



## Elections in Africa

### **Carol Thompson, Deputy Assistant Secretary for African Affairs**

Panel Remarks for the Student Organization for African Studies (SOFAS) at American University  
Washington, DC  
April 23, 2008

Good evening and thank you very much for your invitation. I am pleased to be a part of these discussions that have been organized to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of African Affairs.

I'd like to especially thank Brynne Bannister, a student here at American University for organizing tonight's program. Little did we know when we accepted her as an intern in the Africa Bureau, it would lead to this wonderful event.

I would also like to congratulate the School of International Service at American University, that is also celebrating its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

### **Support for Democracy**

My remarks this evening will highlight some of the current efforts at democracy building in Africa.

It was not too long ago that there was an influential school of thought that argued that democracy could only survive in countries pervaded by Western values and considerable wealth. They maintained that the United States was misguided in its vision, and destined to fail in its effort to advance democracy in the developing world.

The mistake in this line of thought was that democracy was a Western value. In fact, it is a universal value - one that can take root wherever human beings live and succeed - adapting to local customs, practices, and values. No countries' record of democracy is perfect - including ours, but, I can say, nevertheless, that democracy has taken root in much of Sub-Saharan Africa. In the past four years alone, there have been more than 50 democratic elections at all levels in Africa. Almost three-quarters of Sub-Saharan nations are now classified by Freedom House as "Free" or "Partly Free" - up from less than half in 1990.

### **The President's Trip**

As many of you know, President Bush traveled to Africa in February, visiting five countries: Benin, Tanzania, Rwanda, Ghana, and Liberia. The President chose these countries, not because they have been in the news, but because they are some of the many countries that are embracing the principles of democracy.

They all have worked hard to build democratic institutions, conduct free and fair elections to select new leadership, govern justly, establish rule of law and are taking steps to embrace all aspects of a democratic society. They represent positive examples of American support for democracy in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Liberia - highlighting one of these nations - is emerging as a growing democracy in West Africa. The Liberian government has taken significant steps to correct past human rights deficiencies - including working to reform the justice sector, combating corruption and promoting good governance, and establishing a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to investigate and document human rights violations and war crimes committed during the nation's civil war.

Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf was elected in a fair and free election as Africa's first female head of state, and has quickly established herself as one of Africa's most powerful voices of democratization.

While countries like Liberia project a positive outlook of democratization, there are a number of current and potential challenges that threaten the democratic stability of the region.

### **Current Challenges**

Some recent African elections have been highly questionable or plagued with serious irregularities. As we saw in Nigeria last year, and in the current political crises in Kenya and Zimbabwe, free and fair elections are still a goal to be achieved. In all these cases the U.S. Government has supported the rule of law and the right of the people to have their votes counted and their voices heard.

For those who have been following the electoral crisis in Zimbabwe, I would like to offer this update.

Twenty-five days ago, the electorate of Zimbabwe went to the polls to exercise their right to vote in presidential and parliamentary elections. The ruling party, ZANU-PF, led by Robert Mugabe, the President of Zimbabwe since 1980, was strongly challenged by Morgan Tsvangirai, the leader of the Movement for Democratic Change. Because of the country's dire economic situation, many expected the election would produce new leadership. While the results of the presidential election have not yet been officially declared, the MDC claims that President Mugabe has deliberately suppressed results that would show an outright win by Tsvangirai.

Despite the calls of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the African Union (AU), the UN Secretary General, the G-8, Secretary Rice, and others in the international community, for the immediate release of all election results, the Mugabe regime and the ZEC remain intransigent in their refusal to do so, robbing the Zimbabwean people of their right to know the election's outcome.

This past weekend, a recount began of 23 parliamentary constituencies. Despite transpiring in an atmosphere of relative calm, and under the watch of some European Union and U.S. Embassy observers, the opposition MDC has dismissed the recounts as an attempt to rig the election and overturn its parliamentary majority. The absence of a legitimate chain of custody of the ballots and ballot boxes that are the subject of the recounts, raises serious doubt as to whether the recount can be viewed as credible.

Post-election violence is also of great concern. We call upon the ruling party to stop immediately the violence and brutality targeted against those individuals who merely seek to freely express their political will. There is no place for violence in a democratic society.

### **Looking Forward**

Looking forward, we will continue to monitor the situations in Kenya and Zimbabwe. In Kenya, the United States will continue to urge its leaders to fulfill its power sharing

commitment, stand ready to assist the coalition government, and help ensure that the provisions of the February 28 political accord are fully respected. In Zimbabwe, we are looking for SADC and AU leaders to step up and address this crisis.

In the coming year and in the foreseeable future, our task will be to support not just these vital elections, but also the growth of democratic institutions throughout Sub-Saharan Africa. We will partner with these nations to steadfastly advance these goals.

Between now and the end of 2009, nineteen Sub-Saharan countries will go to the polls. Those, such as Botswana and Ghana, will endeavor to build upon their foundation of encouraging free and fair elections.

Similarly, South Africa - serving as a regional economic power, model of democracy in action, and important ally to the United States, is setting a good example for other young democracies on the continent. Their presidential and parliamentary elections in April, 2009 will represent the second peaceful transfer of presidential power since the first democratic election of Nelson Mandela in 1994.

In closing, democracy is growing on the continent. The United States Government is committed to promoting freedom and strengthening the burgeoning democracies in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The recent trend towards the democratization of Africa is an important legacy of the Bureau of African Affairs' first 50 years, and will undoubtedly lead us into our next half century.

Thank you very much.

Released on May 6, 2008

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