



## Managing diversity in Africa for credible and fair elections<sup>1</sup>

### Promoting inclusiveness and participation in Africa through elections

Africa has 2,110 living languages and 3,315 ethnic groups. In every African country, the population practices at least two religions. The countries are also diverse in terms of economic systems, (ranging from pastoralism to capitalism), settlement types (rural or urban) and patterns of income distribution. In addition, there are differences among the African countries in terms of gender ratios, age demographics and the origin of the population (indigenous or migrant).

The management of diversity continues to be prominent in the agenda of international bodies that deal with peace, security, human rights and development, such as the United Nations. It gained significance in Africa during the first extraordinary summit of the committee of participating heads of State and Government of the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), which was held in Cotonou, Benin, on 25 and 26 October 2008. During the summit, the management of diversity was identified as an emerging issue to peace, integration and development in Africa.<sup>2</sup>

“It is not our diversity which divides us; it is not our ethnicity, or religion or culture that divides us. Since we have achieved our freedom, there can only be one division amongst us: between those who cherish democracy and those who do not.”

- Nelson Mandela<sup>a</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Research for the present document is based on the third edition of the *African Governance Report: Elections the Management of Diversity*, a joint publication written by the Economic Commission for Africa and the United Nations Development Programme.

<sup>2</sup> Report of the Expert Group Meeting on the Management of Diversity in Africa, Accra, 31 July – 2 August 2012, Office of the Special Adviser on Africa and the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre.

<sup>a</sup> Nelson Mandela, in a speech made on 16 April 1999 upon receiving the Freedom of Durbin.

Poor management of diversity can exert negative spillovers on social cohesion and economic development. Unfortunately, this is the case in many African countries where mismanagement of elections has resulted in diversity-related problems and broader governance challenges.

This policy brief contains a review on how this mismanagement has affected the way polls are held and the impact of diversity mismanagement on African societies. It also provides policy recommendations for enhancing management of diversity in elections.

### Elections are more regular but still difficult to organize

The overarching goal of free and fair elections is to aggregate, in a transparent and peaceful manner, a population’s preference in the choice of its political leadership. Such an outcome can only be achieved when all diverse groups that constitute a nation are given the opportunity to participate. This promotes social cohesion and grants political legitimacy. Managing politics in a society with deep-rooted diversity is complex at the best of times, but organizing national election is even more difficult. This issue is discussed in the third edition of the African Governance Report, which focuses on the theme “Elections and management of diversity”.

Evidence presented in the report indicates that Africa has made notable progress in conducting regular elections. Between 1996 and 2006, some 44 elections were held across the continent. However, this greater regularity has not yet translated into better-managed elections. Since the 1990s several countries have experienced a change in leadership more than once, while

in other countries, ruling parties have continued to dominate political power.

The difficulties in holding transparent elections and managing diversity in a fair manner in Africa stem from two main reasons that are rooted in the continent’s colonial past and post-colonial political architecture. During the colonial era, Africa was dissected geographically and as result, identical communities were balkanized. Following independence, these new boundaries triggered ethnic consciousness.

Sectarian mobilization, intimidation and violence commonly occur during African elections and consequently, undermine efforts to use elections to resolve social and political differences. Côte d’Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, Nigeria, Zimbabwe and, more recently, Mali are illustrations of this phenomenon. Election-related violence often stems from deep-rooted structural factors (political and economic differences based on ethnic, regional, racial and class competitions). It can occur throughout the campaign, during balloting and counting and when results are announced on election days.

In the post-colonial era, some leaders stifled democratic diversity management by pursuing authoritarian strategies, such as centralization and single-party systems. These leaders were of the opinion that ethno-linguistic diversity and divergent political opinion were detrimental to nation-building. Subsequently, expressions of diversity were strangled under common identity, single-nation and one-party systems. The suppression of democracy prompted struggles, which brought about democratic reforms during the 1980s. However, it was not until the end of the 1990s that many African countries started making notable progress in changing their political architecture by introducing separation of powers, decentralization and presidential term limits.

## Policy frameworks for managing wider electoral diversity

Clear policy gaps in diversity management are prevalent throughout Africa. As the extent of those gaps differs from country to country, the measures to be implemented need to be adapted accordingly.<sup>3</sup>

Constitutions need to adequately promote diversity and inclusive governance by including relevant provisions. In that regard, affirmative action is an imperative in protecting minority interests and marginalized groups. Accordingly, a commission should be established with the mandate to oversee implementation of a diversity-inclusive agenda. The constitution should also ensure the institutional and financial autonomy of electoral management bodies.

The establishment of electoral management bodies or electoral commissions is crucial to organizing successful elec-

tions. Box 1 contains examples of models of electoral management boards in Africa. The models range from having diverse representation on the boards to ones that have financial and administrative autonomy. The composition of those boards has become more diverse over the past 20 years, particularly with increased representation of women as members or even as chairs. However, most minority groups are not still adequately represented. Furthermore, concerns relating to the independence of electoral management boards persist, especially regarding the following: appointing and removing board members; the interference of the government and civil service in elections; resolving electoral disputes; and funding the boards. Some countries, such as Kenya and South Africa, have undertaken key reforms to deal with the aforementioned challenges. Those reforms include: greater decentralization; establishment of watchdogs; including human rights and anti-corruption bodies; and strengthening institutions, such as parliaments. In addition, electoral management bodies have also been redesigned by embedding them in constitutions, and in some cases the influence of the government on their decision-making process has been reduced.

### Box 1 Models of electoral management boards in Africa

Model	Salient features
Independent single track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Full independence from the government.</li> <li>• Members chosen based on personal merit and integrity and professional backgrounds</li> <li>• Separate budgetary appropriations, guaranteed by the constitution.</li> <li>• Full responsibility for administration and management of elections.</li> <li>• African countries that follow this model are Botswana, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda and Zimbabwe</li> </ul>
Independent multi-pronged	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2 or more bodies, independent from the government.</li> <li>• 1 body responsible for administration and management of elections and the other body having oversight powers and functions.</li> <li>• African countries that follow this model are: Sierra Leone; and United Republic of Tanzania</li> </ul>
Hybrid/mixed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Core electoral functions carried out by a ministry, government department or government agency under the supervision of an independent body.</li> <li>• African countries that follow this model include: Cabo Verde, Côte d’Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Guinea and Senegal</li> </ul>
Government controlled (full)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Government takes sole responsibility for management and administration of elections</li> </ul>
Government controlled (decentralized)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited control, coordination and supervision by a national authority, independent of government</li> </ul>

Source: Economic Commission for Africa and United Nations Development Programme, *African Governance Report: Elections and the Management of Diversity in Africa*, Oxford University Press, 2013.

3 Kidane Mengisteab, Diversity management in Africa: findings from the African Peer Review Mechanism and a framework for analysis and policy-making, Report for Economic Commission for Africa, Governance and Public Administration Division, November 2012 (ECA/GPAD/APRM/TP/10/3).

For diversity management actions to be effective, public oversight institutions need to be established. Those institutions, which include judiciary bodies, security forces, anti-corruption bodies and offices of auditor generals, must be autonomous in order to ensure checks and balances and that mandatory punitive actions are taken, when required.

Funding is a key aspect of electoral processes, in particular with regards to campaigns. As access to electoral resources is not equal among African political parties, strict regulations on campaign financing must be applicable to all electoral parties and election funding needs to be safeguarded against corruption. In addition, regulations should be put in place to ensure that parties disclose private campaign funding.

Relevant training and policy-oriented research should be conducted to help build the capacity, professionalism and effectiveness of electoral institutions. Voter education is an instrumental tool in tackling diversity mismanagement. Targeted programmes should highlight the importance of political and social tolerance. Appropriate platforms should also be established with the aim to foster party-to-party dialogue and cooperation in responding to national issues on a non-partisan basis.

The media play an instrumental role in managing diversity during national elections as they are vehicles for supporting democratic ideas. Modern communication tools, such as mobile phones and text messaging, along with social media networks, including Facebook and Twitter, offer new channels for disseminating information quickly. Public media in many African countries, do not extend fair coverage to diverse groups and voices during campaigns. It is, therefore, critical that media outlets receive training on providing objective and accurate reporting, and are made aware of the need to grant fair coverage of campaign activities and messages of all registered contending parties.

At the continental level, African Governments should embrace diversity management in their regional integration agenda. The African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance has emboldened the African Union and regional economic communities to promote democratic governance. Regional organizations and economic communities should also ensure that basic norms of electoral integrity are upheld by African countries. Meaningful sanctions should be applied if those norms are not respected.

## Box 2

### Policy recommendations for managing electoral conflicts and disputes

- Political parties should provide a written commitment to carry out a peaceful election and any violation of this commitment should be sanctioned by a statutory body.
- The capacity and credibility of dispute and adjudication mechanisms should be strengthened.
- Political parties should adopt affirmative measures by ensuring greater representation of women, young people, minorities and persons with disabilities.
- Security forces should be neutral towards parties during elections in order to maintain law and order objectively.
- Countries should draw on good practices relating to conflict management to pre-empt and prevent violence. These include: use of conflict mediation panels and grass-root units (used effectively in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Lesotho, South Africa and Zambia) carrying out campaigns, such as a national campaign on the reduction of electoral violence undertaken in Nigeria in 2007.

*Source:* AGR III, 2013.

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