

A STRAIN ON DEMOCRACY? AFRICAN ELECTIONS AND COVID-19

By Ines Schultes, Researcher

The Mo Ibrahim Foundation, committed to strengthening public governance and effective leadership in Africa, is monitoring the impact of the current COVID-19 crisis on the continent. In an earlier report and discussion with our Founder and Chair Mo Ibrahim, we highlighted the core challenges related to the continent's health capacity as well as the major economic impact of this crisis for Africa. We are now looking at what COVID-19 might mean for the African democratic landscape and the 2020 electoral schedule.

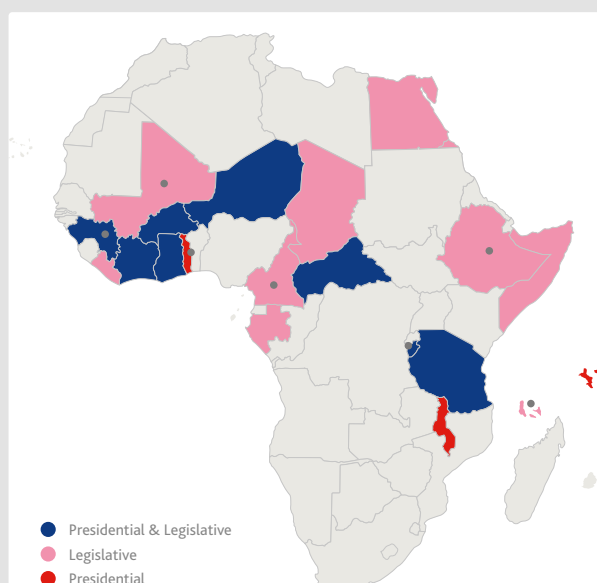
2020 was supposed to be a significant year for elections in Africa, with 20 countries holding scheduled presidential or

legislative elections or both. However, the increasing spread of the COVID-19 pandemic on the continent is disrupting Africa's election schedule.

Since the beginning of 2020, elections have been held in Comoros, Cameroon and Togo as well as in Guinea and Mali. The constitutional referendum and the legislative elections in Guinea in March, and the two rounds of legislative elections in Mali in March and in April, took place despite the pandemic starting to take hold of the African continent.

However, African leaders with elections scheduled later in the year now seem to be considering alternative paths.

African countries: Scheduled elections (2020)



African countries: Elections held, likely to be held or postponed (2020)

Burundi	Scheduled for May, likely to be held
Cameroon	Held in February
Comoros	Held in January
Ethiopia	Indefinitely postponed due to COVID-19
Guinea	Constitutional referendum & legislative elections held in March
Mali	First round held in March, second round held in April
Togo	Held in February

Source: MIF based on Africa Center for Strategic Studies 2020 & African Arguments 2020

There are several electoral appointments on the continent scheduled for the second half of the year besides the ones already held or soon to be held. So far only Ethiopia has indefinitely postponed its parliamentary elections, originally planned for the end of August 2020. While Burundi is likely to go ahead with its presidential and legislative elections scheduled for May despite fears of a spike in COVID-19 cases, and Tanzania is also discussing holding its elections, Côte d'Ivoire is considering postponement.

There is a delicate balance to strike between the public health objective to contain the COVID-19 pandemic and the concomitant responsibility to continue to uphold the rule of law and democratic processes. For instance, for its local elections in March, France decided to go ahead with the first round, amid stringent restrictions to curb the spread of the virus, as it was considered critical in order to preserve the democratic life of the country. The second round was then postponed to June, over fears of a rapidly worsening health situation.

The way in which elections are delayed and the way that the outcome of elections, if held, are dealt with will be a crucial yardstick for the democratic trajectory of the African continent.

- The elections in Ethiopia were probably the most highly anticipated, being the first competitive elections since the violent polls of 2005. The outcome was expected to have considerable implications for the future path of the country, which has entered a democratic transition in April 2018 with the appointment of Abiy Ahmed as Prime Minister.
- In Côte d'Ivoire, President Alassane Ouattara is completing his second term in 2020, having ruled out the possibility of a third term in early March 2020. Nevertheless, there are fears that a postponement could cause an institutional crisis, especially as the opposition appears to be excluded from consultations about the potential delay.
- In Tanzania, President John Magufuli, who has reportedly severely constrained civil rights, the media and the opposition since coming into office, is running for a second term in this year's elections, tentatively scheduled for October.
- The elections scheduled in Malawi for July 2020 are a re-run of the May 2019 elections, ordered by the country's Constitutional Court due to widespread irregularities during the polls. Without new elections, President Peter Mutharika will remain in office despite the annulment of the election that appointed him.

Even if elections are not being delayed, COVID-19 may impact preparation and running processes. For example, voter registration in Ghana has been affected and the training of staff, local commissioners and election agents in Côte d'Ivoire has been postponed. Another acute concern is that holding elections during a global health emergency could not only accelerate the spread of the virus but also that COVID-19 restrictions may be used to conceal interference with the preparations, to limit participation or to curb election monitoring. Indeed Guinea's Alpha Conde benefitted from the low turnout and from the international community's preoccupation with the pandemic in the country's March elections.

A democratic downturn in Africa linked to the COVID-19 health emergency would threaten the continent's recent important advances. According to the Ibrahim Index of African Governance (IIAG), Africa has made impressive progress when it comes to transfers of power along established and accepted constitutional mechanisms. The indicator *Orderly Transfers of Power* features among the five most improved indicators in the Index for the period 2013-2017, gaining on average +1.35 per year. Similarly, IIAG data show that elections on the continent have become freer and fairer. The freedom, fairness and impartiality of African elections have improved between 2008-2017, albeit the pace of improvement has been slightly slower in more recent years.

It remains to be seen on a country-by-country basis exactly how potential election delays or disruptions to the preparation or holding of elections are likely to impact the freedom and fairness of electoral processes. It also remains to be seen whether they trigger violations of national constitutions and popular reactions to these, thereby heightening the risk of conflict and violence. Although delaying campaigns and electoral polls may be necessary in the fight against COVID-19, there is concern that countries might use COVID-19 related restrictions as a shield for a more authoritarian style of public governance. Banning campaigning or delaying elections or holding them under less than ideal circumstances could hide opportunities to silence opposition parties and tighten a leader's grip on power.

Ultimately, the COVID-19 pandemic will be a crucial test for Africa's governance. Strong and accountable leadership will be required in order to negotiate the COVID-19 crisis wisely, ensuring that responses are designed under the rule of law and the continent's much praised democratic advancements are not jeopardised by using COVID-19 as an excuse to undermine democratic processes and the will of the people in the long run.