

Briefing on Elections in Africa

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Tomorrow (19 August) the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) will hold its 869th session focusing on elections in Africa. The PSC is expected to receive the Report of the AU Commission Chairperson on Elections in Africa for the period of January to December 2019. It is expected that the Department of Political Affairs will introduce the report to the PSC.

The practice of providing briefings on elections in Africa can be traced back to the Report of the Panel of the Wise entitled 'Election-related disputes and political violence' and the 392nd meeting of the PSC. But it was at its 424th meeting that the PSC decided to have a briefing from the Department of Political Affairs (DPA) on elections in Africa on a quarterly basis.

The last time the PSC held this session was at its 815th meeting held on 04 December 2018. From the 18 presidential and parliamentary elections on the AU calendar for 2019, tomorrow's session is expected to offer a review of the nine presidential and parliamentary elections and one constitutional referendum held on the continent between January and June 2018. The elections expected to receive attention within this context include those held in Nigeria, Senegal, Guinea Bissau, Comoros, Benin, South Africa, Malawi, Madagascar and Mauritania as well as the constitutional referendum in Egypt.

Of particular interest would be the trend that the briefing is expected to highlight in terms of not only good practice and challenges observed in conducting elections but also in terms

of the monitoring of elections. This may include reference to 'any cases of election malpractices and shortcomings' that the communiqué of the 747th meeting of the PSC required AU Electoral Observation Mission reports to highlight for future lessons.

Some of the issues observed in a number of the elections under review include election irregularity, incidents of violence, tense political environment, low voter turnout, change of electoral calendar, uneven playing field for candidates and restrictive environment. Low voter turnout seems to be a feature of most of the elections. While the AU notes that the 2019 general elections in Nigeria registered the lowest turnout of elections held on the continent during the reporting period, there is no statistics on percentage of voter turnout for the elections in Benin. Yet, given the impact of low turnout on quality of elections and voters' confidence over elections, there is a need for addressing the various factors leading to low voter turnout. The exception to this trend of low voter turnout is that of Guinea Bissau where the turnout of registered voters was 84.69.

Beyond and above voter turnout, issues of participation of some segments of the public particularly women and youth are also highlighted as areas requiring attention. In this respect, it was observed that in South Africa 'only 18.5% of youth in the 18-19 age bracket registered to vote.' The AU accordingly observed that 'these call for serious attention as a significant proportion of first-time voters were apathetic.'

The elections that witnessed tense political environment and major contestations include those in Benin, Comoros and Senegal. In all of these cases, fierce disputes resulted from the introduction of electoral legal reforms on matters of political party registration, term limits, electoral system and increased cost of candidatures. Of these, the country that registered retrogression in its electoral processes is Benin,

where the AU observed not only an environment that was exclusive of opposition candidates but also violative of individual liberties. These developments highlight that there is a need for the AU to closely monitor electoral legal reforms and develop standards that should be followed in undertaking such reforms as a means of preventing electoral disputes and violence.

Claims of vote rigging have been observed in the elections in Malawi. Of interest to the PSC in this respect would be the post-election protests that followed allegations of electoral fraud.

The impact of insecurity on the electoral processes also remains as has been the case, for example, in parts of Nigeria. This remains a major issue for the upcoming election in Mali.

In terms of positive developments, Mauritania witnessed the democratic transfer of power to a new elected president, the first in the post-independence history of the country is notable.

From a perspective of election observation practice of the AU, it was noted that the AU was not able to deploy election observation mission to Madagascar. In respect to the practice and methodology of election observation, it would be of interest for the PSC to get update on developments relating to the need that various PSC outcome documents including the communiqué of its 747th session indicated in terms of enhancing the African Union Election coordination mechanisms with other relevant international missions. This includes the coordination with electoral observation missions of regional bodies.

The upcoming elections expected to take place during the third and fourth quarter of 2019 that tomorrow's session will cover are Algeria, Botswana, Mali, Mozambique, Namibia and Tunisia. The AU has envisaged to deploy election observation mission to

all the six countries.

In respect of these elections, it would be of interest for PSC members to know about how the AUC plans to engage not only in terms of deployment of election assessment and observation missions but also in terms of identifying risks of electoral disputes and preventive measures that should be adopted. In respect of early warning on such electoral disputes, the upcoming elections that may in particular be of interest are the elections in Mali (on account of the security situation in the country) and Algeria (on account of the protest events in the country).

The expected outcome of the session is a communique. It is expected to address the various issues arising from the report. It would, among others, highlight the continuing importance of elections in the democratization process of the continent, the need for improving the quality of elections including through ensuring the independent functioning of electoral management bodies and the provision of even playing field, and the importance of resolving existing crisis and conflicts as necessary condition for inclusive and credible elections. Enhancing the role of this briefing to map electoral risks for providing early warning to the PSC highlighting the measures that the AU could take for mitigating the risks through joint work of DPA and PSD would be of particular importance for the work of the PSC. To this end, the outcome could highlight the importance of holding the quarterly briefing timeously. In terms of lessons from the elections in Senegal, Comoros and Benin, the PSC may highlight the need for ensuring that electoral legal reforms follow the requirements of inclusiveness, fairness, transparency and consensus of all political forces as a measure of democratic legitimacy and preventing electoral disputes.