Article

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Electoral process in Africa: The impact of COVID-19 and challenges for the EU

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic is having a considerable impact on global economic and intercontinental geopolitical relations, and is thus significantly reshaping our world. The coronavirus crisis is also affecting democracy and the electoral process in Africa, with important implications for the rule of law, democracy and security. While 2020 started as a pivotal year for African Union–EU relations, the coronavirus has disrupted the agenda and raises questions about the repercussions of the pandemic on not only EU foreign policy but also cooperation between the two continents.

Keywords

Africa, Democracy, Elections, Security, Coronavirus pandemic, AU–EU cooperation

Introduction

Around the world we see elections being postponed due to the coronavirus crisis. In the context of COVID-19, at least 67 countries (*Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance* 2020) have postponed elections, while 49 have held them as initially planned despite the health crisis. In Africa, 11 countries—Botswana, Chad, Ethiopia, Gabon, Gambia, Kenya, Liberia, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda and Zimbabwe—opted to adjourn their elections, while Burundi, Malawi, Benin, Guinea, Cameroon and Mali held theirs as originally scheduled.

In the time of COVID-19, such decisions leave no one indifferent. Some claim that holding elections as planned is fundamental to safeguarding democratic rights, especially 'at a time when significant state power is being concentrated in the executive

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branch through the exercise of powerful emergency measures' (Banbury 2020). France recently demonstrated that it was possible to hold elections despite the risky health situation and made it a point of honour to introduce exceptional health and safety measures to reassure the voters and offer optimal conditions for people to exercise their civic duty. Even though public opinion was not in favour of this decision, the French government maintained its position and explained that elections are essential as they cement the public's trust in institutions and allow citizens to hold their representatives to account. In the end, France recorded a record low turnout and decided to postpone the second round of local elections.

What about African countries, which do not have the same resources and infrastructure as France? Is going ahead with elections recommended? What are the implications in terms of democracy, rule of law, health and security? This article argues that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the electoral process in Africa, affecting not only democracy and security in the continent but also cooperation between the African Union (AU) and the EU. The article explores the options for the holding or postponement of elections amid the COVID-19 pandemic and whether either is a viable solution for ensuring a well-functioning democracy in a sometimes fragile security situation. In the last section, the article focuses on the challenges the EU needs to address with regard to the latest Comprehensive Strategy with Africa, including the new EU budget deal, the EU Security Union Strategy and how policy reforms will shape AU–EU relations.

Holding the elections as planned: a double-edged sword

A recent Pew Research study (Connaughton et al. 2020) surveyed attitudes towards democracy and revealed a decline in trust in institutions. The survey, which was conducted in the spring of 2020, explored what people in 34 countries think about the way democracy functions in their own country. While people still value voting, the levels of dissatisfaction are high. Of those surveyed,

- 44% are satisfied with how democracy works, as opposed to 54% who are dissatisfied—in Europe as a whole, 48% are not satisfied, though significant disparities exist from country to country;

- 49% agree that the state operates for the benefit of all;

- 64% are frustrated with elected officials.

Four African countries are among the 34 countries included in the survey: Tunisia, Kenya, South Africa and Nigeria. With the exception of Kenya, those surveyed seem highly dissatisfied with democracy:

- In South Africa, Tunisia and Nigeria, the proportion of those who are not satisfied is 61%, 69% and 70%, respectively.

- In Kenya, 59% of the people surveyed are satisfied with democracy in their country as opposed to 39% who are not.

The research reveals that individuals who 'think elected officials don't care about the opinions of ordinary people are more likely to be unhappy with how democracy is working in their country' (Connaughton et al. 2020). In such a situation, countries face a real dilemma between holding and postponing elections.

Before exploring recent cases, it is useful to learn from the past. In 2014, Ebola erupted in West Africa. It was also an important election year for war-torn Liberia, which was experiencing not only a political and security crisis, but also a significant health threat. After two postponements and in spite of the situation, then-President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf decided to hold the elections (Banbury 2020). The government took a series of measures, including a major public health campaign, to make the citizens feel safe and encourage them to cast their votes. Even though Liberia proved it was possible to organise elections at a highly precarious time, thus not yielding to the health threat and enabling the population to exercise their right to vote, the country recorded a very low turnout: 26.68% compared to 71.33% three years earlier (*ElectionGuide.org* n. d.).

Despite the fear and insecurity caused by COVID-19, Mali followed the same path and held its parliamentary elections on 29 March 2020. Mali had already postponed its legislative elections twice due to security concerns. Even though civil society organisations had called for their postponement, President Keita declared that the elections were essential to support the resolution of conflict in the country. He reminded the population that 'these parliamentary elections resulted from the decision of the National Dialogue, which set deadlines' (Gänsler 2020). Some applauded the president's decision to hold the elections despite the aggravating circumstances. The first case of COVID-19 in Mali was announced the day before the elections (Golubski and Schaeffer 2020). Other disruptions to the elections occurred: Soumaila Cisse, head of the opposition, was kidnapped by armed men while campaigning on 26 March; and more than 270 polling stations were closed due to security concerns. The elections had a participation rate of just 35.25% in the first round (*RFI* 2020) and 35.33% in the second. With such a low turnout, how is it possible to promote the elections as a true representation of the population's position and beliefs? Since June, Mali has experienced a serious political crisis. Thousands of protesters have gathered to call for the president's resignation and the protests have resulted in violent clashes with the police. The main breeding ground for this anger is the security crisis that has been going on for years. In addition, the economic situation is worsening due to the pandemic, and the lack of solutions offered by the president, in power since 2013, is increasing people's dissatisfaction with the government. However, the elections were the catalyst for the popular uprising (Duhamel 2020).

The constitutional referendum that took place on 22 March in Guinea also generated disorder. The referendum, which garnered 91% approval of the proposed amendment, triggered violent protests in the country (*France24.com* 2020) over what 'critics see as an extension of power by President Alpha Condé' (Golubski and Schaeffer 2020). The constitutional amendment maintains the two-term limit for elected officials, but increases

the term of office from five years to six. The controversy surrounding the referendum was also fed by suspicions over the verification of 2.5 million names on the electoral roll, as well as the cancellation of the AU's electoral observation mission to Guinea, among other things. President Condé has not hesitated to use COVID-19 to serve his political agenda. The pandemic served as an excuse to postpone the high-level Economic Community of West African States meeting in the capital, Conakry, a few days before the election. The heads of state who had expected to attend this meeting had considered it the very last opportunity to convince President Condé not to move forward with the referendum (Sylvestre-Treiner 2020). In the end the vote took place out of the view of the global community as the authorities shut down the Internet for 48 hours.

The Guinean example shows how the coronavirus has been dangerously used to serve political interests and strengthen leaders' holds on power (Gyimah-Boadi and Logan 2020) at a time when opposition gatherings are banned, campaigning has been made very difficult and electoral observation missions are not easy to set up.

The postponement of elections: a move to save democracy?

While some Western countries have managed to avoid postponing their elections by offering alternatives such as Internet or postal voting, these alternatives are difficult to put in place in Africa because of the lack of infrastructure. Postponing the elections could prove to be a wise decision; nevertheless the challenges that lie ahead are significant. Maintaining public order, ensuring the population's safety and fighting against the rapid spread of fake news on social media are among the challenges that must be overcome to guarantee stability and consolidate people's trust in institutions in any country holding elections.

In Ethiopia, the national election board has announced that the parliamentary elections due in August 2020 have been postponed to a later date. The stakes in these elections are high and the population has been waiting impatiently for the political process to unfold. Indeed, 'the winning party or coalition will set the terms of a national reconciliation process, oversee the drafting of a new constitution, and further the privatization of Ethiopia's industries' (Bruton 2020). With this in mind, the government cannot afford a low turnout or an eruption of protests. The elections will also be crucial in terms of societal structure. The voters will choose between supporting an ethnic federalist system or a unified social system. The fragile security situation of the country is also a factor to be taken into consideration for the organisation of the elections. Bearing in mind the circumstances, the postponement of the elections was a wise decision by Abiy Ahmed, Prime Minister of Ethiopia, and one which was supported by the opposition. However, the adjournment of elections might weaken Abiy's bid for office. The prime minister, laureate of the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize, is under strong scrutiny.

Amid the coronavirus crisis, Tanzanian President Magufuli has been highly criticised for allowing people to continue to attend places of worship (Ng'wanakilala 2020). Tanzania has taken only mild measures to contain the virus in comparison with

its neighbours. The situation, reminiscent of the Ebola outbreak, which was marked by non-transparent management, is likely to break 'the trust between the government and its people, and diminish the international community's trust in Magufuli's administration, too' (Edwards 2020). COVID-19 may have an impact on the upcoming presidential elections scheduled for October 2020. Even though Magufuli announced in December 2019 that he will not seek a third term if he is re-elected, he could use the exceptional circumstances as an opportunity to amend the constitution and consolidate his power.

This would be comparable to the situation of Rwandan President Kagame, who was in a similar position before he decided to change the constitution in 2015 to allow him to stay in power until 2034 (*The Guardian* 2016). Taking advantage of the health crisis would have a very serious impact on Tanzania's aspirations for democracy and prosperity. Since Magufuli rose to power in 2015, the country has suffered from an alarming decline in political and civil rights (Gavin 2019). A concrete example of this fierce repression is the deliberate attack on Tundu Lissu, a leading opposition figure, who was shot 16 times outside the parliament. He survived the attack and has announced that he is ready to run for the presidency (*BBC News* 2019). The Inter-Parliamentary Union is investigating the violations of human rights in Tundu's case and 'highlights concerns over alleged abuses and proposes that an IPU Committee delegation accompany him upon return to Tanzania' (*Amsterdam and Partners* 2020). However, the current conjuncture will make the investigation difficult and represents an important impediment to Tundu Lissu's right to campaign for the presidential elections.

While holding elections as planned presents risks in terms of turnout and true representativeness, postponing elections also constitutes perils in terms of political reputation and repression. The longer the restrictions are in place in Africa, the more the risks engendered by the COVID-19 crisis—economic, security and political—will increase.

The EU's Comprehensive Strategy with Africa is at stake

The EU's partnership with Africa is high on the European Commission's agenda. Ursula von der Leyen's first trip outside Europe as Commission president was to Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian capital and headquarters of the AU. She declared: 'For my first visit, I have chosen the continent hosting the world's fastest growing economies; a continent with immense ambition and aspirations, but also with immense needs' (*DW.com* 2019). The commitment to strategic cooperation with Africa was confirmed at the tenth EU–AU college-to-college meeting in February 2020, which saw the largest delegation of its kind ever to travel outside the EU (Mashika and Nyman 2020). Following the meeting, on 9 March the European Commission released the Joint Communication *Towards a Comprehensive Strategy with Africa* (European Commission 2020). The strategy is built on five partnerships: (1) a partnership for green transition and energy access, (2) a partnership for digital transformation, (3) a partnership for sustainable growth and jobs, (4) a partnership for peace and governance, and (5) a partnership on migration and mobility.

According to the Fragile States Index (*Fragile States Index* 2020), 36 of the world's most fragile states are in Africa, where the situation is often weakened by conflicts and political instability. The crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic struck at a global level shortly after the release of the Africa Strategy. While 2020 started as a pivotal year for AU–EU relations, COVID-19 has disrupted the agenda and exacerbated some African countries' political instability. Votes in elections have been marred by reports of violence and rights violations. Given the circumstances, election observation missions have not been able to take place and follow-up has been difficult to establish.

Not only do electoral periods represent a risk in Africa in terms of security and the rule of law, but the pandemic also 'threatens to raise the risks in recent post-conflict states and other countries not experiencing conflict' (Moyer and Kaplan 2020). In a context of heightened economic and security fragility, vulnerable populations may be forced to migrate. Migration and forced displacement represent challenges for both Europe and Africa. The largest migrant flows are intra-African (Gandhi 2018) and the main drivers of migration are political instability and the search for economic opportunities (UN Conference on Trade and Development 2017). According to an investigation conducted by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, the Latin American Center for Investigative Journalism and various media outlets around the world, a smuggling network between Brazil and South Africa provides fake visas to Africans planning to reach the US or Canada via Latin American states (Nwoye 2020). 'Europe's crackdown on migration' (Nwoye 2020) is why Africans are favouring other dangerous migration routes. Such migration flows present a high risk, especially in the time of COVID-19. Europe and Africa need to renew their cooperation and the crisis may turn out to be an opportunity for an important reset that would benefit both parties.

In April, as part of the 'Team Europe' package, Ursula von der Leyen announced financial assistance to African countries of €502 million in emergency cash and €2.8 billion to support research, health and sanitation systems (Fox 2020). Nonetheless, there is nothing new in this announcement as the money draws on existing resources. Assistance to the health sector aimed at containing the coronavirus crisis, therefore, comes at the expense of funding for other essential sectors for sustainable development, including enhanced cooperation on democratic governance and the rule of law, the very cornerstones of peace and security.

The EU Security Union Strategy

The EU Security Union Strategy, introduced in July 2020, focuses on four main pillars: (1) a future-proof security environment, (2) tackling evolving threats, (3) protecting Europeans from terrorism and organised crime, and (4) a strong security ecosystem. The strategy cannot be achieved without strong AU–EU cooperation. As the Communication from the Commission on the EU Security Union Strategy rightly says: 'Protecting the Union and its citizens is no longer only about ensuring security within the EU borders, but also addressing the external dimension of security' (European Commission 2020a,

2). Both the Common Foreign and Security Policy and the Common Security and Defence Policy have to take into account the electoral process in Africa in order to ensure the effectiveness and sustainability of the different security policies. The security dimension is not sufficiently integrated into the election observation missions. Given that elections have the potential to become a catalyst for violence in fragile countries, resulting in insecurity, political instability and eventually forced displacement, EU security policies need to be assimilated within the missions. The promotion of governance and development objectives must be part of AU–EU efforts in the fields of democracy and security.

Conclusion

It is clear that 2020 is not only a pivotal electoral year for Africa, but also a turning point in terms of Africa–Europe relations. The crisis induced by the COVID-19 pandemic goes way beyond the sector of health and has affected the exercise of democracy, the rule of law and security in both continents, which have been confronted with difficult choices with regard to holding and postponing elections. Various challenges have emerged in Africa: while holding the elections comes at a high cost in terms of turnout and representativeness, postponing them could be used by political leaders as a way to extend their powers—something which has also been witnessed in the EU. In both cases, countries have experienced episodes of violence that have heightened the risk of instability and fragility, especially in times of a pandemic. Political instability and insecurity represent drivers of migration and forced displacement, issues which need to be tackled at an intra- as well as inter-continental level.

AU–EU relations have often been described as asymmetric. Significant political efforts have been made, notably under the leadership of Ursula von der Leyen, to improve the relationship; however, the pandemic has disturbed and disrupted this cooperation. The creation of the Comprehensive Strategy with Africa is an important step towards enhanced cooperation. Fostering a two-way partnership will be essential for continued cooperation and calls for coherent policies and follow-up. A fresh start in Africa–Europe relations is needed, founded on a common political vision. EU foreign policy cannot be limited to solving the problems that manifest themselves in the most visible way, such as terror attacks or boats with migrants sinking in the Mediterranean Sea.

An integrated approach is needed, more than ever, with increased coordination of policies and budgets. In the past, the EU has had a tendency to assess its partnership with Africa in a quantitative fashion by displaying the financial aid granted to countries. Nonetheless, one needs to highlight the progress that has been made in terms of political ambition. In the strategy it is written that 'the EU also intends to step up cooperation on democratic governance and rule of law on both continents, including accountability and transparency of public institutions; independent and impartial justice, corruption and transnational crimes as well as trafficking in human beings' (European Commission 2020c, 14). This is a great first step towards a mutually beneficial partnership. Is the EU finally ready to turn intention into action?

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