

The Art of Keeping Power: A Reflection on this Year's Presidential Elections in Uganda, Congo-Brazzaville, Djibouti, Zambia, Tanzania, Gabon and Comoros



EDITOR'S NOTE: As a follow-up to our project "Elections in Africa 2016" we propose you this document as an assessment of presidential elections in the seven countries listed above.

From Gabon to Uganda, through Congo-Brazzaville (among other notable examples), hope and enthusiasm were visible — especially among the urban youth — for decades-long ruling systems to fall. Yet, except in the Comoros, where the incumbent party failed to win, official results put ruling regimes ahead, allowing them to extend their long decades at the helm (in most of the cases).

Tainted with chaos and other issues of grave concern, this year's elections in the countries under review offered little or no reason for celebration. That being said, one question comes to mind: "are presidential elections gradually losing their true purpose in those countries?" An assessment of this year's presidential elections leads to some worrisome observations, which could be the basis for answering the above-mentioned inquiry in the affirmative.

Some such notable observations include:

- An early perception that victory was beyond the reach for the opposition, for apparently genuine, yet unfair, reasons (the case of Djibouti); or owing to veteran rulers and their systems' unwillingness to give up power, such as in Uganda and Congo Brazzaville
- Serious violations, including a surge in violence during the electoral campaign periods, and after the announcement of results (all seven countries)

1. Guelleh, Sassou-Nguesso and Museveni: tips on how to win before the contest

Djibouti's President Ismail Omar Guelleh won his fifth term with 87% of the votes cast. The Djiboutian strongman has ruled with an iron fist, creating conditions not conducive for opposition parties to function, let alone challenge him in an election. Due to a boycott by the main opposition parties, this year's election, like the previous ones, lacked an iota of suspense, with the slightest idea of Guelleh's defeat seeming like an impossibility.

In Uganda and Congo-Brazzaville, where the winners — Presidents Museveni and Sassou Nguesso respectively — have been in power for 62 years combined, elections were more a formality than a genuine opportunity for voters to pick their leaders.

In Uganda, Museveni employed intimidation tactics, including the mobilization of security forces to disrupt opposition rallies; beating, deploying teargas and detaining opposition supporters and leaders; and harassing independent news media. Consequently, the prevailing chaos tarnished the polls' credibility.

In Congo-Brazzaville, President Sassou Nguesso won by 67% of the vote. Yet the veteran ruler only became eligible for reelection after imposing a chaotic, tailor-made Constitution;¹ and calling the election earlier than expected, leaving his opponents with no time to prepare.



Ugandan main opposition candidate Kizza Besigye (above in white) was arrested multiple times during the election period (Isaac Kasamani / AFP / Getty Images)

2. Elections: an opportunity for positive change, or a source of violence and social unrest?

Election periods were marred with violence in all the seven countries listed above, including those with a reputation of relative stability (Tanzania, Gabon and Zambia). Extreme cases included deaths of supporters (Congo-Brazzaville, Zambia, Gabon, and Uganda).

Rather than laying the foundations for the much-desired socioeconomic changes, elections were more a nightmare than a beacon of hope for the masses, not least in the rare case of the ruling party's defeat (Comoros).

This is not to argue that the opposition's rise to power is the necessary condition for positive change. In the countries under review, cases where ruling parties have been defeated in past elections (at least officially) are extremely rare, for such an argument to hold water. Where it happened (twice in Zambia and once in Congo-Brazzaville), there is no evidence to suggest that the Zambian and Congolese people's situations improved every time an opposition party ascended to power.

Yet the rewards of a genuine "free and fair" election need not translate into tangible socioeconomic gains. A genuine electoral process is more likely to promote stability, while the perception that an election has been "stolen" is often the precursor of violence (Gabon is an example). The result has often been chaotic in terms of human rights violations by agents of the ruling regimes, whose propensity for heavy-handed repression cannot be disputed.

1. The ruling regime deployed heavily armed security personnel to violently repress protestors against the Constitutional changes. The November 6 Constitution eventually removed term and age limits, allowing President Sassou Nguesso to become eligible for reelection.

3. What's next for opposition parties and their candidates?

If opposition parties have in the past been blamed for failing to form coalitions to defeat the incumbents or candidates of the dominant parties, the tactic still proved not to be the answer in Tanzania and Gabon, where such coalitions were formed.

Except for Uganda, Djibouti and Congo-Brazzaville, where the slightest idea of the incumbents losing the election was inconceivable, the odds were higher than ever for opposition groups to defeat the ruling regimes, and even more so in cases of coalitions.

Yet, having been in power for too long (in most cases), such regimes have subordinated vital institutions of support to democracy (electoral commissions and the judiciaries, for example) as well as the security forces, among other state institutions, to enable them to perpetuate their systems.

Opposition candidates issued earlier warnings about the ruling parties' plans to rig the elections, and had to appeal the results in the courts. Yet such appeals were unsurprisingly unsuccessful, given the judiciaries' lack of independence.²

The electoral commission of Tanzania's semi-autonomous island of Zanzibar (ZEC) annulled the island's presidential polls during the counting process — with the opposition party Civic United Front (CUF) leading — arguing they (polls) were “not free and fair”.³ Yet ZEC maintained the national presidential polls from the same supposedly “not free and fair” process. Calls by the opposition to annul the national results — for similar concerns — fell on deaf ears, thus raising suspicion of double standards.

In Gabon, the opposition coalition led by Jean Ping reluctantly filed a petition with the Constitutional Court, to demand a vote recount in the incumbent's home constituency. The ruling by the Court's president later proved that reluctance, reinforcing the perception that the courts cannot rule against ruling regimes' interests, especially when there is a lot at stake.

Both Hakainde Hichilema (Zambia) and Kizza Besigye (Uganda) were making their fourth bids for presidency. Having lost with narrow margins in the previous two elections (1.6% in 2015; and 2.72% this year), the former may fancy the idea of making a fifth attempt in 2020; while the latter, having lost with the margins of 42.37% in 2011 and 25% this year, may quit politics altogether.

In Tanzania, CHADEMA⁴ and CUF — the two major forces in the opposition's four-party coalition UKAWA — had each their fifth unsuccessful attempts to unseat the ruling CCM⁵.

Apparently devoid of any answers in the face of rough political terrains; all other things remaining equal, competitive opposition groups may soon find futile the endeavor of running against ruling regimes (at least as far as presidential elections are concerned).

4. Conclusion

Except for the Comoros — where the candidate of the ruling party failed to secure a win — victory proved to be out of reach for opposition candidates in the cases under review. Thanks to their murky connections, long-established ruling regimes/systems have shown a mastery of the art of retaining power by deceit, rendering elections a futile enterprise.

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2. Except in the Comoros where the Constitutional Court allowed a partial re-run in Andjouan, due to irregularities and violence. For more information, See <http://www.africanews.com/2016/05/16/assoumani-officially-declared-president-elect-of-comoros/>
 3. BBC News, “Tanzania election: Zanzibar vote annulled after fight” Available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-34656934> (Accessed 07 November 2016)
 4. *Chama cha Demokrasia ya na Maendeleo*, Swahili for “Party for Democracy and Progress”.
 5. *Chama Cha Mapinduzi*, Swahili for “Party of the Revolution”.

“The ANC⁶ will rule until Jesus comes”, were the words of South African President Jacob Zuma during his campaign for local elections earlier this year.⁷ With election results failing to match the palpable, rising cry for alternatives, especially among the urban youth in most of the seven countries, Zuma’s euphemism cannot be more relevant. Yet one thing remains uncertain. Will the youth in those countries wait “until Jesus comes”, without exploring alternative means of defeating old, dominant regimes?

6. The African National Congress, the major political party in South Africa’s ruling coalition since 1994.

7. News24, “ANC will rule until Jesus comes, Zuma says again.” Available online at <http://www.news24.com/elections/news/anc-will-rule-until-jesus-comes-zuma-says-again-20160705> (Accessed on 27 October 2016).