

Briefing on Elections in Africa in the Context of the COVID19 Pandemic

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Tomorrow (9 July) the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) is scheduled to hold its 935th meeting to receive a briefing on elections in Africa in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is expected that PSC members will conduct the meeting through video teleconference. It is expected that AU Commissioner for Political Affairs Minata Samate Cessouma will brief the Council.

Since the advent of the pandemic in the continent, countries have adopted various measures to curb the spread of the COVID19 pandemic through various social distancing measures, lockdowns and declaration of state of emergency or state of disaster. The nature of the pandemic and the public health response measures are such that they directly affect electoral processes. The COVID19 measures affect not only the logistical preparation for elections but also the exercise of various rights including the convening of political meetings and rallies that are key for communicating the agenda of contesting political parties and for the electorate to express its views on its needs and be informed of the position of the candidates.

On the other hand, electoral processes by their very nature lead to the gathering of people, the convening of political meetings and the staging of rallies. As such, if not conducted with due regard to the social distancing measures, electoral processes can become the ground for the spread of COVID19 and the resultant rise in the morbidity and mortality that the

virus causes.

Tomorrow's briefing on elections will be the first one to be taking place in the context of COVID19 and presents an opportunity for considering how COVID19 affects electoral plans in Africa. It would additionally afford the opportunity to consider on whether and how elections could be held amid the pandemic and the parameters to be observed if they are to be postponed.

According to the AU calendar of elections, there are about 18 planned elections in 2020 in Africa. The Department of Political Affairs is scheduled to provide an overall update on current developments in countries that have recently concluded elections, those that are preparing to undertake elections and those that have decided to postpone elections.

The last time the PSC held a session on elections was at its 869th on 19 August 2019. In the communiqué, the PSC underlined the need for strengthened citizens participation in democratic process and it also requested the finalization of the reports of AU Election Observation Missions in a timely manner and the early planning for the deployment of the AU Election Observation Missions.

During tomorrow's session, the PSC may assess the challenges COVID19 poses on electoral processes in Africa. More particularly, of interest to the PSC would be an overview on the challenges that have emerged due to the COVID19 pandemic and their impact on holding transparent, fair and free elections in Africa. Considering these issues affords the PSC an important opportunity to provide guidance to member states on how to manage elections in the context of COVID19. This is important in order to ensure that the holding of elections under restricted conditions or postponement of elections due to COVID19 measures would not lead to electoral disputes and instability. The elections that are expected to receive attention include the recently concluded ones in Burundi,

Mali, and Malawi as well as the constitutional referendum in Guinea. The briefing may also provide an overview of upcoming elections in Ghana, Burkina Faso, Cote D'Ivoire, and postponed elections in Ethiopia and Chad. The Council may also particularly address countries such as Somalia and Central African Republic that are experiencing fragile transition and instability and are planning elections in 2020.

From the list of countries that held elections or scheduled to hold elections, it is clear that not all of them are on the same standing in terms of the sensitivity of the election for unstable contestation. This means that apart from the general guidance required on how elections may be held in all the countries, there is a need for paying particular attention to the situation of elections in countries with fragile transitions.

The briefing may highlight challenges related to restrictions on mobility. This can have negative impacts on candidates communicating with their supporters and electorates critically engaging with political parties and candidates. As the election in Mali illustrated, the other challenge is also related to the low voter turnout due to fear related to the spread of the pandemic.

The other impact is that it has adversely affected the deployment of independent observers in countries that have held elections this year. Restrictions on international travels means that the AU has not been able to deploy international observers in some of the recent elections held in the context of COVID19. One of the issues that members of the PSC may wish to get information on during the briefing is the adjustments and new changes that the Department of Political Affairs introduced in its provision of support to member states in the context of COVID19.

With respect to the various avenues taken by member states the PSC may address key elements on the processes and procedures

of elections. First, for countries that have opted to hold elections, it may urge Africa CDC to develop and adhere to strict safety and public health guidelines to prevent the further spread of the virus. It will be essential for the PSC to urge member states to evaluate their capacity to hold credible and transparent elections while keeping citizens safe. Moreover, these measures have also direct effect on the level of participation of election observers. Hence, the PSC may also request member states to address challenges and provide alternative plans to fill this gap.

Second, with regards to countries that opt to postpone elections, the PSC may urge for the respect of legal processes and political consensus, to prevent instability or charges of unconstitutionality. The PSC may pronounce itself on the need to comply with established constitutional processes when opting for postponing elections. Additionally, consideration should be had for states to build consensus with all the stakeholders including electoral bodies, opposition parties and civil society actors not only to address the legitimacy deficits that may result from postponement of elections but also to ensure that postponement does not lead to political instability. Irrespective of whether member states opt to postpone or hold elections, there is also a need for ensuring that there is greater transparency by governments on their decisions and the process they use for arriving at such decision.

Also, of interest for PSC members is to receive indication from the briefing on countries expected to have highly contested elections and countries expected to hold elections in fragile transitions. These countries require particular attention not only to ensure that COVID19 does not further exacerbates an already volatile situation but also to ensure that contestations surrounding election does not undermine their efforts towards containing the virus. For example, in Malawi, the newly elected government changed the plan for the

inauguration of the new president on account of reports of spike in the spread of the virus during the electoral process.

In the context of recent elections, the briefing by DPA may also highlight positive developments including the role of an independent judiciary in the democratization process of countries as demonstrated in the election in Malawi. The briefing may also present best practices that might guide countries that are planning to hold elections.

The expected outcome is a communiqué. The PSC is expected to address the various challenges arising from COVID19 and their effects on planned elections and the electoral process. It may in particular express concern on the negative impacts of COVID19 on holding elections in context that is free from fear and insecurity. With respect to member states that opt for proceeding with scheduled elections, the PSC may urge that they comply with the applicable standards of holding free, fair and credible elections. To this end, it may call on those states to put in place the necessary public health measures including social distancing and hygiene measures during the electoral process. For member states that opt for postponing elections, it may urge them to ensure that proper constitutional procedures are followed and close working relationship and consultations are maintained with all stakeholders in rescheduling the calendar for the elections. The PSC may call on Africa-CDC working with the Department of Political Affairs to develop guidelines on the holding of elections in the context of COVID19. It may request the AU Department of Political Affairs to adjust the provision of its support to member states to the COVID19 environment to ensure that its critical role in the democratization process through supporting electoral processes is not disrupted as a result of COVID19.