

AFRICAN UNION'S ROLE IN ELECTIONS: PROMOTING DEMOCRACY OR WHITEWASHING ILLEGITIMACY?

AMANI AFRICA

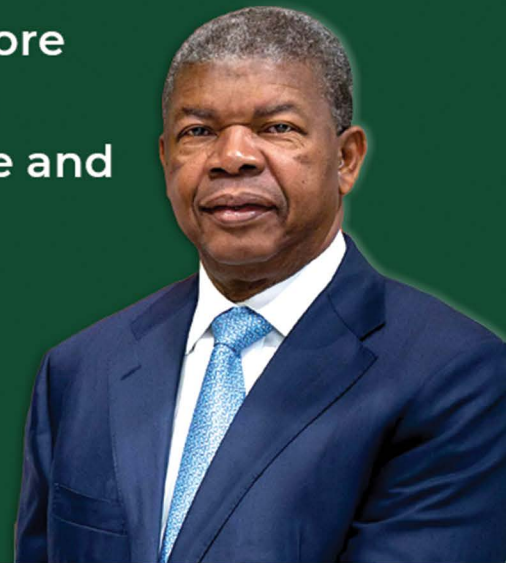
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Allowing coup makers to legitimise themselves via elections is 'a way of whitewashing an act that lacks legitimacy, which unfortunately is beginning to be seen as normal and therefore acceptable, when in reality it threatens the foundations of our principles and the peace and security of the continent.

JOÃO LOURENÇO

president of Angola,
Opening speech 39th AU Assembly, 14 February 2026



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The African Union (AU)'s role in elections in Africa is conducted through two interrelated processes. The first is AU's election observation activities and the other is the Peace and Security Council's (PSC) agenda on elections in Africa. Between 2021 and 2025, the PSC progressively consolidated its focus on elections, moving beyond episodic observation toward sustained engagement that recognises elections as extended political processes with significant implications for political and institutional stability. This period registered some notable institutional gains, including improved professionalism of AU Election Observation Missions (AUEOMs), support for professionalization of election observation bodies, increased attention to inclusivity of women and youth, and the launch of knowledge-generation initiatives.

These advances (not central to the political factors that shape the conduct of elections), however, were offset by persistent weaknesses, notably the normalisation of minimalist electoral assessments that privilege calm over credibility, inconsistent enforcement of continental norms, most critically Article 25(4) of the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG) in post-coup contexts and weak follow-up on election observation recommendations and the lack of consistent use of preventive diplomacy. AU's uneven handling of elections following a) unconstitutional changes of government (UCG), b) constitutional and electoral manipulation and c) cases where electoral and military illegality converged (in Gabon in 2024 and in Guinea Bissau in November 2025) have not only eroded the

deterrent value of AU norms and strained the Council's preventive credibility but also are exposing the AU to charges of being complicit in the increasing perversion of elections in Africa.

I. WHY THIS POLICY BRIEF?

In recent years, the PSC has institutionalized the consideration of the half-year report of the Chairperson of the AU Commission on elections in Africa. The most recent such consideration of this agenda on elections in Africa was in January 2026 (see [here](#) and [here](#)). With the first half of the year coming to an end in June, the next cycle of the PSC's consideration of elections in Africa is planned for July 2026. While the institutionalization of the agenda on elections in Africa is informed by PSC's desire to transform elections from being a site of political confrontation and societal instability into instruments for institutional consolidation and political stability through promoting their credibility, the review of the AU's practice during 2021-2025 reveals concerning trends in which the AU could be charged of being complicit in legitimizing electoral authoritarianism and the perversion by incumbents of the role of elections.

This policy brief aims at providing insights into and lessons from the emerging trends in AU's election observation. It also seeks to proffer considerations for refocusing election observations for enhancing electoral credibility as an instrument for advancing institutional and political stability, thereby reversing the drift of PSC's session on elections in Africa into an exercise in legitimizing elections lacking credibility.

II. EVOLUTION OF THE PSC'S ENGAGEMENT WITH ELECTIONS AS A PEACE AND SECURITY ISSUE

The PSC's engagement with elections has evolved from a firefighting mode limited to dealing with electoral crisis to an institutionalized approach. This evolution is rooted in the Council's March 2014 [424th](#) meeting decision to receive regular quarterly briefings on elections in Africa. This marked a conceptual and institutional shift treating elections as political processes having major bearing on stability with the potential either to consolidate peace or to precipitate instability, violence and UCG.

Between 2021 and 2025, this framing became institutionalised through bi-annual PSC engagements. Elections featured regularly in PSC agendas, Chairperson's reports and outcome documents, increasingly analysed as part of a broader conflict-prevention architecture. The January–June 2021 mid-year report was particularly illustrative in capturing several critical trends shaping electoral processes across the continent. It highlighted the growing demand for democratic dividends, the increasingly '*choiceless*' nature of electoral politics, rising voter apathy and the persistent concentration of power at the centre. In addition, the report noted that volatile security environments not only undermined the credibility of some elections but also adversely affected voter turnout.

Security threats, heightened political tensions, shrinking political space, opposition boycotts and low participation rates were identified as continuing and worrying trends influencing elections

(See Amani Africa's [Insights](#) on the PSC). However, the evolution of PSC's engagement also revealed persistent structural constraints. While the PSC accumulated information and expanded its analytical bandwidth, its ability to translate this knowledge into calibrated policy action shaping the actions of national actors has remained at best uneven and at worst absent. The Council's deliberations increasingly reflected a tension between awareness of electoral risks and reluctance to intervene assertively in what are often framed as sensitive domestic political processes. This gap between increased analytical depth and lack of political resolve to act on such analysis has become a defining feature of the PSC's engagement with elections during the review period and underpins many of the challenges discussed below.

III. INSTITUTIONAL GAINS AND MODEST ACHIEVEMENTS IN AU'S ELECTION OBSERVATION PRACTICES

A balanced assessment of the PSC's performance over the review period requires recognition of modest but meaningful achievements but with concerning serious flaws. These gains do not negate the challenges identified, but they demonstrate institutional learning and capacity building that provide a foundation for reform.

First, the technical quality and professionalism of AUEOMs have improved measurably over the review period, reflecting a more systematic and methodologically coherent approach to election observation. Missions are **increasingly** (not always) preceded by

pre-election technical needs assessments, enabling clearer analysis of legal frameworks, political environments and operational risks. Enhanced coordination with Regional Economic Communities (RECs) has reduced duplication, fragmentation and strengthened methodological consistency, while the AU has maintained broad deployment of observation missions across the majority of countries covered in the Chairperson's reports.

At the same time, the PSC has increasingly emphasised the strengthening of national Election Management Bodies (EMBs) through experience sharing and initiatives linked to the Association of African Election Authorities (AAEAs), recognising that durable electoral integrity depends not only on observation missions but also on sustained national institutional capacity. Within this context, the PSC has repeatedly commended the Specialized Training Workshops for AU Short Term Election Observers as a concrete and effective professionalisation measure. (See communiques: [1096th](#), [1132nd](#), [1165th](#) and [1194th](#)). The PSC has welcomed the regularisation of these workshops and encouraged the mobilisation of adequate financial and technical resources to sustain them, identifying them as a key contributor to institutional learning, credibility and the overall effectiveness of AUEOMs over the review period.

Second, the AU has made tangible progress in inclusivity. The 24 January 2025 Chairperson's [report](#) highlights that AU Observer participation in 2024 reached approximately 66 % female observers, reflecting noteworthy progress toward gender parity, a milestone consistent with the AU's commitments

on women, peace, and security. Youth participation has also received increased attention, both in observer recruitment and in PSC rhetoric, contributing to the gradual mainstreaming of demographic inclusion as a standard electoral concern, although it remains unclear how this is translated in election observers assessment of demographic inclusion in electoral processes, particularly on the growing concern of African youth on the failure of electoral democracy to deliver for their aspirations including in enhancing their participation in the governance of the affairs of the state of which they are part.

Third, the PSC has consistently emphasised domestic financing of elections as a pillar of national ownership and a safeguard against external interference (See communiqués: [1034th](#), [1062nd](#), [1132nd](#), [1194th](#), [1224th](#), [1255th](#) and [1288th](#)). Although implementation has been uneven, the PSC's sustained emphasis on domestic financing has contributed to a gradual recalibration of discourse in some Member States, strengthening the association between electoral integrity, sovereignty and political legitimacy. This was specifically reflected in the Council's [1255th](#) session, where it commended the increased use of domestic financial resources for organising elections as a marker of national ownership and reduced external dependence.

Fourth, the documentary film on 'Election Observation Missions in Africa' and the 'Elections in Africa Report – Democracy at Work' are AU knowledge-generation initiatives mandated by the PSC to consolidate institutional learning from election observation and strengthen electoral democracy across the continent (See communiqués: [1194th](#) and [1224th](#)).

The documentary is intended to visually capture the evolution, methodology and practical impact of AUEOMs, while the 'Democracy at Work' report is conceived as an annual analytical publication synthesizing the Chairperson's bi-annual elections reports to distill lessons learned, identify systemic trends and formulate actionable recommendations for Member States, AU organs, RECs/RMs and other stakeholders. Together, these initiatives respond to the PSC's call for moving beyond episodic observation toward structured reflection, follow-up and policy-relevant learning, reinforcing elections as a core pillar of conflict prevention, democratic governance and peacebuilding in Africa

Fifth, the increasing emphasis on electoral technology and procedural innovation reflects both progress and risk. Reports highlight biometric and alphanumeric verification, electronic transmission of results and transparency tools as confidence-building measures, particularly in cases such as Kenya (2022). However, experiences in Nigeria (2023) illustrate the inverse risk: when technology fails, is poorly communicated or is not accompanied by credible accountability mechanisms, it can deepen mistrust rather than mitigate it (See the Chair Person's reports, [here](#) and [here](#)). **The PSC's current approach tends to celebrate procedural upgrades without systematically connecting them to independent oversight, legal accountability, information integrity and credible dispute-resolution pathways.** Where these elements are absent, technical improvements cannot substitute for political legitimacy.

Finally, there have been instances where electoral engagement was

complemented by preventive diplomacy that forestalled emerging threat of electoral dispute-induced instability. In Zambia in 2021 and Kenya in 2022, timely political engagement by the AU and regional actors contributed to de-escalation and acceptance of outcomes. These cases demonstrate that when political will, coordination and timing align, AU's electoral observation along with preventive action can enable elections to function as opportunities for consolidation rather than triggers for instability (See Amani Africa's [Insights on the PSC and January 2023](#), Monthly Digest).

These achievements show that AU's election observation practice and the PSC's engagement are not entirely procedural and ritualistic. However, they suffer from two flaws. First, these are not the consistent practices. Second, their impact remains constrained by the absence of systematic follow-up, political enforcement and institutionalisation across cases. These and other flaws discussed below highlight the pitfalls that should be avoided in AU's election observation practices and the PSC's engagement in elections in Africa.

IV. ELECTIONS FOLLOWING UNCONSTITUTIONAL CHANGES OF GOVERNMENT

The most consequential challenge during the review period concerns the PSC's handling of elections organised in the aftermath of UCG. Despite repeated rhetorical reaffirmation of zero tolerance for coups, practice since 2021 reveals growing inconsistency in enforcing Article

25(4) of [ACDEG](#), which prohibits coup perpetrators from contesting elections intended to restore constitutional order.

This inconsistency first became evident in Chad. Following the April 2021 military takeover after the death of President Idriss Déby, the PSC accorded '[exceptional treatment](#)' to the Transitional Military Council instead of designating the takeover as a UCG. More damagingly, the PSC failed to enforce its own decision on non-eligibility when Mahamat Idriss Déby Itno ran and won the 2024 presidential election. The subsequent congratulation of Chad for 'successfully' organising elections marked a decisive departure from established AU norms. Gabon transformed exception into a potential pattern. Although the AU formally [suspended](#) Gabon following the August 2023 coup, it [lifted](#) the suspension after coup leader Brice Oligui Nguema won the April 2025 election. The PSC neither named nor addressed the violation of Article 25(4), effectively legitimising an outcome the norm was designed to prevent (See Amani Africa's publications: [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)). Following the September 2021 military takeover, Guinea's transition was shaped by a [constitutional referendum](#) held in 2025, which amended the legal framework to allow members of the ruling military authorities to participate in elections. This transition culminated in the 28 December 2025 presidential election, in which the head of the junta, Mamadou Doumbouya, secured a landslide victory with [86.72 per cent](#) of the vote. By restructuring the constitutional order in a manner that enabled the junta to convert control over the transition into electoral eligibility and victory, the process confused the electoral legitimisation of a coup for constitutional restoration.

Taken together, these trajectories risk eroding the deterrent value of ACDEG by weakening the non-eligibility norm and entrenching a practice in which elections serve to legitimise power acquired through unconstitutional means rather than to restore democratic constitutional order. This evolving pattern is widely interpreted as facilitating the conversion of military authority into electoral legitimacy, signalling a shift from deterrence to accommodation that generates a moral hazard in which coups become politically manageable rather than proscribed acts.

V. DEALING WITH CONTESTED REVISION OF CONSTITUTIONAL TERM LIMITS AND FLAWED ELECTIONS

One of the major gaps in AU's election work and PSC's engagement in this respect concerns the treatment of contested revision of constitutional term limits as a means of extending term of office and electoral authoritarian practices involving the engineering of elections as rituals for legitimizing the incumbent and repressive rule. In elections held in countries such as Cameroon, Mozambique and Tanzania, widespread perceptions of election rigging and accompanying disputes were responded with violence and criminalization of protests against election rigging, creating the phenomenon of electoral authoritarianism. AU's response to these events exposed it to legitimate charges of engaging in enabling or covering up such electoral authoritarianism. A case in point in this respect is the congratulatory message the AU Commission Chairperson sent to

Cameroon and Tanzania in the middle of widespread contestation through public protests of claims of electoral victory by the incumbents, thereby undermining the norms AU was meant to defend and protect.

In terms of serious practices inimical to constitutional rule, it would be recalled that it was the unpopular constitutional amendment extending the term of office of President Conde of Guinea in 2020 that after a flawed election created the conditions for the military coup that was greeted with celebration by Guineans. Earlier in 2015, contestations around interpretation of the Constitution and the 2005 Arusha Agreement precipitated political instability and violent confrontation that brought Burundi to the brink of a relapse back to violent conflict. In Guinea-Bissau, various executive measures including the suspension of the national assembly that mutilated the constitution of the country set the background to a corrupted political environment in which the November 2025 elections were held and the interruption of the finalisation of the electoral process through a coup that was orchestrated by the incumbent president to prevent his electoral defeat. While the AU adopted a heavy handed response in the case of Burundi (despite the situation being open to interpretation) including by invoking Article 4(h) of the Constitutive Act and by declining to deploy election observations when elections were held in a contested environment, no similar measures were adopted in relation of other cases of undemocratic constitutional changes for extending term limits of incumbent presidents from Guinea, to Cote d'Ivoire, Togo and a number of other cases in east and central African regions.

Weak and inconsistent responses to removal of term limit, constitutional manipulation and other forms of constitutional subversion as was the case in Guinea Bissau have contributed to legitimacy crises that later complicated anti coup enforcement. **Manipulated electoral processes and constitutional subversion frequently generate the same instability pathways as overt military takeovers, including mass protests, repression, radicalisation and security fragmentation, yet they are seldom consistently treated as peace and security threats.** This failure to integrate electoral authoritarianism and constitutional manipulation into the PSC's preventive framework undermines early warning, erodes normative coherence and weakens the Council's capacity to deter both military coups and other forms of unconstitutional changes.

VI. GUINEA-BISSAU: THE CASE OF THE CONVERGENCE OF ELECTORAL AND MILITARY ILLEGALITY

The most recent Guinea-Bissau crisis of late 2025, crystallises many of the [structural weaknesses](#) in the PSC's responses. Elections were convened belatedly, in a context widely characterised by domestic and international observers as [favouring](#) the incumbent, President Umaro Sissoco Embaló. The electoral process was subsequently interrupted by a military intervention (the incumbent orchestrated to prevent electoral defeat and handing over of power to the victor) that halted tabulation and suspended constitutional institutions, an episode some referred it to as '[ceremonial coup](#)'.

The initial response of the PSC was firm and normatively appropriate. Guinea-Bissau was [suspended](#), and demands were issued for the continuation of the electoral process. However, follow-up remained a challenge. The threatened sanctions were not imposed, demands were not enforced and the electoral process was abandoned without consequence.

The Guinea-Bissau case is particularly significant because it demonstrates the convergence of an attempt to use election for legitimization, collusion between incumbent and the military to prevent the conclusion of the electoral process to avoid defeat of the incumbent and military seizure of power that the AU failed to reverse. It exposes how far power-hungry political elites can go including through orchestrating ‘military’ illegality and underscores the need for the AU to take a much more proactive and robust approach to its election monitoring by addressing political practices that undermine constitutional rule and fuel electoral subversion as integral components of peace and security.

VII. FOLLOW UP OF RECOMMENDATIONS OF AUEOMS

AUEOMs are deployed routinely almost in all national elections, except where the country convening the election declined to authorize election observation as was the case in Gabon in 2023. Throughout the review period, the PSC and the AU Commission have remained diplomatically active, including through high-level engagements, deployments of the Panel of the Wise, enhanced coordination with RECs/RMs and

international partners and repeated calls for political dialogue, reflecting sustained recognition that elections constitute conflict-sensitive moments requiring preventive diplomacy.

One of the most persistent institutional gaps throughout the review period is weak follow-up. As early as 2021, the PSC acknowledged the importance of monitoring the implementation of AUEOM recommendations. This recognition briefly translated into a concrete innovation: the introduction of a ‘return visit’ mechanism, intended to deploy AU observer leadership back to Member States to engage authorities, EMBs, opposition actors and civil society on implementing recommendations. Yet the mechanism was neither institutionalised nor consistently referenced in PSC outcome documents after its initial use in November 2021. Its disappearance from subsequent electoral processes signals institutional drift rather than consolidation. Without predictable follow-up, observation risks becoming a one-off ritual rather than a reform driver. Member States can host observers without undertaking meaningful corrective measures, while the PSC forfeits a low-cost, politically acceptable lever for incremental improvement of electoral quality. (See Amani Africa’s Monthly Digest, [January 2023](#))

VIII. PSC’S NORMALIZATION OF PEACEFULNESS OF ELECTIONS FOR MEASURING ELECTORAL CREDIBILITY

One of the most significant trends

shaping the AU's handling of elections between 2021 and 2025 has been the gradual normalisation of a minimalist approach to electoral assessment. Across multiple electoral cycles, PSC outcome documents have increasingly relied on standardised language that increasingly seems to tend to equate peaceful conduct with electoral credibility or to reduce the legitimacy of elections to a negative standard of absence of violence or instability. Elections are routinely described as 'peaceful' and at times, 'free, fair, and credible,' even in contexts where AUEOMs, domestic observers and opposition actors documented serious shortcomings. In other words, PSC's engagement is risking to becoming an exercise in legitimizing electoral processes lacking credibility.

When the PSC employs blanket validation, it unintentionally reduces incentives for electoral reform by signalling that minimal compliance suffices for continental approval. It also weakens the AU's own observation architecture by muting critical findings, thereby creating a dissonance between technical assessments and political messaging. This pattern further reflects a deeper strategic choice. In fragile political environments, where elections are often preceded by violence or repression, the absence of large-scale conflict is understandably valued. However, over time, the prioritisation of absence of such full-scale conflict lays the ground for UCG as the examples of Gabon in August 2023 shows, if not resort to more violent conflicts (such was the case for example in Kenya in 2007/8).

In Sierra Leone's 2023 elections, concerns regarding the transparency of results management and post-election tensions

were documented but downplayed in PSC outcomes. Tunisia's electoral processes between 2022 and 2024, conducted in a context of democratic regression and institutional concentration of power in the hands of the presidency, were acknowledged without robust political assessment of their implications for the credibility of elections. Nigeria's 2023 elections raised questions about technology failures, legal compliance and public confidence, yet PSC messaging emphasised acceptance and stability. Similar patterns were evident in Mozambique's 2024 polls, where structural imbalances and opposition constraints were well known (See Amani Africa's Monthly Digests: [July 2023](#), [January 2024](#) and [January 2025](#); Insights on the PSC: [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)).

The cumulative effect has been the inadvertent normalisation of flawed elections. By avoiding explicit differentiation between credible, contested and crisis-prone processes, the PSC has weakened its preventive leverage. Electoral grievances that could have been addressed politically at an early stage are instead deferred, increasing the likelihood that unresolved tensions resurface later as protests, repression, elite fragmentation or even military intervention.

VIII. CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR AU'S CREDIBILITY AND PSC'S ELECTORAL CRISES PREVENTION MANDATE

Between 2021 and 2025, the PSC made meaningful progress in consolidating its agenda on elections as a core peace and security concern, with AU's

election observation contributing to strengthening the professionalism of AU election observation, expanding attention to inclusivity and domestic financing and knowledge-generation initiatives intended to deepen institutional learning. Yet the record across the period demonstrates that such gains have not consistently translated into calibrated political action with substantive democratic and peace gains: minimalist assessments have too often substituted calm for credibility, follow-up on observation recommendations has remained weak and uneven and the inconsistent enforcement of continental norms, particularly ACDEG Article 25(4) in post-coup electoral contexts, feeding into democratic regression and the accompanying threat to peace and security. As elections increasingly serve, in some cases, to launder unconstitutional power and normalise authoritarian rule, the PSC's preventive credibility and deterrent authority risk further erosion.

The cumulative effect of these dynamics is a growing credibility challenge. First, there is growing gulf between the normative commitment of the AU as encapsulated in ACDEG and its own engagement in elections in Africa. Second, while the PSC and AU's election observation has strengthened procedures, improved observation and enhanced inclusivity, it has replaced marginal procedural gains for substantive and strategic objectives. From the perspective of political and military elites, the emerging lesson is troubling: **electoral manipulation, constitutional erosion and even coups can increasingly be normalised through elections observed by the AU and endorsed by the PSC.** This would have dire implications in changing elections from instruments for advancing

political stability and peace through promoting credibility and democratic consolidation into tools of political absolutism of electoral authoritarianism and UCG.

Reclaiming elections as instruments for advancing peace and security through promoting their credibility for democratic consolidation will therefore require a re-evaluation of the AU's election observation practice and the PSC's consideration of its agenda on elections in Africa.

IX. WAY FORWARD: RECALIBRATING PSC ENGAGEMENT ON ELECTIONS

The PSC's continued engagement on elections remains essential. Building on existing gains while addressing structural weaknesses requires a recalibration of approach. Priority should be given to:

- **Differentiated Electoral Risk Typologies:** Replace generic congratulatory language with a typology that distinguishes between credible, contested and crisis-prone elections, triggering tailored PSC responses.
- **Automatic Preventive Triggers:** Institutionalize criteria under which early warning indicators in Chairperson's reports automatically trigger pre-election PSC briefings, Panel of the Wise engagement or joint AU-REC missions.
- **Norm Enforcement Protocol for Transitions:** Strictly observe PSC procedures for enforcing Article 25(4) of ACDEG, including explicit

eligibility assessments in post-coup elections and mandatory Council reaffirmation of non-eligibility.

- **Binding Transition Roadmaps with Automatic PSC Review:** Require PSC endorsed, time bound transition roadmaps with clear electoral and constitutional benchmarks, subject to automatic Council review and graduated political responses in cases of non compliance.
- **Mandatory Follow-Up Architecture:** Operationalize the 'Return Visit' mechanism as a standing requirement, with timelines, reporting obligations and PSC review of implementation status.
- **From Observation to Accountability:** Link AUEOMs to post-election political engagement for advancing electoral reform informed by recommendations of AUEOMs, including structured dialogue with EMBs, opposition actors and civil society on corrective reforms.



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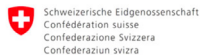
ABOUT AMANI AFRICA

Amani Africa is an independent African based policy research, training and consulting think tank with a specialization and primary focus on African multilateral policy processes, particularly those relating to the African union.

We support the pan-African dream of peaceful, prosperous and integrated Africa through research, training, strategic communications, technical advisory services, and convening and facilitation.

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ADDRESS

On the Corner of Equatorial Guinea St. and ECA Road, Zequala Complex,
7th Floor, Addis Ababa
Tel: +251118678809
Mobile: +251944723204 Addis Ababa, Ethiopia