

Symposium Concept Note

Seventh Annual Symposium

Two Decades of Election Observation in Africa: Lessons Learned, Role, Performance and Impact on Democracy Building



Background and Context

Regular elections in Africa have become a norm since the dawn of multi-partism in the early nineties. For instance, in 2012 alone, there were more than 20 elections conducted in Africa, simply attesting to the norm. The surge of electoral democracy has considerably taken over from the nascent military coups and unconstitutional change of governments that saturated the continent in the early post-independence decades (Straus, 2012). Even so, whilst regular and competitive multi-party elections characterise the political scene of Africa, the quality of these elections as contributory factor to democracy building has still been found wanting in many remarkable instances (Kadima, 2009; Leonard, 2009).

Central to the conduct of regular multi-party elections is the concomitant practice of election observation which has equally become integral to many electoral processes in Africa. Since the early nineties and increasingly over the years, the African Union, Regional Economic Communities such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), South African Development Community, Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), East African Community (EAC), the Arab League, as well as Civil Society Organisations such as the Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa (EISA), have all deployed international observer missions in Africa to assess the quality of elections. Other important players in international election observation from outside the continent such as the European Union (EU) and The Carter Center (TCC) have also conspicuously featured in most African electoral processes. Equally important are the citizen observer groups which have increasingly played a significant role in assessing their own electoral processes. On the back of the multiplicity in election observation practice, this has not proportionately corresponded to improvement of electoral processes and democracy as a whole.

More broadly, election observation whether international or citizen, serves mainly to contribute the integrity, transparency, legitimacy and credibility of an electoral process. It can promote public confidence, electoral participation and mitigate the potential for election-related conflict as well as enhance international understanding through the sharing of experiences and information about democratic development.

In bid to professionally conduct election observation, many organisations have adopted methodologies that are now commonly integrated in most missions. Some organisations have employed either long-term, medium-term or short-term observation or a combination of these while others have restricted themselves to only short-term observation. Increasingly, observer groups are also integrating technology in the attempt to improve the overall quality of their election observation work. All these approaches have had financial implications. Indeed, conducting election observation is a generally expensive engagement and the output for such an exercise ought to generally reflect this investment in ordinary circumstances, something that has not always been the case.

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Responding to the need to standardise the qualitative assessment of elections, the last two decades have seen a surge of instruments employed in election observation such as the Declaration of the International Principles for Election Observation and Code of Conduct for International Observers (adopted in 2005 at the United Nation); Durban Declaration on the Principles Governing Democratic Elections in Africa (adopted in 2002 by the African Union); Declaration of Global Principles for Non-Partisan Election Monitoring and Observation by Citizen Organisations (United Nations, 2012); African Union Guidelines for Election Observation and Monitoring; African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (African Union, adopted in 2007 and entered in force in February 2012); the SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections; (EISA/SADC ECF (Electoral Commissions Forum) Principles of Election Management, Monitoring and Observation in the SADC Region (2003). Important as these various instruments may be in establishing benchmarks for credible elections and legitimizing or de-legitimizing electoral outcomes, experience in Africa has shown that different observer missions have arrived at divergent conclusions on the same elections under assessment, sometimes even with the same instruments employed (Ogude, 2012).

EISA is organising its seventh annual symposium to review the conduct of election observation in the last two decades in Africa with a view to harnessing lessons-learnt by drawing from diverse experiences from election observer groups, election practitioners, political parties and citizens at large. These lessons accruing from the role, performance and impact of election observation in Africa will seek to possibly inform the future direction of election observation in Africa.

Problem Statement

Logistical and security considerations aside, the practice of election observation in Africa has become common to the extent that the decision to deploy or not to deploy an observer mission to a country has more often than not been perceived as an important cursor on the nature of elections in question. That is, whether deploying an observation mission will add any value to the electoral process concerned. This perception draws our attention to the importance of election observation and the need to take stock of the role it has played in promoting credible and transparent electoral processes in Africa over the two decades of multi-party democracy. For instance, Ghana and South Africa, two countries which are generally perceived to be some of the most stable democracies in Africa had relatively "fewer" election observer missions in their 2012 and 2009 general elections respectively compared to other countries which are considered to be democratically problematic like Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC 2006, 2011), Kenya (2007) and Cote d'Ivoire (2010) among others. This accrues to a somewhat common perception that in the former countries, deploying observer missions may not serve its utility and perhaps a "waste of resources" as these countries are generally viewed as "democratically advanced". Contrary to this perception, even in these countries, there have been remarkable shortcomings noted by participating observer groups which subsequently proffered recommendations for further improvement of their electoral processes. Indeed, in these cases and others in Africa, recommendations from election observation reports have informed various post-electoral reforms processes. Even so, embracing such inputs from election observer missions has always been a question of political will rather than a natural proclivity of stakeholders in the countries concerned.

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In other circumstances, different organisations have opted not to deploy observer missions in some countries in Africa which are perceivably recalcitrant to democratic progress. In such cases, elections simply serve as rubber stamp in perpetuating their autocratic rule and observing elections in such countries is conceived to be a "waste of resources".

Conversely, in countries where electoral processes have been flooded with election observer groups, all in the bid to safeguard the integrity and legitimacy of these processes, evidence shows that missions have arrived at contrasting conclusions in their assessments. A glaring example is the 2011 Presidential and National Assembly elections in the DRC where international observer missions had divergent conclusions (Ogude, 2012) about an electoral process that was flagrantly flawed as reported by the citizen observer reports and the media. Yet, election observation, by its very definition is the systematic, comprehensive and accurate gathering of information concerning the laws, processes and institutions related to the conduct of elections and other factors concerning the overall electoral environment and the impartial and professional analysis of such information; and drawing of conclusions about the character of electoral processes based on the analysis of information gathered (United Nations, 2005). Drawing of [sharply] contrasting conclusions in what is supposedly deemed to methodologically result in convergence of some kind has raised concerns on the value of election observation in electoral processes in Africa, and whether deploying missions is worth such an expensive endeavour.

Response to the above criticisms of election observation tends to narrowly focus on three important elements: that election observer missions are partisan; that the information available to the observer missions is inaccurate or inconsistently analysed; and that these missions are unable to detect and deter electoral irregularities (Lynge-Manguiera, 2012). All these responses are generally normative and methodologically-focused.

Collectively, the above issues drive our quest to understanding the importance election observation and assessing conditions under which this is likely to succeed in achieving objective of assessing electoral processes in Africa by contributing to their credibility and transparency. The 7th EISA annual symposium seeks to attend explore these issues by reviewing and drawing lessons from the past two decades of election observation the dawn of multi-party elections in Africa.

Objectives of the Symposium

The overarching objective of the Symposium is to draw lessons from the two decades of election observation in Africa in the attempt to contribute to the future direction on the conduct of election observation in Africa. The specific objectives are to:

- Assess the place of election observation in democracy building in Africa;
- Consider the methodology employed by different observer missions in assessing elections in Africa;
- Interrogate the essence of the election observation in contributing to credibility and transparency of electoral processes in Africa; and
- Assess the context within which election observation takes place in Africa and how this impacts on the overall conduct of election observer missions.

The policy brief emanating from the symposium will seek to harness the lessons-learnt from the two decades of election observation in Africa.

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Participants' Profile

The Symposium will bring together representatives of African Union, Regional Economic Communities like ECOWAS, EAC, ECCAS, SADC; Election Management Bodies; political parties; national civil society organisations; academia; and international donor agencies.

References

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