

■ Introduction

DEMOCRATIZATION, ELECTIONS, AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN AFRICA

Exploring the Nexus

In the 1990s, nearly all of Africa's fifty-four states have undergone dramatic political changes. Whether through transitions from war to negotiated peace agreements, through guided reforms to multi-party politics, or through battlefield victories that swept rebel movements into power, the stereotypical African one-party state—a common pattern of politics since rapid decolonization and independence began in the early 1960s—is a relic of the past. Africa has seen scores of new governments come to power seeking to inaugurate a new era that displaces the paradigmatic one-party or military-led “patrimonial” states that held sway over the continent for thirty years. In sum, a second independence has dawned.

Africa's second independence has brought with it a spate of elections, more than twenty between 1992 and 1994. In countries previously racked by armed conflict, elections often occurred as the capstone of war termination efforts. The international community, often personified as a UN peacekeeping operation or an election verification mission, advocated an election as *the* principal terminal point of efforts to replace civil wars with sustainable, peaceful politics. Angola, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Liberia, Namibia, Mozambique, Sierra Leone, South Africa, and Uganda, for example, held internationally monitored elections in the wake of years of civil conflict.

Elections have also served as the high points of political reforms that ushered in multiparty democracy. Pressures for democratization

in Africa's one-party or military-ruled states mounted. External donors set good governance as a condition of their aid, and popular demands for political liberalization and accountability intensified. Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, and Zambia, for example, held high-profile elections that ushered in a new era of multiparty politics.

The track record of elections in Africa, however, remains quite mixed. Many Africans and external observers alike remain skeptical about the appropriateness and the ultimate utility of elections as an instrument of political change. Some decry the multiparty elections that have been held since the turn of the decade as the consequence of pressures by Western donors that usually fail to introduce democracy and often exacerbate tensions in Africa's invariably multiethnic, often polarized, societies. Disillusionment with elections is widespread, both among some African elites and in donor states.

There is good reason to be skeptical about the value of elections in societies such as those found in Africa. Elections *can* exacerbate social tensions by further polarizing highly conflictual societies. This is true particularly when incumbent regimes manipulate election rules to their own advantage.¹ One of the most poignant examples of the failure of elections to promote democracy or manage conflict in Africa is the 1994 election in Africa's most populous state, Nigeria. Rather than accepting the apparent will of the people, Nigeria's military intervened and halted the democratization process; the country remains tenuously poised between authoritarian stagnation and widespread civil unrest. In Angola in 1992, the peace process failed at the election moment when the losing party (UNITA, the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola) returned to the battlefield rather than accepting a likely defeat for its presidential candidate, Jonas Savimbi. The war raged for another two years before a peace settlement was eventually struck, a settlement that implicitly defers new elections for the foreseeable future.

Despite these examples of failed elections, others see the elections in Africa as the only way to create truly legitimate governments that protect human rights, govern accountably, and genuinely represent the people. Although imperfect in many respects, elections—even in Africa's predominantly rural, semiliterate, and

deeply divided multiethnic societies—are the only vehicle through which democracy and long-lasting, peaceful politics can begin to take root. This view is common among grassroots democratizers and some scholars in the international community, and those who adopt it assert that efforts should focus on improving elections in Africa rather than dwelling on their shortcomings.

Some democratization experiments in the 1990s were successful, in that legitimate government has been reconstituted and the stage set for a longer term evolution to full democracy and its consolidation. In Benin, Eritrea, Madagascar, Mali, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, and Uganda, elections have been more or less successful vehicles for establishing fledgling democracies or at least starting down that road. Conflicts that formerly had been waged in the battlefield in these societies are increasingly arbitrated through the ballot box and on the floor of parliament.

The fact that elections can turn a society toward greater conflict or greater cooperation underscores the fact that processes of democratization and conflict management are inherently linked. Democratization does not inexorably lead to better conflict management, as might be expected, and the end of armed conflict does not lead inexorably to a new democracy, as would be hoped.

To investigate the nexus between elections and conflict management in Africa, the United States Institute of Peace held a symposium in June 1995 on these interrelated themes. The symposium brought academic experts on democracy and electoral processes together with representatives of international organizations, the U.S. government, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) active in Africa. This volume includes revised and updated versions of some of the papers presented at that symposium, augmented by a chapter written by the editors that provides an analytical prism through which to assess the many different roles of elections in democratization and conflict resolution. The concluding chapter draws upon the discussion at the conference to derive some generalized findings and policy recommendations.

This volume focuses on the role of electoral systems—the rules and procedures under which votes are translated into seats in parliament or the selection of executives—as a critical variable in

determining whether elections can simultaneously serve the purposes of democratization and conflict management. Electoral systems are critically important for promoting democratization and conflict management because they are highly manipulable instruments of “constitutional engineering.” Constitutions, including electoral law, establish the rules for the political game. The premise of constitutional engineering is that the rules can be established to provide structural incentives for moderate, conflict-mitigating behavior on the part of politicians. The rules under which elections are held have a strong bearing on whether they will have conflict-exacerbating or conflict-mitigating effects.

Thus, part I of this book addresses the following questions:

- How are elections related to democratization and conflict management processes?
- What are electoral systems, and what effects do they have on conflict management?
- How are elections related to other mechanisms that manage conflict in mature democracies, such as the full array of political institutions?
- Can power sharing and constitutional engineering help manage conflict, particularly ethnic conflict, in Africa?

The editors take the view that elections—if sequenced, structured, and conducted properly—are appropriate instruments of conflict management through democratization. The approach adopted by the editors, more fully developed in chapter 1, places an analytical premium on the role of institutional design and constitutional engineering in efforts to simultaneously advance both democratization and conflict management. This approach emphasizes the importance of choosing an appropriate electoral system to promote inclusivity and power sharing. In chapter 2, Harvey Glickman links the concern with electoral systems to overall problems of conflict management and constitutional design in Africa's multiethnic societies, underscoring the possibilities and the limits of constitutional engineering.

Part II addresses an important debate over electoral system choice—in sum, whether a plurality or a proportional representation

system is best for Africa—and the effects of such choices on conflict management. These chapters include a focus on the following questions:

- How do various types of electoral systems contribute to the mitigation or exacerbation of conflict, particularly ethnic conflict? What are the most important elements of electoral system design as they relate to conflict management through democratic institutions?
- What has been learned about the consequences of electoral system choice from the experiences of post–Cold War elections in Africa?

Joel D. Barkan, in chapter 3, argues that majoritarian systems—winner-take-all, or first-past-the-post, arrangements—are best suited to African society because they offer a direct constituency-representative link, and that these systems can promote integrative, moderating effects across ethnic group lines. Majoritarian electoral systems, Andrew Reynolds rebuts in chapter 4, induce more competitive, confrontational, exclusionary politics, whereas proportional systems are often argued to produce inclusive, consensual governments.

Shaheen Mozaffar reports in chapter 5 on his empirical assessment of the arguments presented by Barkan and Reynolds using data on the post–Cold War elections in Africa. He argues that electoral system choice does have a strong effect on outcomes (such as the nature of the party system), and that therefore it has important implications for conflict management.

Part III focuses on Ghana and South Africa. These states' experiences with democratization and conflict management typify some of the broader questions that arise in the debate about the efficacy of elections and electoral system choice. In chapter 6, Emmanuel Gyimah-Boadi diagnoses the conflict management features of the 1996 election in Ghana, which is believed to have been a successful means of further inculcating democracy and multiethnic cooperation in that country.

In chapter 7, Robert B. Mattes and Amanda Gouws challenge a common assumption in the entire debate about elections and

conflict management: that voting in a multiethnic society is tantamount to an ethnic census, that people overwhelmingly vote for those candidates or parties who share a similar identity rather than choosing on the basis of other issues, such as economic policy or the performance of incumbents. Using public opinion data from South Africa's celebrated 1994 election that ended the apartheid system, Mattes and Gouws argue that the "ethnic census" assumption deserves reconsideration. Voting behavior was not tantamount to an ethnic census, they contend.

If the progress toward greater democratization and conflict resolution in Africa is to be sustained, and if future mishaps are to be avoided, policymakers at many levels will need to consider carefully the effects of their decisions regarding elections on the exacerbation or mitigation of conflict. What some policymakers may perceive as a relatively technical issue—over an aspect of the electoral system such as district magnitude (the number of candidates to be elected per voting district), for example—may in fact turn out to have very important consequences for the success of the election and for peace and stability. Part IV, or chapter 8, assesses the policy implications of knowledge and experience accumulated from the remarkable wave of elections in Africa in recent years. This chapter explores the following questions:

- What are the inherent problems with elections in Africa? Given these problems, what are the critical choices, dilemmas, and trade-offs of international intervention that advocates elections as an instrument of political change?
- What can external parties, acting as mediators, do to promote more meaningful elections in Africa that simultaneously serve the aims of enhanced democratization and better conflict management?

The essays in this volume seek to help bridge the gap between the extensive scholarship on elections, electoral systems, and democratization and conflict management in Africa and the policies adopted by states, contestants in elections, and other external parties such as international and nongovernmental organizations. The details of electoral administration and electoral system design,

no matter how arcane or technically laborious they may appear, are relevant for policymakers. These choices may be seen as the purview of scholarly or technical experts and not of diplomats and mediators, whose main concern is inducing parties to trade the bullet for the ballot. This view is misguided. Electoral systems and other issues related to electoral administration have tremendous effects on whether democratization and conflict management are advanced simultaneously, whether one goal is advanced at the expense of the other, or whether any given election entails a setback in the pursuit of both aims.

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