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Subcommittee on African Affairs
“Entrenched African Leadership: Progress Made, Challenges Remaining”
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Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, on behalf of the National Democratic Institute (NDI) I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you to discuss potential U.S. policy responses to entrenched African leadership. For more than 25 years, NDI has conducted programs alongside African democrats to support and consolidate democratic governance, advocate for fair and credible elections, strengthen political parties, and encourage citizen participation in politics, especially among women and youth. The Institute has conducted programs in 44 of Africa’s 54 countries, and I have been fortunate to be part of that effort in many of those countries for the past 19 years. That has meant numerous and sustained interactions with pro-democracy activists and democratically-elected leaders across the continent.

Introduction

Many Africans and Africa experts would agree that entrenched one-man rule, often autocratic in nature, is still an impediment to political development in many African countries today. Despite the continent’s valuable and abundant human capital and rich mineral resources, many African countries still suffer a democracy deficit because of long serving heads of state whose actions inhibit the emergence of an enabling environment that could permit the continent to realize its full democratic potential. In some cases, these leaders are octogenarians holding tight at the tip of a demographic triangle where two thirds of the adult population is under the age of 35.¹

At the same time, significant political change has occurred in Africa in the last two decades since the beginning of what has been termed the ‘third wave of democratization’ in the early 1990s. For example, between 1960, when many African countries achieved independence, and 1990, only three heads of state voluntarily retired from office. However, as a result of ongoing democratic transitions, by 2000 the number of heads of state that had either retired from office or stepped down after losing an election had risen to more than 30.² In 1980, while rating democracies around the world, Freedom House ranked only four sub-Saharan African countries as “free” and 15 as “partly free”; by 2011, nine were ranked as “free” and 22 as “partly free.”³

Also, some sub-regional bodies have adopted protocols and guidelines on governance and elections that strengthen democracy and have facilitated the renewal of political leadership in member states. For example, by insisting on strict adherence to constitutionalism and credible

¹ US Census Bureau, [International Data Base](#). 2012 population estimates for Chad and Cameroon.

² Goldsmith, Arthur A. “Risk, Rule, and Reason in Africa.” *African Economic Policy Discussion Paper 46*, (Washington: USAID, 2000).

³ Freedom House. “Freedom in the World” 1980 and 2011. <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report-types/freedom-world>

elections among member states, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has given most of West Africa a facelift despite the recent military incursions in the politics of Mali and Guinea Bissau. Today, only two of the regional bloc's 15 countries are ruled by leaders who have been in power for more than 10 years. Similarly, because of norms and guidelines adopted and enforced by the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC), Southern Africa has experienced peaceful political transitions and renewed leadership in countries such as Botswana, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa and Zambia.

Nevertheless, Africa is a mosaic and a tapestry whose leaders project many shades of political performance and varying degrees of democratic credentials. In still too many African countries, entrenched leaders hold onto power and govern their countries in complete defiance of democratic practices and norms enshrined in international instruments, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which call for citizens to have the opportunity to renew their political leadership through regular and credible elections⁴. In almost all cases, the provisions of the Universal Declaration are also adopted in the preambles of the constitutions of these countries, but they are ignored or amended at will to suit the personal quest for political self-preservation of the leader.

As of the start of 2011, 10 African heads of state had been in power longer than 20 years.⁵ The 'Arab Spring' has reduced the number of North African autocrats in the past year, but the number of entrenched leaders remains high in sub-Saharan Africa. It is noteworthy that most of these leaders are concentrated either in the Horn of Africa or in the Gulf of Guinea, two areas that should be of significant geostrategic value to U.S. interests and attention.

In June 2005, NDI brought together 15 former African heads of state from 14 countries in Bamako, Mali, to share experiences and ideas on why some African leaders facilitated political transitions in their respective countries while others impeded the process. The group also discussed ways that former African heads of state could continue to contribute positively to addressing the major challenges of democratic governance and human development on the continent. The African Statesmen Initiative was developed in part to highlight the role that former leaders can play as elder statesmen. In a Bamako Declaration issued at the end of the meeting, these African leaders restated their firm belief that democracy remains the "sole form of government that permits the development of the range of national institutions needed to ensure sustainable peace, security, economic growth, and social well-being," and committed themselves to using their "good offices to promote development objectives and advance democratic governance."⁶ Members further affirmed that "changes of power and political succession should always be based on constitutional rule and democratic principles," and they expressed grave concern that many countries on the continent still failed to meet such requirements for democratic transitions.

⁴ United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 21.

<http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml#a21>

⁵ Muammar Gaddafi of Libya (42 years as head of state), Teodoro Obiang Nguema of Equatorial Guinea (32 years), Jose Santos of Angola (32 years), Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe (31 years), Hosni Mubarak of Egypt (30 years), Paul Biya of Cameroon (29 years), Yoweri Museveni of Uganda (25 years), King Mswati III of Swaziland (24 years), Blaise Comporé of Burkina Faso (24 years), and Zine Ben Ali of Tunisia (23 years).

⁶ Bamako Declaration of the African Statesmen Initiative:
http://asi.ndi.org/about/declaration/bamako_declaration.pdf

Shortly after the Bamako summit, the heads of state present formally launched the Forum for Former African Heads of State and Government (Africa Forum), a group of 33 with “strong democratic credentials” that engages in activities to promote sustainable peace and security, enhance democratic governance and protect human rights.⁷ Many of these leaders have launched private foundations to continue good works in their respective countries, and are increasingly involved in conflict mediation and peace building, election monitoring and other humanitarian causes across the continent.

Sources of Entrenchment

In many cases, long-serving leaders stay in power by repressing political dissent and manipulating electoral and constitutional processes within their countries. While in the 1990s, people-driven democratization efforts through national conferences and inclusive constituent assemblies led to successful constitutional reform in many countries, in the last decade we have seen constitutional backsliding in countries whose constitutions were amended to abolish term limits and thereby allow long-serving leaders to prolong their stays in office. In most cases, the amendments were rushed through parliaments without broad-based, inclusive discussions or extensive consultations that would have allowed more citizen input in the process. These cases epitomize the fragility of constitutionalism and institutions of checks and balances in many countries on the continent because while most constitutions in Africa may be well-written, their full and just implementation lags behind.

As the bedrock upon which the nation-state is anchored, the fundamental law of the land ought not to be trampled upon with impunity else laws pertaining to issues such as human rights, the administration of justice, the protection of minorities, women’s interests and the protection of private enterprise can be easily ignored or set aside.

While more African countries now hold regular elections that meet international standards, there is a correlation between flawed presidential electoral processes and longevity in office. Entrenched leaders are more apt to structure the rules governing elections to ensure victory. Even if some of these leaders publicly embrace the rhetoric of political pluralism and competitive elections, their actions are often geared toward limiting political space and participation by creating an uneven playing field.

Although elections alone do not a democracy make, multiparty elections are a pillar of democratic governance. Elections also create multiple opportunities to gauge the vitality of a country’s democracy using benchmarks such as: the right of free association, as citizens and candidates engage in campaign activities across the country; the independence and impartiality of the judiciary, which may be called upon to rule on election-related grievances and needs to assure citizens that they can obtain fair and equitable recourse through non-violent means; the professionalism and neutrality of security services; and the faith of citizens in civil discourse and tolerance of diverse viewpoints. Elections are a vehicle for the participation of citizens in the democratic process, and they help to build capacities that are central to achieving accountable,

⁷ The Forum of Former African Heads of State and Government (Africa Forum): In Brief: <http://www.africaforum.org/images/stories/pdf/africa%20forum%20brief.pdf>

democratic governance. So when the rules around elections are designed to achieve a particular outcome, societal cleavages are exacerbated and the possibility of violence increases.

In democracies, elections remain the sole mechanism through which leaders negotiate and enter into a social contract with citizens as they develop and debate policy positions, and ultimately obtain the mandate to govern. Should a leader steal an election or bend the rules in this very public negotiation, then it becomes easier for such a leader to transgress other laws and public obligations relating to accountability, transparency, the fight against corruption, honesty in government and other principles of good governance. Such issues become less significant in the eyes and daily conduct of that leader.

Impact of Entrenched Leadership

Not only do entrenched leaders manipulate constitutions to deny citizens access to regular and credible elections, they are apt to further weaken governmental institutions to impede checks on their power. Moreover, state resources, including the public treasury, are likely to be diverted to serve private interests. Also, a disproportionate amount of national resources are likely to be allocated to regime security with vital aspects of human security relegated to the periphery. It is therefore no surprise that these long-serving regimes measure poorly in multiple social accountability indicators such as Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI) and the Millennium Development Goals, even when they are oil-rich countries with moderate to high income per capita.

African heads of state that insist on remaining in power for decades are antithetical to the growing sense of optimism among Africans and friends of Africa about the continent and its future. They also are an oddity on a continent in which an estimated 83 percent of the population is under the age of 40⁸, which explains in part the reason why even though Africans remain strongly committed to democracy, they are equally less pleased with the performance of many of their leaders. Despite the challenges of democratization in today's Africa, NDI is heartened by a recent Afrobarometer study that showed that a large majority of Africans continue to aspire to the ideals of democracy. While satisfaction with the performance of leaders in the countries sampled had dropped in the last decade from 61 to 56 percent, support for democracy among citizens had grown from 69 to 72 percent in the same period.⁹

Turning the Tide

Through the first quarter of 2012, Senegal's democracy was tested by controversy over the candidacy of incumbent President Wade, viewed by many Senegalese as contrary to the term limits enshrined in the country's constitution. Thanks in large measure to effective grassroots mobilization by Senegalese civil society, the media, youth movements and political parties, the electoral process was safeguarded and the country experienced a credible transition of power. The Senegal example is significant because it illustrates that other tenets of democracy are taking root across Africa, and when properly mobilized can serve as a firewall to democratic backsliding. To Wade's credit, his timely concession was unprecedented for an African leader

⁸ U.S. Census Bureau, International Data Base. 2012 population estimates for sub-Saharan Africa.

⁹ Afrobarometer Surveys. <http://www.afrobarometer.org/index.php>

who had tried at a minimum to push the envelope in terms of his stay in office. That concession is also a reflection of a greater trend toward democratic governance in many parts of Africa and an increasing recognition by African leaders that there is life after the state house.

The experience of Senegal contrasts sharply with that of Cameroon, a country that obtained independence the same year – 1960 – and that has comparable governance institutions. Unlike in Senegal, for the past 50 years, even after the return to multiparty politics in 1990, Cameroon has failed to conduct a national election that was not overshadowed by controversy. Over the years in Cameroon, the opaque handling of electoral processes has aided manipulation by government official at all levels, and administrative hurdles impede the ability of civil society and independent media to monitor and report on elections. Political discourse is highly polarized, and there is a distinct unwillingness among the ruling elite to recognize the rich, diverse viewpoints that exist within Cameroonian society. Cameroonian youth, prompted by restrictive laws and a lack of confidence in the country’s political system and institutions, are becoming apathetic and apprehensive of their future. After the presidential election of 2011, which was widely criticized as poorly conducted by both domestic and international observation missions,¹⁰ the incumbent head of state, who has been in power for 30 years, acknowledged publicly the need for electoral reform. Yet this commitment was followed a few days ago by the government adopting amendments to the election law that restrict citizen participation in politics and shrink political space even further. There is increasing concern that the lack of political will to create the appropriate framework and mechanisms for credible democratic elections, while preserving an entrenched regime in power, may be pushing the country to the brink of violence and instability. The cumulative effect of these factors impedes the bright and prosperous future for Cameroon that other African countries such as Senegal, Ghana, Benin and Botswana have come to take for granted. Cameroonians realize that in the past 30 years, Senegal has had four presidents – Leopold Sedar Senghor, Abdou Diouf, Abdoulaye Wade and Macky Sall – and its reputation continues to grow across the continent and around the world; and they wonder why, over the same 30-year period, a de facto one-man rule has imposed itself on them.

In a number of other African countries, parliaments have vetoed attempts by incumbent presidents to extend their terms of office, even when the majority in parliament belonged to the incumbent party. This remarkable show of independence and commitment to constitutionalism and the rule of law among African legislators contributed measurably to fostering peaceful democratic transitions in Nigeria in 2007, Malawi in 2002 and Zambia in 2001.

These examples highlight the role that countervailing institutions – legislatures, the media, and civil society – play in balancing the power of the executive, with the corollary understanding that as these institutions gain in credibility and performance, they become more adept at curbing entrenched leadership.

¹⁰ “The Electoral Process in Cameroon: What Are the Lessons Learned?: Remarks by Ambassador Robert P. Jackson at the Civil Society Post-Election Roundtable.” 19 October 2011.
http://yaounde.usembassy.gov/sp_10192011.html

Recommendations for the International Community At Large

Clearly, citizens living under entrenched regimes have no access to the freedoms that their peers enjoy in more democratic societies. They often live with a constant threat of repression, intimidation and harassment if they attempt to make their voices heard. The absence of proper mechanisms for dialogue between citizens and those that govern in these societies means that citizens have no choice when their frustrations overflow than to express them in the public space, often at the risk of vociferous repression and loss of life. In Cameroon in 2008, riots linked in large part to grievances over the government's decision to amend the constitution and eliminate term limits were severely repressed and officially left 40 young men and women dead, although credible human rights organizations, including the Catholic Church, reported over 100 deaths.¹¹

By strengthening representative institutions and civil society organizations, the international community can help African democrats consolidate or deepen the fragile democratic gains of the last two decades. Independent election commissions are essential to holding credible elections that create a level playing field for all contestants, and nonpartisan citizen election observers can deter manipulation and provide information about the credibility of election results. A well-organized, vibrant civil society can be an effective watchdog against the emergence of entrenched leaders. More effective legislatures and independent judiciaries can provide safeguards to the many Africans that aspire to be governed democratically. While international support for development of these institutions can increase the possibility of strong counterbalances to entrenched leaders, consistent public diplomacy can go a long way in assuring African democrats that they are part of a global community of democrats with shared values and ideals.

As African regional bodies operationalize protocols to promote and protect democratic governance, the international community should demonstrate the political will to support these regional networks in upholding the high standards they have adopted for themselves. Along these lines, the African Union's Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance, now ratified by enough African countries to be binding, calls for states to regularly hold "transparent, free, and fair elections" that provide citizens a voice in the selection of their leaders. Furthermore, the Charter authorizes sanctions when incumbent governments fail to abide by the outcomes of free and fair elections or amend their constitutions to infringe on the "principles of democratic change of government."¹² Regional organizations such as ECOWAS and SADC have adopted similar protocols aimed at fostering democratic governance and have shown firm responsiveness to unconstitutional maneuvers such as the recent coups in Mali and Guinea-Bissau and the flawed presidential election of November 2011 in The Gambia. The international community and the African Union should ensure that African countries adhere to the provisions of the Charter and relevant protocols to foster democracy and consolidate the gains of recent years.

The international community can also highlight the role of elder statesmen and increase recognition for leaders who govern justly and facilitate peaceful and meaningful leadership

¹¹ U.S. Department of State, "2008 Human Rights Report: Cameroon," February 25, 2009.

<http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2008/af/118990.htm>

¹² The African Union, "African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance." <http://www.africa-union.org/root/au/Documents/Treaties/text/Charter%20on%20Democracy.pdf>

transitions that respect the letter and the spirit of the constitutions of their respective countries and international norms. Along these lines, NDI expresses its appreciation to Dr. Mo Ibrahim and his Foundation for his leadership in this regard and for helping reinforce the message to incumbent African leaders that there are meaningful opportunities in life after office.

Even if more needs to be done in specific countries based on the particularities of each case study, the international community at large will do well to recognize more firmly that African aspirations for democracy are genuine and legitimate, borne not just in the universality of freedom and democratic values but also in the very fundamentals of African culture – respect for human life and human dignity. In today’s globalized world, as events in one country or continent impact developments in other spheres, denying leadership opportunities to a whole generation of African youth and emerging leaders deprives Africa and the rest of the world of the tremendous talent, exuberance and energy that the continent is capable of contributing to a better world in the 21st century. It is a travesty of generational injustice that a handful of leaders should be the perpetrators of such deprivation.

Conclusion

An increasing number of brave and courageous Africans are holding themselves and their leaders to high standards of democratic performance. Today, unlike two decades ago, the comparison is not between the poor performing African regimes and the United States or other established democracies; the comparison is between the poor performers and other African countries that face similar economic and developmental challenges, but still endeavor to give their citizens the rights and dignity they deserve in being proud of their constitutions and elections.

Despite the setbacks faced by African democrats pinned down by entrenched regimes, citizens’ voices on the continent are being heard and governance trends are moving in a positive direction for the most part. The continent is not doomed to failure, even on the leadership index. Africa has its share of success stories with emerging visionary leaders, and I am optimistic that should the collective support for democracy be sustained and enhanced, new success stories will emerge.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee.