



# Perceptions of the Effects of European Union Electoral Assistance on Democracy Building in Southern Africa

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## Abstract

If too much emphasis is placed on defining democratic transition and democratic consolidation, perceptions of democratic assistance are usually politicized and the positive benefits are lost. Although the Southern African region has held elections regularly, with the support of the European Union (EU), this has not necessarily entailed the building of robust democratic states and institutions. There has been democratic erosion and decay. EU funding has not led to a 'quick fix' of electoral institutions and democracy. The process of democratization and the rise of opposition parties in Southern Africa have often generated high levels of political instability and may even have prolonged authoritarianism in cases such as Zimbabwe. Formerly conflict-ridden states such as Mozambique need still more investment in the capacity strengthening of a variety of governance institutions in order to build democratic values. Often, however, such assistance comes in trickles for a particular electoral year without making an impact on broader democracy building.

This paper examines the challenges to democracy building in Southern Africa. It describes the negative and positive views from Southern Africa as they pertain to the flows of electoral assistance from the EU and the lack of policy reform or policy change in some African states. The levels of democratization in Southern Africa vary and authoritarian tendencies continue, dominant party systems prevail and democratic institutions remain weak. The paper focuses on Zimbabwe and Mozambique, two countries that have received different levels of electoral assistance from the European Union. The nature of the assistance to the two countries is examined as well as positive and negative perceptions of this EU electoral assistance.

## Summary of Recommendations

For effective electoral assistance the EU should:

- develop a clear contextual understanding of the electoral issues, politics and regime type in a country in order to provide support that goes beyond supporting the

capacity of the electoral management bodies (EMBs) and beyond the electoral event;

- design programmes that are broader and wider than the traditional concept of an electoral assistance programme;
- support important governance institutions such as political parties; and
- design programmes that incorporate poverty reduction and poverty eradication and form part of the donor-government dialogue.

## 1. Challenges for Elections and Democracy Building in Africa

The major challenge to electoral democracy in Africa is that the rules and regulations which govern elections lead to conflict and a violent political culture. The political realities in Africa are those of a winner-takes-all political culture. This characterizes the electoral process and shapes the political institutions in Africa. Political office is a prized possession that gives access to resources – something that electoral assistance

alone is not designed to break down. Electoral systems can also lead to violent conflicts as ethnic or identity groups fight for power and control. In some African countries electoral commissions themselves are a cause of conflict because their credibility and legitimacy are questionable.

The realities in Africa are such that its citizens and stakeholders have not usually agreed the legal electoral frameworks. Electoral systems were designed and handed

down by the colonial powers at independence, and these may no longer be fit for purpose. Most of the postcolonial structures and systems are not conducive to the promotion of sustainable development and democracy. Electoral system design is becoming an area of serious political contestation.

In countries such as Mozambique the cost and sustainability of elections is a cause for concern, particularly because the whole electoral process depends on donor funding. The country does not publicly fund its own democratic process, which calls into question the issue of local ownership of the democratic system.

The degree of citizen participation in African electoral processes is hampered by lack of trust in the political institutions, which leads to voter apathy. Poor public funding of the EMB and the manner in which governments appoint the leaders of EMBs have led to perceptions of a lack of independence, leading in turn to decreased trust in such institutions.

Political parties are the weakest link in democracy building. They are not fully equipped to challenge incumbents effectively, or to occupy their positions as effective opposition parties. Some are harassed and many are fragmented. A missing link to successful electoral democracies in sub-Saharan Africa is the development of credible political parties able to demand accountability and provide alternatives in the political system. Party capacity and democratic structures are limited. Political party capacity development has been limited to projects or workshops on democracy and internal

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democracy, without any long-term objective of building democratic parties. Most political parties do not have private sources of funding and they are not publicly funded. Donors fear that political party assistance might be perceived as political manipulation. Little work has been done in the areas of supporting political parties or evaluating the effectiveness of party assistance.

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African democracies continue to be challenged by economic hardship and underdevelopment, which make elections almost meaningless because most of the population lives in extreme poverty. Electoral assistance alone cannot address Africa's challenges of poverty and poor service delivery. African citizens perceive democracy as having failed them because it has not been able to put food on the table.

There have been some positive developments. The New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) policy framework and the good governance benchmarks under the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) allow for optimism that Africa, despite its lack of resources, is aware of and preparing to meet its development and democratization challenges. They also provide cooperation opportunities for donors such as the European Union (EU).

## 2. European Union Democracy Assistance

Since the start of the third wave of democratization in the 1980s, the international community has put an enormous amount of resources into supporting democratization. The *good governance decade* of the 1990s led to donor support for elections and electoral systems, political parties, parliaments and judicial reform as well as support to civil society and an independent media. In 2004 alone the EU allocated USD 9.9 billion in commitments to government and civil society democracy-related projects.

Democracy is not just about elections. What happens between elections is equally important to lasting democracy (Price, 2009: 160). Elections are a vital component of a democratic society but successful elections are only the beginning of a democratic transition, which relies on the development of a number of institutions and actors as well as of citizens' participation in the democratic processes. The first democratic election is usually very popular, with huge voter turnouts. Subsequent elections become less popular as unresponsive institutions disorient and demoralize citizens. Electoral assistance is political because it involves power dynamics. This is a political reality with which both the EU and the African nations must come to terms.

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A central challenge for international democracy assistance is how to support hybrid regimes, which now range from what are categorized as semi-democracies to electoral authoritarian democracies, as well as fully fledged democracies. The idealized blueprint forms of democracy and the categorizations by donors do not add value to the African trajectory of democratization because most states remain mired in widespread poverty, uneven development and political instability. Such categorizations fail to take account of

the different forms of democratic assistance, leading to the use of one size fits all packages.

Much of the EU assistance has gone to civil society because it is considered non-partisan and such assistance is perceived as avoiding interference in domestic political processes. However, the civil society organizations funded have an urban bias and have difficulty in influencing the government. In Zimbabwe, for example, such groups have been considered 'puppets of the West' and to lack any domestic legitimacy.

Assistance to the media is another form of EU democracy assistance that is important for building democratic states. An independent and professional media is crucial for any democratic state.

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### ***Electoral assistance***

Preparing and running elections is an expensive venture for most African countries. Many Southern African countries look to the EU for this critical form of assistance. Donors have made funds available for elections, which is particularly welcome for the poorest countries. Election observation involves large budgets and has become more sophisticated.

More time and money is being spent on election observation. Observers now stay longer in the countries – almost two months compared to the two-week visits of earlier missions.

Electoral assistance is the most widely accepted form of democratic assistance and yet the least likely to add to democratization. EU electoral assistance takes various forms, such as supporting EMBs, the supervision of elections, voter registration, technical assistance, legal assistance and the training of electoral staff. Electoral assistance also involves international observer missions and international supervision of the electoral process.

Donors expect too much from the electoral process, regarding it as a panacea for achieving peace and stability. It is a widespread criticism that donors put time, money and effort into the first elections held in a country, but seem to lose interest in subsequent elections. While the EU assumes that elections are crucial for democratization, the popular perception in Southern Africa is that elections have not developed into a real force behind sustainable democracy.

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Although a lot of money is poured into electoral assistance, the question remains whether, with the levels of widespread poverty, underdevelopment and ethnic diversity, the emphasis on the ballot paper can sustain democracy in most African countries. After almost two decades of democratization,

Africa remains the least democratic part of the world after the Middle East. (Barkan, 2009: 2).

## Box 1: Classification of Southern African states

- Botswana, Ghana, Mauritius, Namibia and South Africa are classified as *liberal democracies*
- Mozambique, Zambia, Tanzania, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia and Senegal are classified as *aspiring democratic*
- Ethiopia, Uganda, Togo, Burundi and Gabon are classified as *competitive authoritarian*
- Angola, the DRC, Swaziland, Rwanda and Cameroon are classified as *electoral authoritarian*<sup>1</sup>
- Chad, Equatorial Guinea, Somalia, Sudan and Zimbabwe are classified as *politically closed*

Source: Barkan, 2009: 5

## 3. Case Studies

### Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe has been in economic crisis and undergoing a crisis of governance since the government lost a constitutional referendum in February 2000 and began a state-orchestrated campaign of violence and seizures of white-owned land, which polarized the country. The legacy of violence spawned by the colonial past and the absence of a viable political opposition placed the burden of democratization on a feeble, fragmented and donor-dependent civil society. Institutional manipulation has enabled the incumbents to retain power at all costs. Gerrymandering of constituencies, manipulation of the voter registration process and direct control of the media are the reality. As the country descended into lawlessness and violent authoritarianism, the EU withdrew its electoral assistance.

Zimbabwe has received funds from the EU to support civil society groups and democratic institutions, such as the judiciary, as part of a larger strategy to support democratic development in Zimbabwe. The imposition by the EU of targeted economic sanctions has led to retaliation by the government. The EU cancelled its planned EU Observation Mission of the 2002 elections on the grounds that the conditions for observation imposed unacceptable constraints. On 18 February 2002 the EU's Council of Foreign Ministers imposed targeted sanctions on Zimbabwe because of its government's violation of human rights and disrespect for the rule of law in the run up to the 2002 presidential elections.

The suspension of development cooperation meant that budget support to the government was reoriented to social sectors such as health and education. Most of the EU democracy assistance was diverted from the government to provide support for civil society. This led to a strong perception that donors wanted regime change. President Robert Mugabe made this point very clear in 2007 in his address to the Sixty-second Session of the United Nations General Assembly.

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<sup>1</sup> Competitive and electoral authoritarian regimes differ in terms of their levels of the realisation of political and civil liberties, using Freedom House scales, but the common factor is that in both regimes elections are held but the prospects for the alternation of government by the ballot and genuine democratisation is limited. Joel D Barkan p 6 2009.

Although welcomed by many, there is a widely held perception that the withdrawal of the EU observer mission had little impact on the Mugabe regime. Confronting despotism and building sustainable democracies are two different things and they require different strategies (Price, 2009:167). Democracy promotion is not regime change. The punitive character EU assistance to Zimbabwe and the targeted sanctions were resented by the political leadership but the pressure these generated was not enough to achieve quick results. The autocratic leaders are still in power and the EU is already negotiating the terms of a new relationship with them.

The EU has been willing to enter into talks and funding relationships with the government of national unity. It is unclear whether electoral assistance is on the agenda. Now is the time to consider a new EU approach to democracy and development assistance – one which is properly integrated and holistic.

### **Mozambique**

On independence in 1975, Mozambique was plunged into a civil war that lasted for 16 years. With a lot of political will and donor support, Mozambique today is seen as a post-conflict success story and as one of Africa's best performing economies. It is regarded as a functioning electoral democracy, and, despite some serious irregularities, its recent elections generally reflected the will of the people. Mozambique is rated by Freedom House as partly free (Freedom House, 2009). However, the state controls nearly all broadcast media and corruption is endemic in the judicial system. Human rights abuses by security forces remain serious problems and include extra-judicial killings, the torture of suspects and arbitrary detention. Nonetheless, in June 2008 the country's principal international donors promised an additional USD 774 million in aid for 2009.

Mozambique held Presidential, national and provincial elections on 28 October 2009. Although the elections were considered free and fair there are still a number of problems with the electoral process. Irregularities were noted in the nomination process, some of the party coalitions were disqualified from the national assembly electoral contest, and incidents of violence were reported including serious injuries and intimidation. The EU Observer Mission also observed numerous irregularities during tabulation of results (European Union, 2009).

Mozambique is highly dependent on international assistance and the EU accounts for almost 70 per cent of its development assistance. The present EU-Mozambique cooperation aims to support the poverty reduction strategy and achieve broadly based growth. Other priorities include the transport infrastructure, regional economic integration, agriculture and rural development.

The perception is widely held, especially in Mozambique, that EU Election Observer Missions use a lot of money that could be better utilized in other parts of the electoral cycle.

## **4. Perceptions of EU Democracy Building Efforts**

This section is based on the results of a series of interviews with key respondents in Southern Africa, primarily in Mozambique and Zimbabwe.



The funding of elections by the EU is perceived positively by many commentators and academics. The EU is regarded as an important development partner. It is recognized that making democratization a condition for assistance is important for the EU's credibility. The EU is perceived as putting political pressure on authoritarian regimes. EU policy on democracy and human rights brings about high standards, and there is a feeling that it is good to be associated with the EU.

Some strongly believe that support for civil society organizations has helped to strengthen their role as watchdogs. Electoral assistance has enhanced the capacity of relevant democratic institutions, EMBs, civil society organizations and political parties. In Zimbabwe there is clear recognition from some sections of civil society of the positive role that EU assistance has played in voter education and in supporting local observer groups during elections.

On the other hand, the EU's commitment to governance and democratization is perceived as merely rhetoric or a paper commitment only, rather than being reflected in the level of funding. Most respondents felt that EU funding is insubstantial, comes in trickles and is oriented towards projects rather than fully fledged programmes of democratization.

Some respondents in Zimbabwe and Mozambique felt that the EU was no longer funding electoral assistance but instead focusing on development issues such as infrastructure development, health services and other essential services. On the other hand, many donors, including the EU, are perceived as focusing more on elections and observation than on the bread and butter issues that affect Africans, such as land ownership and the means of production. There is a strong perception that models of democracy are still being imposed on African countries, and that there is too much emphasis on elections rather than support with broader issues of democratic governance.

There is a perception that the EU puts a lot of money into electoral assistance because elections are time-limited, specific, visible events with clear objectives and outcomes. Electoral assistance is widely regarded as support for an isolated event with no proper bearing on the overall democratic process. There is no perception of a holistic approach that links the election to other important aspects, such as constitution building, the rule of law and strengthening political party systems. Electoral system design has been neglected.

There is also a perception that the EU is no longer providing electoral assistance but instead concentrating on election observation. Electoral assistance projects are seen as event driven, short term projects that do not have any impact on the overall process of democracy building. Observer missions are perceived as fairly important for the quality of the election but, although huge sums of money are spent on these missions, many believe that most of the recommendations in observer mission reports are rarely taken up in planning or strategizing for future electoral support programmes.

There is no harmonization or coordination among donors about who is doing what, when and how. A better coordinated approach and a long-term strategy to fund

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democratization are missing, and this reduces the impact of the millions of dollars pumped into different regions in the name of the good governance and democratization agenda. Funding mechanisms have been ad hoc. Some donors have focused on narrow aspects, such as electoral assistance, parliamentary strengthening, women's human rights and political party assistance.

There is a need to measure how much electoral assistance has contributed to democracy building in Africa. The perception is that electoral assistance has no clear effect on the quality of elections unless there are also effective checks and balances in place and an evolving democratic political culture where the political actors and parties abide by the rules of the game. Usually, the EU and the USA are branded as a single powerful force with common interests. Democratic assistance is perceived in terms of advancing EU and the US foreign policy objectives, in particular their security and economic interests, rather than advancing African interests. It has been argued that the whole governance agenda is part and parcel of economic policies based on the Washington consensus propagated by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. These have further impoverished the African people, robbing them of their dignity and bringing about social and political chaos. A number of African intellectuals (e.g. Shivji 2004) believe that a new democratic consensus for Africa cannot be constructed without addressing the issue of liberation from imperialism – and that an electoral democracy cannot achieve this.

## **5. Conclusions and Recommendations**

Donors and recipient organizations must recognize the reality of the regimes to which they provide electoral support. Countries such as South Africa, Namibia and Mozambique have continued to hold credible elections and South Africa has been able to create reputable electoral institutions. Electoral assistance to these countries will boost the quality of elections and confidence in the electoral institutions. However, a number of countries still face problems related to politicized EMBs, electoral violence and a lack of political choice – problems that cannot be resolved by electoral assistance alone. Some of the ill-effects of the African democracies are the result of the legacies of colonialism, one-party regimes and undemocratic dominant political cultures. Changing a political culture is a long process, which many donors are unwilling to become involved in. Donors often opt for short-term, results-oriented projects that are highly visible.

A number of conferences have been held in different countries by academics and electoral practitioners in order to find ways to improve the effectiveness of electoral assistance. Analysis of the electoral realities and the context of each particular country is crucial in order to formulate suitable democratic assistance programmes. A one-size-fits-all mode of electoral assistance does not yield positive results. In some political regimes, the level of democratization affects the approach to the design of the entire electoral process. In some countries, voter registration is a big issue which is usually politicized. Some voters are disenfranchised; entire groups, e.g. immigrants or descendants of immigrants, might not be allowed to vote. Sometimes the voters' roll is not accessible to opposition parties. In countries such as South Africa these are non-issues, but in Zimbabwe they are the reality.

The most critical electoral issues in most African contexts are the design of the electoral system and the independence and professionalism of the EMB. These are usually affected by the political culture and the regime type. Lack of funding for the EMB as well as a lack of professional and non-partisan staff create serious problems for the credibility of the EMB. The EU should develop a clear contextual understanding of the electoral issues, politics and regime type in a country in order to provide support that goes beyond supporting the capacity of the EMB and beyond the election event.

Electoral assistance remains crucial to building democracy in Africa. Democratic assistance is political in most African countries. It is not merely technical but also affects power dynamics. Regardless of how much money is poured into a country, the politics must be right or the rules of the game must be agreeable to the bulk of the citizens. This is the first point of a truly democratic process.

The focus of democratic or electoral assistance should be on building a democratic political culture. The importance of a democratic political culture cannot be overstated as it determines the type of government institutions, how power is distributed, how institutions and authority are respected and how leaders are held accountable. If donors, and African governments and politicians neglect the building of a democratic political culture, then all the funds put into electoral assistance will be wasted. There is a need for a proper discussion among donors, EMBs, non-governmental organizations and governments about electoral assistance and the failure of recipient states to democratize. The new strategy could revisit how to assist the development of democratic political cultures.

Electoral system design has become a politically contested issue. There is a need for serious dialogue with stakeholders over proportional representation or mixed member proportional electoral systems, which have brought representation and stability to such countries as Mozambique, South Africa and Lesotho.

Elections and electoral assistance should be considered just a small component of the democratization process, along with the strengthening of civil society, the promotion of human rights – including the issues of gender, minorities and indigenous peoples – and the reinforcement of the rule of law and justice. The EU should design programmes that are broader and wider than the traditional concept of an electoral assistance programme.

Fighting poverty and meeting the basic needs of the population are the realities for most African governments. EU funds should be integrated into a long-term democratization strategy. The objectives of democracy and good governance programmes need to be incorporated into those of the national programmes that cover poverty reduction and poverty eradication. This should form part of the donor-government dialogue.

It is vital that the EU seeks the broader participation of stakeholders, including governments, political parties, the media, civil society organizations dealing with democratic governance, academics and organizations that work with the media and political party development, when putting together democratization programmes for countries.

The development of effective political parties remains a serious obstacle in the democratization process in Africa. The EU should find a way to focus on and emphasize

political party assistance. There must be a transparent relationship, and a frank discussion must take place between the EU and African recipients in order to agree the principles and standards for effective electoral assistance.

The EU should refrain from engaging in short-term projects that are highly visible but have little effect. Instead, the EU must be prepared to enter into a long-term commitment to build democratic political cultures. There is a need for greater harmonization and alignment in democratization assistance by the different donors, including better alignment with country priorities.

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