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The Pains of Democratisation: Uneasy Interface between Elections and Power-Sharing Arrangements in Africa

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Abstract

Although elections are a critical hallmark of democratic governance, on their own they do not make democracy as other elements (constitutional, legal frameworks, institutional, historical, socio-economic, political and cultural) have to exist and complement the democratic value of elections. However, the most prominent aspect of Africa's democratization project since the last couple of decades has been the holding of regular elections, some perfect while others imperfect. Given this, in many instances, the political elite in Africa has come to assume that elections, in and of themselves, are synonymous with democratic governance and have played the election game largely in response to donor preferences/pressure as part of their external accountability to powerful/hegemonic forces in today's world political economy and less as an internal accountability mechanism to their own citizens. Besides their external focus on elections, the elite also perceive elections as war by other means (a do or die battle, a zero-sum game, a cut-throat contest) in their political calculus for the control or capture of the highly prized state power in the context of poor or non-existent prospects of wealth accumulation in the private economic sphere. In this vein, the state is a site of wealth creation for elites and elections are a vehicle to this 'promised land' for which they would use all available means (fair or foul) to get to or stay in perpetuity in state house. At the very heart of electoral integrity is the now popular notion of procedural certainly (clear and predictable rules of the game) and substantive uncertainty (unpredictability with certainty of election outcomes/results before they are officially announced by the election management body). There is no gainsaying that many of Africa's democratic transitions, including election experiments, have been marred by violent conflict most of which have bordered, worryingly, on the verge of civil war claiming large numbers of human life, destroying property, battering already minuscule economies and diminishing political legitimacy of regimes. Although responses to this conflict situations have varied from one region or country to another, by and large, it is interesting to note that there has been a prevalent trend towards power-sharing model as a way out of this conundrum. In this regard two main approaches are observable: (a) pre-election power-sharing models anchored on elite negotiation resulting in appropriate constitutional/electoral engineering (e.g. South Africa-1994; Angola-1992; Mozambique-1990 and most recently Zanzibar-2010) and (b) post-election elite pacts meant to redress political crises occasioned by imperfect (read fraudulent)

elections which have in turn tended to nullify election results and in the process undermining popular sovereignty replacing the power of the people with the power of elites. The latter approach has been followed by constitutional review processes (as in Kenya 2010 and Zimbabwe 2010-2011) whose outcomes are yet to manifest in terms of their long-term value to peace, security and democratic consolidation in these countries. The first model above has gained enormous popularity and legitimacy for its great potential to add value to both peace-building and accelerated democratization in post-conflict African societies. The second model has been greeted with an avalanche of criticism as it denudes the potential of sustainable peace and democratic governance in countries concerned. This article aims to deepen our understanding of the pains of Africa's democratization which manifest in the uneasy interface between elections and power-sharing models so far applied in various parts of the continent. The article presents a critical analysis of these models and proposes possible policy and institutional reform measures for ensuring sustainability of Africa's peace, democracy and development.