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Introduction: Elections and the Challenge of Post-Conflict Democratisation in West Africa

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Abstract

This special issue of *AJIA* is comprised of eight selected and revised versions of papers presented at the conference on Post-Conflict Elections in West Africa: Challenges for Democracy and Reconstruction that was organised by the Nordic Africa Institute's Post-Conflict Transition, the State and Civil Society in Africa Programme, and held in Accra, Ghana from 15 to 17 May 2006. The conference was directed at a critical evaluation of elections and post-conflict democratisation in West Africa. Organised in terms of case studies, comparative and regional perspectives, the papers provide interesting insights into the nature of multi-party democracy in the region and its impact on peace-building.

Résumé

Ce numéro spécial de *AJIA* comprend huit versions choisies et révisées de communications présentées à la conférence tenue à Accra (Ghana) du 15 au 17 mai 2006 sur le thème Les élections post conflit en Afrique de l'Ouest : Défis pour la Démocratie et la Reconstruction. Ceci était dans le cadre du programme de Nordic Africa Institute sur les transitions post conflit, l'État et la société civile en Afrique. La conférence était centrée sur une évaluation critique des élections et de la démocratisation post conflit en Afrique de l'Ouest. Organisées autour d'études de cas, de perspectives comparatives et régionales, les communications apportaient d'intéressants éclairages sur la nature de la démocratie multipartite dans la région et son impact sur l'établissement d'une paix durable.

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Elections and Post-Conflict Democratisation: An Overview

Since the end of the Cold War, multi-party elections have become a key aspect of peace agreements designed to put an end to wars in various parts of the world. They have also been writ large in political transitions from authoritarian/militarised political contexts to open, multi-party democratic systems. In countries such as Cambodia, Angola, Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Namibia, Mozambique, El Salvador and East Timor, elections were a critical aspect of the peace and transition process(es). In West Africa, a similar pattern has been replicated. The peace processes that brought an end to the brutal civil wars in Liberia, Guinea-Bissau and Sierra Leone, and political transitions that marked the end of authoritarian political regimes in Ghana, Nigeria, Togo, Nigeria, Benin, Niger, Mali and Mauritania were centred, among other things, on open and competitive elections. In the same manner, considerable effort and resources are being directed at holding elections in Côte d'Ivoire in order to bring closure on the civil war that broke out in the country in 2002, and seal the peace between the government and rebels based in the northern part of the country.

At present, save for Côte d'Ivoire, which is currently experiencing a new impetus in its otherwise stalemated post-conflict transition, with the signing of the Ouagadougou Peace Agreement between President Laurent Gbagbo and Guillaume Soro, leader of the erstwhile New Forces, for a power-sharing arrangement, that will among other things prepare the ground for elections in 2008 (Obi 2007a: 5–6), all other West African countries are under some form of democratic rule. If, or when the Ivorian elections are held in 2008, West Africa, which a decade ago was one of the most conflict ridden sub-regions in Africa (Adebajo 2004: 1–17), will have been completely transformed into a sub-region occupied by governments elected through generally peaceful, free and fair, but in a few cases controversial, elections. The logical question that arises is on the nature and sustainability of these 'newly won' democracies, and how they may strengthen, or weaken the prospects for democratic consolidation, peace and development in West Africa.

Although Nigeria, the region's most populous country and Africa's leading oil exporter – known for its pivotal role in regional peacekeeping in the 1990s – has had two elections (2003, 2007) since the 1999

transition elections from military to civilian rule, the democratic process has not been altogether smooth sailing (Obi 2007b; Ibrahim 2007a). Indeed, several contributors to this volume (Ayelazuno, Olayode, Odukoya and John) are rather critical of the 'contents' of democracies that have emerged in the West African sub-region. They also examine the role of civil society in the democratic struggles in various countries. It would appear that at best what has emerged could be described as some form of electoral democracy from above, or, at the worst, pseudo-democracies. Yet, the point should not be lost that in some way – as all the essays broadly show – the political environment that exists in West Africa is more open now than it was a decade ago.

Elections are of critical importance within the context of peace-building. Many commentators and scholars agree that elections play several roles in post-conflict contexts. These include war termination, marking the formal end of military/one-party rule, providing legitimacy and international credibility to post-conflict governments, promoting democratisation and reconstruction in societies emerging from prolonged conflict (Lyons 2002), and acting as a strategy for conflict management or resolution (Sisk and Reynolds 1998). Elections also lend credibility to the 'new leadership and institutions that emerge from negotiated settlements to a civil war' (Lyons 2002). However, Zeeuw and Kumar (2006: 4), make the important point that elections take place in the context of 'a threefold transition; war to peace, command to free market economy, and authoritarian system to open political order'. This underscores the connection between post-conflict elections, the role of the international community and the promotion of a (neo) liberal peace (Paris 2002: 637). Thus, peace-building and reconstruction could in reality imply the promotion of multi-party democratisation, market-based economies and public institutions designed to promote a 'capitalist peace'.

In spite of the nature of elections as 'good in themselves', they also are instruments of a global agenda for a post-Cold War order hinged upon certain values. The effort of building peace in war-ravaged contexts is therefore not a neutral process, but is an attempt to promote a particular kind or model of peace. The questions that arise relate to the sustainability of such a peace often imposed by regional and global powers and, more importantly, how post-conflict elections fit into the new liberal peace agenda and its consequences for societies emerging from war. Some analysts have based their position on the timing of

elections, the costs and the implications of choosing one electoral system over another (Reilly 2002). Others have rather focused on the opportunities such elections present to political elites and 'spoilers' driven by certain vested interests to advance or subvert the democratic peace. It is also important to note that elections do not take place in a vacuum, and that post-conflict elections can be complex, costly and difficult endeavours. This view has even tempted some global powers to venture into costly state-building attempts in conflict zones, so far with severely limited success. Yet, there are some who rightly note that elections may reproduce old divisions or cleavages, or simply return perpetrators of violence to power – this time legitimised through elections. Three well-known cases of such instances in West Africa are those of Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea-Bissau, each of which is the subject of an essay in this publication. What this implies is the need to examine in some detail the elections/democracy nexus.

Elections and Democracy

It is an axiom in the liberal political paradigm that, 'open and fair competition for power, structured around the popular vote inevitably lead to democracy' (Gurr 2000). The principle at the heart of this assumption is that free individuals with an equal voting power have the power to choose their representatives and leaders, and also hold them accountable, as the electorate – the people have the power to vote them into or out of power. This is often seen as a concrete manifestation of the sovereign will residing with the people, who decide who rules and who does not. The equality of voters is also premised on the nature of individual citizens that emerged from the capitalist revolutions in Europe and North America, whose principles of liberty and equality were expounded as the justification for the overthrow of the 'old order'.

Popular consent and legitimisation through open competition or elections implied, among other things, rule by the people, through their elected representatives, or in some form of 'political shorthand', a government of the people by the people – democracy. But there is enough evidence to show that it is not as simple as that. As Adejumbi (2000: 61), notes, 'the existence of an oligarchy in society shows that elections provide a legal and political framework to justify and legitimize minority rule'. This observation is critical in relation to the distribution of wealth and power in society. When this is taken into consideration, it becomes evident that voters neither have equal power, nor can the right

to exercise that limited power be taken for granted. In such contexts, the political form of 'minority rule' that emerges is more of a plutocracy – government by the wealthy – rather than a democracy (Robinson 1996, 2006). In such political systems the 'few' rich control power, and elections are often reduced to competitions between various factions of the elites, supported by powerful corporate and international interests, offering the people little choice, in what Mkandawire (1999) once described as 'choice-less democracies'.

However, Adejumobi again argues that in spite of their ideological connotations, 'elections as an element of liberal democracy need to be taken seriously' in the African context. He goes further to add a caveat: accepting the relevance of elections being tied to 'the constitutive and regulative mechanisms and precepts necessary to promote healthy and free electoral competition' and 'the environmental conditions (socio-economic and political)'. This position adds two elements: the relevance of socio-economic and political contexts in which elections take place and the quality and fairness of the procedural aspects of elections – an aspect to which the international election observation industry has been devoted, with mixed results.

Elections in post-war contexts seem to be part of a 'technical fix' for procedural democracy that will improve and hopefully evolve into full-blown democracy as the effects of reconstruction and peace-building policies kick in over a given period. These policies, like the elections, will not take place in a vacuum, and elections may indeed produce outcomes that may be 'democratic', but do not lead to peace. A quote of Amos Sawyer, the former President of Liberia's Interim Government to the effect that 'the state we produced turned out to be a criminal state, legitimised by elections' (quoted in Samuels 2006: 4), in reference to the 1997 electoral victory of ex-rebel leader Charles Taylor (Lyons 1999), under whose rule Liberia returned to civil war in 2003, along with others brings out the complexity of the elections/democracy/peace nexus.

This brings us back to the point of the 'the environmental conditions' that are also linked to the root causes of violent conflict. Do elections as conceptualised in post-war peace agreements address the roots of conflict, or is there a basic assumption that after the elections and the exit of peacekeepers, observers and multilateral missions, the roots of the conflict will somehow be addressed? Can post-conflict elections produce results that reach down to the roots of conflict, and would

those that win such elections share power with erstwhile foes, or address the needs or grievances of those traumatised by the war? Do governments produced by elections always have the capacity, resources, will or autonomy to claim ownership of, and deliver, the peace dividend to their citizens? Where does the accountability of such post-conflict governments lie? What happens when elections produce results not favoured by the international community? Whose priority prevails? How come 'such votes for peace' in Liberia and Sierra Leone in the middle of civil wars in the 1990s quickly unravelled as both countries slid back into conflict after elections? How can the 'vote for peace' translate into a vote for popular power, justice and human development/security? What kind of state is produced by such elections? Some of the essays in this special issue direct their attention towards these questions.

Elections and Conflict Resolution

Another 'selling point' of post-conflict elections is that they facilitate the resolution of conflicts in a non-violent manner. First, by making elections a part of peace agreements, their authors and promoters are able to get all sides in the conflict as signatories to peace to lay down their arms and submit to the rules of non-violent political competition. Second, by allowing various political groupings to organise and compete on an equal footing through free and fair elections, it is believed that the spirit of openness, dialogue and bargaining that are inherent in democratic politics can prevent the tempo of social conflict and tension from reaching explosive levels. Also through institutional reforms and constitutional designs, the venting of grievances, articulation and pursuit of competing interests can be organised in a regulated and consensual manner that significantly reduces or resolves conflicts before they escalate to explosive or destabilising levels. This is clearly an optimistic view of elections that also has the approval of the international community.

As Samuels (2006: 3) notes, 'adoption of a democratic regime can assist in the resolution of the struggle for power by providing an internationally accepted standard of who is entitled to govern'. But, where the struggle for power is hinged upon structural political divisions and a historically rooted sense of grievance, elections may not lead to the resolution of conflict; rather they may create new forms of old divisions. Four authors in this volume – Einarsdottir, John, Olayode and

Odukoya, drawing on experiences from Guinea-Bissau, Sierra Leone and Nigeria – show how elections may not address the roots of conflict, nor prevent conflict from recurring. Ayelazuno also provides a rather compelling critique of the democracy-conflict management ‘model’ based on the case of Ghana. These essays use rich empirical material in their analysis of the democracy/conflict resolution debate, and provide explanations of why elections may not resolve violent conflicts at all times.

At another level, elections are a part of the peace-building architecture in which processes of transitional justice, particularly national reconciliation, play important roles. It is believed that democracy can also breathe life into processes of reconciliation and reconstruction. Democracy ushered in by elections can act as an incubator for transitional justice institutions and processes that can address grievances and wounds from the past – at least at the national and social levels – and provide the political order within which reconciliation at the communal and individual levels can take place. The essay by Svärd on the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) provides insights into the challenges facing ordinary citizens in a country coming out of prolonged war, as regards accessing the information generated by the commission. Yet, such information is necessary both in terms of coming to terms with the past and moving on as a nation. The recommendations of the TRC are also valuable both in respect of the ways they can reinforce institutional reform and practices at the national level, but, perhaps more importantly, in terms of the educational value of the information generated to the younger and coming generations about the causes of the war, and how to avoid a recurrence of such tragedies in the future.

International Democracy Support and Elections in West Africa

Post-conflict and transitional elections in West Africa have received ample international support under the rubric of democracy promotion. The reasons for this have already been mentioned and will not be elaborated upon here. It is important to note that such elections are expected to meet the internationally stipulated conditions for openness and fairness, and reflect the will of the electorate. International support has come in the form of resources for institution-building/reform, training/capacity-building, support for electoral and political institutions, and international election monitoring. Such support has gone to governments and organisations of civil society and is clearly directed at promoting a liberal form of democracy in the sub-region.

As noted earlier, this is inherent in a hegemonic agenda of promoting both liberal democracy and liberal peace in post-conflict societies around the world. It also accounts for the 'elevation' of free and fair elections, as certified by international observers, into one of the conditionalities for granting African governments international legitimacy, as well as donor support. However, the international certification of elections has not been altogether unproblematic. This is partly because of the 'confusion, contradictions and unevenness that have characterised international election observation in Africa' (Anglin 1998: 471; Laakso 2000: 437–8), and the reality that although election monitors may indeed see themselves as 'neutral observers' of the electoral process, they are also actors within the framework of their countries and organisations, which may have strategic, ideological and economic interests in Africa. This last factor sometimes explains the inconsistencies in election observer reports, and the varying actions taken on such reports on a case-by-case basis. Odukoya's essay in this volume explores some of the contradictions between election monitoring, democracy and peace-building in West Africa. A critical point, however, is that democracy support provides spaces in some contexts for international actors to take up part of the policy space, sometimes overtly influencing the process and sometimes undermining local ownership and local impact.

The essays in this volume do not directly address the 'three-fold transition' from the command economy to the free-market economy, which is well embedded as the economic component of the liberal democracy and peace agendas. Although Ayelazuno links up with some of the issues in his analysis of the class relations underpinning Ghana's elite-led democracy, the ways in which electoral democracy transfers power to political and economic elites – or what may indeed be a 'new' governing class – would need to be explored further. Akokpari and Azevedo in their jointly authored essay present an interesting viewpoint based on the comparative study of post-conflict elections in Liberia and Guinea-Bissau. They are able to identify the commonalities and differences in the politics and elections in both countries, but note that both countries have a rather long journey to make towards peace and development. An important lesson in this comparative study is that no two countries are exactly the same, and policies designed for elections and peace-building need to take local histories and specificities into consideration at all times.

Focusing on the role of development assistance to post-war countries, Einarsdóttir provides a sharp critique of donor behaviour, drawing on partnership in aid within the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida). Noting that unequal relations between donors and recipients have underscored the partnership policy, she shows how such inequalities have fed into decisions that have hurt vulnerable sections of the population in post-conflict countries such as Guinea-Bissau. She also notes that this has further weakened the fragile government, feeding fears that it is 'becoming Africa's first narco-state' – based on media reports linking certain state and military officials to drug lords and drug trafficking via air and boat shipments from Latin America (Winter 2007). She also notes that in spite of fulfilling the free and fair elections criterion for international aid, post-conflict Guinea-Bissau was abandoned as an 'aid orphan' by donors acting under the new rubric of development partnership with Africa, thus paving the way for the crisis in which the Guinea-Bissau state is presently immersed.

In the contribution on political rhetoric in media reports on politics, Nwagbara explores the links between rhetoric, semantics and democracy, by analysing the ways in which media reports use rhetoric to further certain political interests and influence politics. Drawing upon one of the 'soft' and less obvious aspects of peace, the essay is able to draw attention to how the 'language power' of news is crafted by the mass media to promote biased political views and influence the reading public.

In the light of the foregoing, this publication provides much interesting information and knowledge from several West African countries, and could serve as a pointer to the extent to which democratic struggles have led to gains for the people, or those areas in which democracy has been undermined, with implications for sustainable peace.

In conclusion, it must be emphasised that democracy is good for West Africa. It has been able to put an end to the wars in the sub-region. But, it should be noted, 'democracy is not about Western values' (Ibrahim 2007a: 17). Indeed, democracy is about the emancipation of the majority from the tyranny of the few. However, when the few are able to fund parties and stand for election, win and control the levers of state and the economy, the struggle for democracy becomes

more complex and challenging if it is to lead to more egalitarian societies and peaceful outcomes in Africa.

In spite of its imperfections so far, electoral democracy does offer some opportunities and political space for conflict transformation in West Africa. The opening up of the political space provides opportunities for alternative progressive political forces to organise and mobilise for support around their programmes, but the struggle to wrest power from the hegemonic and dominant forces will be a difficult one. However, electoralism provides some potential for inclusive coalitions and hitherto excluded groups to contest the political space and engage in a participatory process that can lead to a transfer of power to pro-people political forces.

What a decade of post-conflict and transition elections in West Africa aptly demonstrates is that there is much potential for democratic consolidation and peace, but that considerable work still has to be done by a wide spectrum of social actors and a new generation of visionary, independent and selfless political leaders to engage in the complex challenge of defending and extending democratic gains, and transforming the immense potential for popular democracy, peace and development into concrete reality.

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