

## Democratic Elections and Coalition Government? A View from Kenya

Friday, June 12, 2009, 9:00 am – 10:30 am

The Brookings Institution, 1775 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington, DC

Eighteen months ago, Kenya's abortive elections culminated in widespread violence, which was only quelled when the international community led by Africans helped create a coalition government. What does this look like now and where is Kenya likely to go? Recent scholarship has raised serious issues about the efficacy of the democratic model for African countries. Does the Kenyan experience, combined with the lessons emerging from the recent Zimbabwe experiment with coalition government and the successful South African elections, provide insights into the validity of democratic models in the African context?

On June 12, Dr. Constance Freeman, regional director for East and Southern Africa of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in Nairobi led a roundtable discussion on "Democratic Elections and Coalition Government? A View from Kenya." Dr. Freeman was joined by Dr. Susanne Mueller, a political scientist who has lived and worked in Kenya for 20 years. Mueller is currently a consultant with the World Bank, and an associate in the Department of African and African American Studies at Harvard University. Dr. Mwangi Kimenyi, senior fellow of the Africa Growth Initiative at Brookings, and a Kenyan national, moderated the discussion.

### Post Election Violence in Kenya

Dr. Freeman spoke from her own experience living in Kenya before, during, and after the 2007 presidential elections. She noted that tensions were high in the country—ignited by presidential election results not being announced until three days after December 27, 2007 when they were held. Although the opposition candidate Raila Odinga originally appeared to be ahead, there was a sudden shift in favor of President Kibaki, who was then sworn in very quickly on December 30. The opposition leader, Odinga, however still claimed victory. Violence and killings along ethnic lines quickly ensued. It was initially directed at members of Kibaki's ethnic group, the Kikuyu, and then at supporters of Odinga as well; however, it quickly spilled over leading to retaliatory and even spontaneous violence against other ethnic groups. As a result, over 1000 people from different ethnic groups were killed in the following months, and more than 300,000 were displaced from their homes and villages.

Freeman remarked that these events were very unexpected in Kenya, which had previously been a relatively peaceful state. High-profile African leaders, such as Former Secretary-General of the United Nations Kofi Annan and Tanzanian President Kikwete, swiftly began mediation talks between the government and opposition party. By late February 2008, a power-sharing agreement had been reached to form a coalition government with Kibaki as president and Odinga as prime minister.

Dr. Freeman noted that as a result of the chaos, national and international confidence in the economy and investment environment was severely diminished. Tourism decreased, food prices doubled, and the economy shrank from an annual GDP growth rate of 7.1 percent in 2007 to 1.7 percent in 2008. This of course is in addition to an international financial crisis that has lowered remittances and further suppressed growth. Ethnic tensions remain high and are also taking on a class character, as both sides of the government enrich themselves through ever increasing salaries and perks, as well as a series of questionable incidents such as the sale of maize from vital strategic stores during a time when shortages

and hunger loomed. A grand coalition government leaves little room for any organized opposition, and Freeman notes that corruption appears to be getting worse. Thus far, the coalition government's progress on the reform agenda is very limited, as are initiatives to improve the lives of people. While some efforts have been made toward reconciliation, they are not robust.

Although many have reported widespread ethnic tensions to be one of the main factors in the post-election violence, Freeman attributes additional causes, such as rampant corruption, high youth unemployment—related to high poverty—and of course, frustrations with the elections and lack of faith in Kenyan democracy.

Dr. Susanne Mueller agrees that the election was a catalyst, but not the underlying cause of the post-election violence in Kenya. She identified the causes as follows: the diffusion of violence since the early 1990s, the deliberate weakening of institutions that under other circumstances might have vetted a contested election, and the tendency of politics to be played out as a zero sum ethnic game with no party accepting loss.

In contrast to Dr. Freeman, she also argued that the outbreak of violence was not actually that unexpected, noting she had predicted it a few years earlier. Throughout Dr. Mueller's career studying Kenya, she observed an escalation of state-sponsored violence and intimidation utilizing extra state agents. Starting in 1992, one year after multi-party elections were legalized, government leaders and politicians hired gangs to eliminate and displace opponents, a practice that has increased over time. She argued that this pattern is indicative of an unwillingness to lose elections, a hallmark of democracy, and something that has led to cycles of violence and counterviolence both during and after elections. This history, plus the trickle down effect of an epidemic of gang violence even between elections, has led to a loss of the state's monopoly of legitimate force, both by design and neglect, and to gangs forming shadow states in many parts of the country. Mueller noted that both the unwillingness to lose elections and the increasing use of violence to win elections raises questions about how democratic Kenya really is. Furthermore, in many parts of the country gangs rather than the government continue to call the shots. Dr. Mueller also raised these and some other points against the backdrop of different theories of democratic transition.

Unlike Dr. Freeman, Dr. Mueller also maintained that Kenya is not a real coalition government. Classic coalitions are based on a voluntary peaceful agreement among parties to form a majority government in parliament. In Kenya, the coalition government was instead manufactured under pressure by outside mediators as a temporary band-aid to stop the escalating violence, and to keep the state from disintegrating. Mueller said that the current "coalition" deviates from the classic form and is more indicative of a reversion to a one party state. However, she argues it is likely to hold mainly for self interested reasons; MPs do not want to risk a rerun for their seats and the possibility of losing their huge salaries.

Dr. Mueller also briefly discussed the lack of progress in setting up a special tribunal as recommended by the Waki Commission of Inquiry into the Post Election Violence (CIPEV). She analyzed why parliament had voted down a bill to anchor a special tribunal in the Kenyan constitution. She also discussed the motives of MPs who voted for and against a local tribunal in contrast to those who preferred perpetrators to be tried in the International Criminal Court (ICC) in the Hague.

### The Zimbabwe Example

Dr. Freeman also spoke briefly of the Zimbabwe case and its commonalities with Kenya. In Zimbabwe's elections in 2008, the opposition party of Morgan Tsvangirai won more votes than the incumbent leader, Robert Mugabe. Neither candidate gained a majority of votes (over 50 percent) however and run-off elections were held. During this time violence broke out in the country, allegedly organized by Mugabe's

Zanu-PF security forces, which prompted Tsvangirai to pull out of the run-offs for fear of continued violence and in defiance of what he considered to be false elections. International pressure and a failing economy in Zimbabwe forced Mugabe to consider a power-sharing agreement with Tsvangirai, whose party also won in parliament.

Although the coalition government has held for some months, there does not appear to be much progress toward improving the economy and quality of life for most Zimbabweans. Inflation is down, largely due to the abandonment of the Zimbabwean dollar and reversion to use of hard currencies. International governments have seen insufficient progress to recommit to development assistance, but instead have created a category of “humanitarian-plus” aid seeking to assist the transition. Amazingly, people in Zimbabwe are seizing this opportunity to continue about their business with improvements in the atmosphere and commerce, at least in Harare.

#### Validity of Coalition Government

Dr. Freeman views both of these cases as examples useful to consider in the debate about the efficacy of standard Western-style electoral systems in very poor African countries and the validity of coalition governments as a solution to “failed” elections. While it is too soon to judge definitively, coalition government in Kenya appears to be failing to grapple sufficiently with root causes of the conflicts. More time will be needed in Zimbabwe to determine possibilities of success. The lack of a true opposition in either case also contributes to the difficulty of keeping the ruling government in check and curbing rampant corruption.

When stakes are high and there is no strong cultural basis for losing “gracefully,” rigged elections are more common and representative electoral systems are less likely to work well.