



CONFLICT/CYRIL OBI

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ARE ELECTIONS REALLY ENOUGH?

THE TRANSITION TO DEMOCRATIC PEACE IN WEST AFRICA

Events in West Africa during 2010 show that the democratic project is still contested terrain. Perhaps the lesson is that there is a limit to which the international community can use multiparty elections to consolidate democracy and peace, writes Cyril Obi.

WEST AFRICA CONTINUES to throw up situations that challenge one of the international community's basic assumptions, namely that multiparty elections constitute the key element in peacemaking and peace-building in Africa.

Events in 2010 underscore the need to rethink the role of transition elections in post-conflict peace-building in West Africa and the role of regional institutions and the international community in consolidating democracy and peace.

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), working with the African Union (AU), the United Nations Office for West Africa (UNOWA) and the international community has shown zero tolerance for unconstitutional changes in the region. It has promptly suspended errant member states on the basis of the ECOWAS Declaration of Political Principles and the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance.



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A voter showing her inked finger after casting ballot at a polling station in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, 31 October, 2010. Côte d'Ivoire held the West African country's first presidential elections in years, with polling stations opened on schedule.

GUINEA: POST-ELECTION PEACE, HOW SUSTAINABLE?

The December 2008 coup d'état in Guinea, following the death of President Lansana Conte and in violation of constitutional provisions, was met with immediate condemnation by ECOWAS and suspension of the country's membership of that body. ECOWAS also appointed a high-level mission to engage with the military junta on the restoration of democratic rule. The organization partnered with the AU, UNOWA and the international community to press the military head of state, Captain Dadis Camara, to return Guinea to democratic rule within a year. However, a crisis erupted when Camara was suspected by the opposition of harbouring self-succession ambitions, prompting protests. During

one of these in September 2009, soldiers fired on an opposition rally in a Conakry stadium, leaving scores dead and triggering international sanctions. Following an incident in which Camara was shot and flown abroad for treatment in December 2009, his successor, General Sekoube Konate, agreed to a transition plan and appointed a transitional government, which organized elections in 2010.

The elections were held in July 2010 with the support of ECOWAS, the AU and the International Contact Group on Guinea. Due to the inconclusive result in the first round,

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run-off elections were held in November. The two leading candidates, Alpha Conde and Cellou Diallo, polarized the country along ethnic lines: the former represented the Malinke (believed to have produced all presidents to date and well represented in the junta), and the latter represented the Peul or Fulani ethnic group (which had not produced a president).

Thus, when Alpha Conde was declared the victor in the re-run elections by a narrow margin, post-election violence erupted. The government, however, took steps to arrest a slide into chaos and to defuse the crisis. Thus, Guinea, after hotly disputed elections, successfully transitioned from military to democratic governance in 2010. However the sustainability of the new-won democracy will depend on the ability of the new government to address the contradictions in Guinean society in ways that constructively, equitably and inclusively engage the diverse groups and stakeholders in the country.

NIGER REPUBLIC: FROM CONSTITUTIONAL COUP TO MILITARY COUP

In 2009, President Tanja, whose second five-year term was ending, tried to illegally extend his tenure. He sacked the National Assembly in June when opposition parties opposed his self-succession moves, and dissolved the constitutional court after it ruled in favour of the opposition that the planned referendum on tenure extension was illegal. He then constituted a new constitutional court that legitimized the referendum, in spite of mounting domestic opposition.

Tanja pressed ahead with his referendum in August and got a three year tenure extension. He then assumed full autocratic powers under emergency rule. This prompted a stern warning and suspension from ECOWAS in October 2009. ECOWAS appointed General Abdulsalami Abubakar as its mediator in the talks among Tanja, the opposition, civil society groups and stakeholders in the country. The AU and UNOWA also got involved in the mediation. ▶▶



School children walking passed members of Niger's military outside of a camp where junta leaders met on 22 February, 2010.
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- ▶ The talks dragged on but by 10 February 2010 were stalemated due to what an AU official, Kwaku Asante-Darko, described as Tanja's rejection of an inclusive transition plan.

On 18 February, a military coup ended Tanja's rule, and the new military head of state, General Salou Djibo, assured Nigeriens and ECOWAS that his junta would organize transition elections within a year. True to his promise and working with ECOWAS, the AU, UNOWA and the international community, a new constitution was drafted, with local and presidential elections slated for January 2011.

CÔTE D'IVOIRE: TWO PRESIDENTS, ONE COUNTRY

By the end of 2010, Côte d'Ivoire was teetering on the brink of renewed civil war. The immediate cause was the dispute over the result of the run-off presidential elections on 28 November. The Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) declared Alassane Quattara winner, with 54 per cent of votes cast, as against Laurent Gbagbo's 46 per cent. In response, President Laurent Gbagbo rejected the result, and got the constitutional council to annul some of the votes cast in favour of Quattara. Gbagbo was then pronounced the winner of the elections. The problem was further compounded when both men declared themselves to be the rightful president of Côte d'Ivoire. On 7 December, ECOWAS suspended Côte d'Ivoire in line with its Protocol on Good Governance and recognized Quattara as the elected president based on the IEC results as endorsed by the UN secre-

tary general's special representative in the country.

Gbagbo rejected the ECOWAS decision and remained adamant. Thabo Mbeki, Raila Odinga (the AU-appointed mediator) and ECOWAS leaders Boni Yayi of Benin, Pedro Pires of Cape Verde and Ernest Koroma of Sierra Leone attempted to mediate between Gbagbo and Quattara, but to no avail. Meanwhile, the divisions in Côte d'Ivoire, where Gbagbo is believed to enjoy the support of the military and ethnic groups in the south, as against Quattara's support base among northerners, have continued to widen, leading to increased tensions and violence in the country. At one point, ECOWAS threatened to use "legitimate force" to make Gbagbo quit power, but this option remains unlikely in the short to medium term.

CONTESTED DEMOCRATIC PROJECT

Although ECOWAS has made great efforts, the democratic project remains contested. Structural problems such as the unresolved citizenship question, ethnicity, inequality, marginalization and the role of neighbouring states and transnational actors continue to pose potent challenges to ECOWAS's capacities and resources, according to Raheematu Momodu, the Head of the ECOWAS Liaison Office to the African Union Commission. Perhaps the lesson is that there is a limit to which the international community can rely on multiparty elections as a quick alternative to supporting much more viable, inclusive and equitable processes aimed at resolving the problems facing post-conflict African states. ■