

African elections have assumed a significance which political elites cannot ignore, transformative agricultural and industrial policies imperative

As Senegal celebrates its second democratic transfer of power, and Mali copes with the aftermath of a military coup which ended 20 years of democratic rule, Africa Research Institute's latest briefing note places these seismic political events in a regional context. [*Diehards and democracy: Elites, inequality and institutions in African elections*](#) examines the essential traits of recent polls, and considers the implications for future democratic contests.

Multi-party elections are a salient feature of Africa's fast evolving political landscape. In 1989, three African countries were electoral democracies. By 2011, that number had risen to 18. Twenty-three countries have elections scheduled for 2012. African elections have assumed their own character, producing diverse political outcomes and myriad unintended consequences.

Progressive democratic developments abound. Substantial external funding for elections has recast political competition. Since 1991, 31 ruling parties or heads of state have been voted from power. Institutions matter in ways they previously did not – attempts to extend presidential term limits in Nigeria, Zambia and Malawi were rebuffed by national assemblies. The management of elections has improved, albeit unevenly.

The African Union has consistently supported the democratic process and opposed illegitimate transfers of power. Since 2005, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has suspended and sanctioned all coup leaders who refused to hold elections. Open condemnation by African regional organisations of the March 2012 coup in Mali – and insistence on a return to constitutional order – would have been unthinkable in the 1990s.

While much progress has been made in consolidating democratic politics, many African elections involve the recycling of protagonists. Vote buying and fraud are common. The military retains significant influence in most African countries. While elections have been more peaceable mechanisms for contesting power than civil war, politically motivated violence occurred in 60% of African elections in 1990-2008.

Democratic reforms have coincided with rising inequality. No government in sub-Saharan Africa has yet created the conditions for sustainable and transformative agricultural or industrial development. Formal job creation has stagnated. Even in industrialised South Africa a quarter of the labour force – and more than half of 15-24 year olds – are unemployed. As living costs rise relentlessly, voters' demands for economic opportunities will become increasingly volatile.

“Expectations about elections must be realistic, in Africa as elsewhere” says Jonathan Bhalla, Research Manager at African Research Institute. “Elections are not a “silver bullet” for effecting immediate and positive political change. But they do play a crucial role in improving the accountability and transparency of governments, and further consolidation of electoral processes and institutions is imperative. The democratic genie will not be returned to the bottle in Africa. Autocratic regimes ignore this at their peril.”

Notes to editors:

Africa Research Institute is a non-partisan think-tank based in London. Our mission is to draw attention to ideas that have worked in Africa, and to identify new ideas where needed.

[Diehards and democracy: Elites, inequality and institutions in African elections](http://bit.ly/HWIYGB) can be downloaded from the Africa Research Institute website: <http://bit.ly/HWIYGB>

For all media enquiries, please contact Edward Paice on 07941 228294 or 020 7222 4006 or Jonathan Bhalla on 07892 697304 or 020 7222 4006