

Fair Elections for a Better Future

Goodluck Ebele Jonathan

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To participants in Africa Summit and Leadership Conference 2019 in South Africa



First, let me appreciate Dr. Hak Ja Han Moon, the lady who brought us together this morning, for her leadership and ability to carry on with the work of the Universal Peace Federation after the passing on of her husband, Rev. Sun Myung Moon. It shows that the vision of lasting peace in the world, which the organization propagates, is a shared one. I appreciate UPF for organizing the International Leadership Conferences, which provide a platform for leaders to share their perspectives on peace and development. I also thank members of UPF for inviting me to this conference which has the theme "Building a Peaceful and Prosperous Africa Centered on Universal Values." I am always pleased to be in any gathering where the peace and development of our world is being considered. It is also my joy and honor to share this platform with fellow African leaders, especially those whom I personally know to be passionate about Africa's growth and the wellbeing of the good people of the continent. I am grateful to them and other dignitaries who are participating in this conference and for the rich presentations so far made and others that are yet to come. Equally important is my gratitude to the citizens of the Republic of South Africa who have always shown me love whenever I have had the opportunity to visit this beautiful and important country in Africa.

Experience and outlook

I left here barely three weeks ago after I led the Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa (EISA) observation mission to the just concluded national and provincial elections. I must say that the job of observing the elections for me and members of my team was made easier by the warm reception and courtesies accorded us by the good people of South Africa.

I always tell people that Africa missed out on the industrial revolution and is already lagging behind in the race to space. Others are not only visiting the moon but seeking the possibility of long stays on other planets. We therefore have no reason to fail our people on democracy. This is because it is within our power and aptitude to freely choose our leaders and determine how we shall be governed. Africa need not and should not miss out on democratic consolidations. What is true about our world today is that every country's development is relative to the level of peace that exists in its national space. I have continuously made the point that the world's ten most developed nations are those countries that experience the least conflicts while the ten least developed countries are consumed in the worst forms of conflicts.

I don't take pleasure in observing that many of those nations who are categorized as least developed are here in Africa. This tells us that the continent is still in need of the kind of leadership and service that will deliver prosperity to a greater number of our people.

While conflicts scare people away and discourage investors, good governance attracts growth and investments. True democracy guarantees free and fair elections and peaceful transfer of power from one administration to another. It also brings about peace, which is the ideal setting that attracts investments that the nations need to grow and develop.

Society grows and develops where the leader tolerates opposition, guarantees freedoms, educates and builds up the people, as well as upholds equity and justice. Those who ignore these tenets of a free and progressive society often plunge their countries into crises.

Contentious struggles for dominance

In many African countries democratic processes remain fragile because of leadership struggles among politicians. Such struggles, mainly driven by ego, do not allow for the deepening of democratic values and the conduct of free and fair elections. Many African nations have either stood in one spot for years or even regressed because of the take-power-at-all-cost disposition of some politicians. Many of those who eventually get to power with that mind-set end up rising above the people, above the laws of the land and beyond the reach of justice.

When leaders encourage impunity in the conduct of elections, they push the aggrieved to desperate limits, which fuels crises and conflicts. That is why some African nations are in turmoil today. A leader who truly wishes to serve his people will not impose his will on them. Such a leader will not be tempted to manipulate constitutional processes to either repress opposition or extend his tenure.



Dr. Jonathan had a heart-to-heart encounter with Father in July 2007 as president of Nigeria. He was already blessed at that time. True Mother and Hyo Jin nim had blessed him and his wife, Patience, in July 2006

Leaders' character is key

It was Frank Herbert [1920–1984] a celebrated American writer, who said that "Good governance never depends upon laws, but upon the personal qualities of those who govern." I find this view quite germane. The seed of good governance is sown in the heart of the patriotic leader. Driven by his conscience, and never ego, he dons the garb and disposition of stewardship to envision a society that will be just to his people.

Although multiparty elections have become more regular in Africa, we still lag behind the rest of the world in making democracy work for the electorate, the main reason for this being the winner-take-all approach to democracy in Africa. Having said that, I must commend President Cyril Ramaphosa for bridging the gap by setting up a gender- and politically-balanced national government of fourteen men and fourteen women within ninety-six hours of being sworn in. The rest of the continent has a lot to learn from this.

There is evidence of conflicts arising from weak institutions, undemocratic practices and rigged electoral processes that in the worst-case scenario usually cause political instability and widespread insecurity. Any leader who gets consumed in personal survival tactics, as often happens on our continent, ceases to be responsible to the people. I believe that power loses its taste and appeal once it becomes hostile and unresponsive to the wishes of the people.

Significant progress

There is no doubt that there is a silver lining in the fact that Africa has taken considerable steps in striving towards democratic and participatory governance, going by the rate African nations are holding periodic multi-party elections. This year alone, no fewer than eight African countries have held one form of election or the other. They include Nigeria, Senegal, Guinea-Bissau, Comoros, Egypt, Benin, South Africa and Malawi. It is expected that more than that number of countries will conduct general or parliamentary elections before the end of 2019.

That for me is a plus and an important step in the right direction, knowing Africa's past with autocratic rule and one-man shows. Whatever we are doing or saying here today will therefore focus on how to strengthen the pillars of democracy where they are weak and enhance political stability across the continent.



Kathy Rigney presenting Goodluck Ebele Jonathan with True Father's autobiography

Impressive South Africa

I am delighted that the organizers of this conference chose South Africa as the venue for the event. On one hand, the memories I had of the elections held here in May as leader of an election observation mission are still fresh and worthy of sharing with this distinguished gathering. On the other hand, South Africa to me symbolizes Africa's difficult past, its hopes, aspirations and possibilities with representative leadership.

Seeing how far the country has come, her leadership experience embodies all that is required to explore "the need for good governance and a peaceful electioneering processes in Africa," which is the topic of my discourse. This is because, like the rest of Africa, South Africa is new to representative democracy. The country has turned its back on its past of minority rule to embrace representative democracy as a system of government.

I am also inclined to believe that ahead of many other African nations, South Africa, within a relatively short time, has successfully established functional institutions that guide its democracy, inspiring confidence in the system. There are lessons for us to learn from the country's last elections. It was obvious from our interactions with a cross-section of the stakeholders as election observers that almost all the players had confidence in both the electoral management body, the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) and the police operatives that secured the elections.

The development accounted for why the just-concluded elections were largely peaceful and adjudged by observers to have been credible. This is encouraging because South Africa was able to record this kind of progress, barely twenty-five years after the legendary Nelson Mandela became its first democratically elected president.

For me, this is an important milestone in Africa's journey towards liberal democracy. Once you get to that point where all role players in elections can express confidence in the umpire and the security systems, you would have solved more than 70 percent of your electoral challenges.

Room for improvement

Sadly, not many African countries have gotten to this point, the point at which they can beat their chest and boast of political freedom, inclusiveness, independence of the electoral management body and

credibility of the political process. You can always tell how credible or otherwise a democratic process has been from the level of protests and violence and the number of post-election litigations. In places where there had been issues of election-related conflicts or violence, like Kenya, Togo, Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Benin, the question of credibility and trust involving role players in the elections had always been on the cards.

When people have confidence in the electoral system and where the process has been free, fair and transparent, they are more likely to accept the result of elections, rather than protest or go to court to challenge the outcome. I should also note that politicians sometimes hide behind ego and religious and ethnic sentiments to instigate crises. The truth is that credible and peaceful elections have been accepted globally as the necessary tool for improved governance, inclusiveness and people-oriented development.

Technological aids

As technology continues to evolve, electoral processes are being retooled globally in tune with the times. That is why some countries are adopting electronic voting as the system of choice. In countries where decision is yet to be taken on full electronic voting, automation has taken over some sensitive aspects of the process, like in Nigeria where card readers have already been deployed to enhance efficiency of voter registration and accreditation during the voting process.

Despite the fact some people are still skeptical about its reliability, I remain convinced that full automation is the way to go for future elections. I am optimistic that Africa will ultimately cue into [pay attention to] this choice. However, I believe that before we get there, we should be able to build political and electoral systems that give our people hope and confidence. When we establish a credible system, it will be easier to deploy technology when the time eventually comes for full electronic voting.

Key human factors

What is obvious is that the credibility and legitimacy of electoral processes are, to a great extent, determined by the competence, impartiality and independence of electoral management bodies (EMBs). For Africa to make more progress toward building liberal democracies, upholding the rule of law, protecting human rights, improving human security and enhancing good governance, it should first take deliberate measures to strengthen the independence of the electoral management bodies. Transparency of the recruitment processes for members of EMBs is a major factor that boosts the confidence of the respective electorates during elections. Such principles should ensure independence, impartiality, fair representation, transparency and integrity.

That almost all EMBs in Africa are identified with the prefix "independent," is interesting, but the jury is still out on whether these agencies are truly independent as their names imply. As Africa consolidates its hold on democracy with many nations holding periodic elections, the question of which system of recruitment for the leadership of EMBs serves the continent best has continued to be asked. This is because a nation's electoral management model will, to a great extent, determine the transparency of its electoral processes. So far, the method of constituting members of EMBs varies from one nation to the other, without a general guiding principle. What is clear is that there are actually three models in practice globally.

In some countries, the appointing authority is vested in the president, as you have in such nations as Nigeria, Liberia, Kenya and Sudan. In other countries, the president does not have much influence over who receives an appointment to the EMBs. This is the system that is evidenced in countries like India and Canada. In some countries, other institutions provide a shortlist of names from which the president appoints EMB members, like South Africa and Zimbabwe. This system seems to be a hybrid of the two already itemized.

It bears mentioning that in countries in which the president exercises sole appointing authority, the propriety of the exercise has regularly come into question, with analysts claiming that it does not guarantee total independence for the commission. When you leave a serious responsibility like that in the hands of one powerful partisan politician, there is every indication that the people, especially fellow politicians who are in the opposition, will view his motives as suspect, even if he or she has the best of intentions.

Examples of EMBs in action

Three countries out of those cited above have already conducted general elections this year. They are South Africa, India and Nigeria. It is instructive that the elections in the first two countries, in which EMBs were constituted through institutional processes, enjoyed wider acceptability among the people. In cases where there is no confidence in the electoral commission, candidates who doubt the impartiality of the umpire usually challenge the election results in court. For instance, by the end of April 2019, Nigeria's Election Petition tribunals had received no fewer than 766 petitions from those challenging the outcome

of the 2019 general elections. What this tells us is that the continent urgently needs to review and harmonize its standards for constituting the institutions responsible for the conduct of elections in order to properly equip them to truly earn the confidence of the people.

The African Union guideline for electoral observation and monitoring missions requires African nations to establish "impartial, all-inclusive, competent and accountable national electoral bodies staffed by qualified personnel, as well as competent legal entities including effective constitutional courts to arbitrate in the event of disputes arising from the conduct of elections." This is however not far-reaching enough as it comes across as mere suggestions for nations going into elections. In this regard, I urge the African Union to work toward establishing minimum standards and benchmarks for constituting electoral management bodies and to encourage member-nations to ratify them.

The African Union should, through its Political Affairs Department, set up a team of electoral experts to study different models and recommend the system they consider best for the continent. Such benchmarks should also take cognizance of the need to review the election judicial processes to ensure that where election tribunals are set up to specifically handle election cases, one judicial officer does not handle the role of appointing all members of the tribunals.

The role of security forces

Since neutrality of the security services is absolutely necessary in ensuring free and fair elections, it is also important that the Africa Union establishes a code of conduct that should guide security officials in charge of elections. All these recommendations should be accommodated in African Union's procedures for elections that should serve as guidelines for election observers.

When I pointed out earlier that elections alone do not deliver good governance, it was on the understanding that to attain good governance in a democracy requires a deeper and more nuanced consideration. I have said elsewhere that a driver of good governance must be development-minded, visionary and selfless and he or she must never seek power at all costs nor wield it for its own sake. Nations only develop when national institutions gain strength and all citizens, both the leader and the led, come under the control and protection of the rule of law.

Some final thoughts

As I close, let me emphasize that Africa's leadership problem has more to do with weak institutions than with the situation of leaders serving in office for lengthy periods of time. When the democratic institutions are strong, they will develop firewalls that will resist attempts to alter the constitution and manipulate electoral processes for selfish reasons.

Democracy is not about holding periodic elections but conducting credible, transparent, free and fair polls. African elections must meet minimum acceptable standards for democracy to be beneficial to the people of the continent. Anything short of that can at best be considered pseudo democracies. African nations must improve their electoral processes by establishing systems that will support and deliver credible elections. That is the impetus the continent needs to achieve lasting peace that will catalyze growth and sustainable development. I thank you all.

Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, who was born in Bayelsa State, Nigeria, in 1957, earned a master's degree in Fisheries Biology and a PhD in Zoology. He was deputy governor of his home state, 1999–2005 and then governor, December 2005–May 2007, due to the impeachment of his boss (the governor) for money laundering. As the running mate to presidential candidate Umaru Musa Yar'Adua (who was in ill health), he rose to vice-president in April 2007, acting president in February and then president upon Yar'Adua's death in May. He won election as president in April 2011 and served until May 2015.