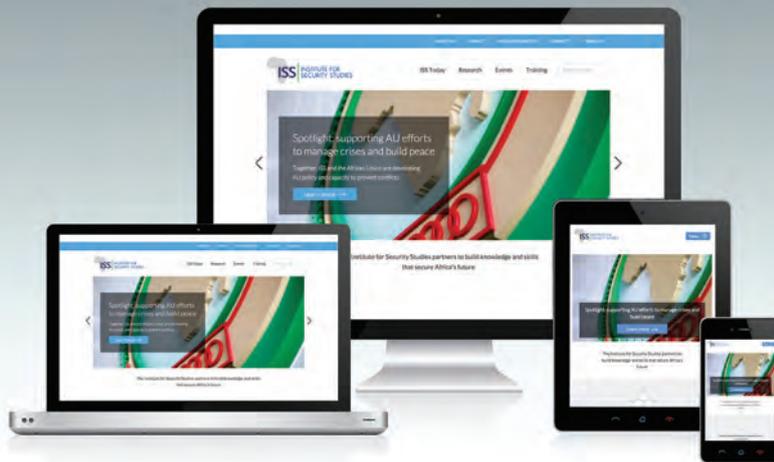
Knowledge and evidence-based responses to COVID-19 will determine how governments in the region manage their ongoing peace, security and governance problems. Mapping out individual country situations and generating innovative evidence-based policy advice is key. Good practices and success criteria should also be developed to help overcome mistrust between countries given the different results in fighting the pandemic.

Nigeria
Ghana

COUNTRIES IN WEST
AFRICA THE WORST
AFFECTED BY COVID-19

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Contributors to this issue

Mohamed Diatta, ISS Addis Ababa researcher

Liesl Louw-Vaudran, ISS senior research consultant

Andrews Attah-Asamoah, ISS senior research fellow

Shewit Woldemichael, ISS Addis Ababa researcher

Paul-Simon Handy, ISS Dakar senior regional advisor

Contact

Liesl Louw-Vaudran

Consultant to the *PSC Report*

ISS Pretoria

Email: llouw@issafrica.org

Development partners



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