

Guinea, Tanzania, and Côte d'Ivoire: three observations from October's elections

Blog post by Senior Associate Isabelle Trick, 9 November 2020

While all eyes have been on the US presidential elections, Guinea, Tanzania and Côte d'Ivoire have all also elected presidents in the last three weeks. In all three countries, the incumbent presidents retained their positions and increased their votes: Alpha Condé won 59.49% in Guinea; John Magufuli won 84.40% of the vote in Tanzania; Alassane Ouattara won 94.27% of the vote in Côte d'Ivoire. Margins Joe Biden would envy. In none of these cases did the opposition accept the results of these elections. But this is only one of a number of trends across the three votes.

First, despite Africa being the youngest continent in the world, elections in West Africa returned 78-year-old Ouattara and 82-year-old Condé to power, and both seem to have significant support among young voters. Elections keep pitting the same opponents against each other in Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire. In Tanzania, the ruling party has been in power (under different guises) since independence in 1961. This is a reflection of deeply entrenched oligarchies. There is a strong correlation between lengthy periods of rule and corruption, and they can undermine the independence of democratic institutions. In the short term, a lack of viable alternatives tends to lead to resignation among young voters - and, as we have recently seen in Nigeria, once the gap between young people and their governments has grown too wide, the results can be explosive.

Second, issues around fakes news, freedom of the press and social media have featured in all three elections. In Côte d'Ivoire, an information war between the different parties played out on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and WhatsApp - sometimes crossing the line into misinformation and political manipulation. In Tanzania, information is highly centralised with tough cybercrime laws, and intimidation of local and international journalists causing the country to drop 53 places to 124 on the Reporters Without Borders annual Press Freedom Index (PFI) since Magufuli came to power.

On election day itself, Tanzanians were unable to send texts and access sites like WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, and Google. In Guinea, ranked marginally better at rank 110 of the PFI, internet and phone service were also suspended by the government for about 100 hours around the election. Social media allowed Guillaume Soro, a former rebel leader and prime minister, who is stuck in exile in France and was prevented from running for president, to be a vocal critic of Ouattara's campaign without being in Cote D'Ivoire. Soro used social media last week to openly call on the army to intervene against the president.

Third, all three elections struggled with legitimacy issues. In both Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire, incumbent presidents ran for third terms which their opponents argued were unconstitutional - part of the wider trend of [third termism](#) across the continent. In Côte d'Ivoire, the two major opposition leaders opted to boycott the election and called for civil disobedience. In Tanzania, leading opposition candidate Tundu Lissu criticised widespread voting irregularities and intimidation and all three countries saw violence and election-related casualties.

Opposition leaders were subsequently arrested or placed under house arrest in all three countries and these situations remain tense and may escalate. Independent electoral observers raised concerns about all three elections. Ironically, all three re-elected presidents have previously been seen as positive forces within their countries. Condé himself was the first president since independence to come to power through free elections in Guinea ten years ago.

Both for investors and for businesses operating in these markets, the unfortunate fact is that these three elections will entrench rather than bridge divisions and will increase uncertainty, breaking with the widely held assumption that continuity equals stability. Especially in the face of term extensions, voters may increasingly feel that true transitions of power only happen when there is a rupture in the political system - as recently observed in Mali.

With the likely exception of Ghana's elections in December, the equally unfortunate fact is that the trends captured by these elections are not likely to be confined to these three states. The next few months will see elections in Burkina Faso, Niger, the Central African Republic, and Uganda, states with high levels of conflict and histories of voter intimidation and election irregularities. If these elections foreshadow wider patterns, 2021 will be an uncertain year.