

**Testimony by United States Agency for International Development  
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Global Human Rights and International Organizations  
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**“U.S. Election Support in Africa”**

Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Bass, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

When I last spoke with this Subcommittee in November, we discussed one of the most pressing challenges facing the continent, reducing energy poverty. Today, we’ve come together to address another critical undertaking that holds the potential to impact the continent’s future for generations to come - credible and legitimate elections. Our Agency mission statement, “We partner to end extreme poverty, and promote resilient, democratic societies while advancing our security and prosperity,” reflects the importance we place on this topic.

While visiting Ghana in 2009, President Obama observed that, “Development depends on good governance. That is the ingredient which has been missing in far too many places, for far too long. That’s the change that can unlock Africa’s potential.” Consistent with the President’s vision, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) promotes better governance as an integral part of our development agenda. But the real story isn’t one of our technical assistance or support for elections. The real story lies in the committed African men and women that are working every day to strengthen their nations’ democratic institutions and processes. According to a 2014 Afrobarometer survey, seven out of ten Africans prefer democracy to other political systems. These individuals, growing in number, making their voices heard -- through elections and through civil society organizations -- are the faces of democracy in Africa.

Dedicated civil servants like Justice Irene Mambilima, a member of Zambia’s Electoral Commission who I had the privilege to meet and see in action, are the backbone of democracy. She, alongside countless other Zambians, worked determinedly following the death of President Michael Sata last October to prepare the country for a presidential by-election within the three-month period mandated by the constitution. It was clear to me that she and her fellow commissioners were as fiercely determined as Zambia’s citizens to make democracy work, and were striving tirelessly to put together a free, credible, and peaceful, nationwide election in record time. Africans such as these Zambians, some prominent, others working behind the scenes, are writing the story of Africa’s future. Supporting their efforts is USAID’s goal.

Since the early 1990s, USAID has promoted political freedom as an indispensable part of development. We are guided in these efforts by our Democracy, Human Rights and Governance Strategy which highlights participation, inclusion, transparency, and accountability as principles central to the achievement of human rights, democratic governance, and sustainable development. These principles are vital to the pursuit of freedom, national security and economic development.

Today, I will highlight USAID's support for elections and political processes which in turn helps establish and consolidate inclusive, accountable, and resilient democratic societies that advance freedom, dignity and development on the continent. I will provide examples of our support, highlight lessons learned, and address the challenges moving forward.

### **USAID Support**

Supporting elections and political processes has been a cornerstone of USAID's work in Africa for more than two decades. During the Obama Administration alone, USAID and its international and local partners have worked to improve the credibility and conduct of elections in at least 34 countries in sub-Saharan Africa. In Kenya, USAID was actively engaged with myriad Kenyan stakeholders, other donors, and across the interagency from the 2007 -2008 post-election violence period through the adoption of the 2010 Constitution, through the 2013 6-ballot general election; our robust support assisted Kenyans to conduct civic education on decentralization and the new multiple-ballot vote, to identify and mitigate conflict triggers, and to peacefully resolve electoral disputes. In Kenya, Liberia, Nigeria, and a handful of other countries, we have worked across multiple electoral cycles during that period. This fact alone underscores one of the key democratic achievements in Africa: elections have become a regular, predictable feature of politics across the region. In a growing number of countries such as Botswana, Cape Verde, and Mauritius, free, fair and credible elections have taken place for years without substantial assistance from donors. In fact, our programs increasingly support training by experts from these countries, and others like Ghana, Senegal, and South Africa, who are sharing their countries' own substantial expertise and lessons learned with their peers in developing democracies around the world. As we reflect on the challenges facing individual countries at any given moment, it's important not to lose sight of these longer-term positive trends across Africa when it comes to elections and political processes.

Yet elections alone do not make a democracy or even assure democratic transformation; they are a snapshot of democratic trends, not the whole story. That is why we also work to ensure that the enabling conditions for successful elections are in place, to strengthen the rule of law, to promote and protect human rights, to improve governance institutions and processes, support a dynamic civil society, and promote a free and independent media. These elements of democratic governance are just as important as the ballot box and help reinforce the important electoral cycle that plays out between polls and sustain democratic reforms. Voices need to be heard,

systems need to function, impartial justice needs to be dispensed, and human rights need to be protected *every day*, not just on Election Day. This is the foundation for long-term democratic change.

Our support of credible and legitimate elections provides a crucial opportunity for citizens to hold their political leaders accountable and to give ordinary citizens a role in determining the future of their nations through peaceful political competition. Through diplomacy and development assistance, the United States remains committed to supporting credible, transparent, and inclusive elections, encouraging a respect for the political rules of the game, and reducing the likelihood of electoral violence. Our activities in support of credible elections typically include: providing assistance to election management bodies; strengthening the capacity of political parties to develop and campaign on issue-based platforms and to accurately represent their constituents' interests; and supporting civil society's efforts to bolster civic and voter education, and to conduct oversight of the democratic process.

Very importantly, our goal is to support the creation of fair and credible electoral systems, not to determine the winners of elections. We strive only for legitimate, impartial, and peaceful political processes, not particular outcomes. We support the right of leaders to govern, but only if they win elections fair and square. Incumbents in several African countries, however, have no interest in receiving international assistance that aims to improve the quality and credibility of elections. Fear of losing power motivates them to manipulate laws, institutions, and processes to create a playing field so uneven that their opponents stand no chance of winning, even when a majority of citizens would support them. In these cases, USAID works closely with the State Department, other donors, local media, and civil society to try to create an environment for reforms that will lead to more credible electoral processes.

A vibrant and empowered civil society helps to promote inclusiveness, transparency, rule of law and human rights, and acts as a partner to governments and the private sector in delivering services. As African societies and political systems continue to develop, the expectations of people toward their governments continue to rise. Whereas an Afrobarometer survey in 2000 of citizens in 34 African countries showed that they believed the degree of democracy was based on the performance of the president, the 2011-2013 survey showed that they now believe the leading factor is the quality of elections. A robust and energized civil society is also a key ingredient as governments consider reforms to electoral legal frameworks, for monitoring the entire electoral cycle, and for observing processes and outcomes on Election Day itself.

Countries with strong democratic institutions and processes that uphold the rule of law and respect citizens have greater success in mitigating conflict, ensuring security and promoting sustainable development and prosperity.<sup>1</sup> In addition to supporting electoral processes and civil society, USAID electoral assistance builds the institutional capacity of electoral commissions;

strengthens political parties; equips non-partisan election monitors and observers; trains media on how to report responsibly; promotes peaceful, non-violent participation; and facilitates the inclusion of women, youth, and people with disabilities at all stages of the electoral process.

We do much of this work by supporting international partners like the International Republican Institute, the National Democratic Institute, and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, which have a long history of expertise in this arena, some of whose leaders are here with us today. We also increasingly partner directly with local non-partisan civil society organizations and networks on election observation and voter outreach, such as NGO3D in Senegal, and government institutions such as Ghana's Electoral Commission. As highlighted during the President's 2013 visit to Africa, USAID also supports innovative partnerships such as the one between the University of Southern Africa and the South African Independent Election Commission to improve the capacity of election officials across the region with hands-on and distance learning courses.

Although we read and hear narratives to the contrary, we've contributed to and seen a number of recent electoral successes, and believe with targeted support, more are on the horizon.

In Zambia recently, even pouring rains and rising flood waters did not prevent many Zambians from venturing out to their polling places to exercise their right to select their new leader. The results speak for themselves. Despite the stormy weather and an extremely close race — only 27,000 votes separated the two candidates — the Commission was able to tally the results and officially declare an uncontested winner in just four days, with few disruptions or incidents of violence.

Indeed, the electoral authorities were only one part of the successful process. USAID provided critical support to civil society and thousands of nonpartisan citizen-observers who monitored the conduct of the elections and conducted a sophisticated parallel vote tabulation that confirmed the official results. In defense of their interests, political party poll watchers observed at voting sites and helped validate result tabulations.

These rigorous, transparent procedures provided confidence in the democratic process. These elections benefited from experience: Zambia has a history of hotly contested elections and peaceful transitions of power ever since President Kaunda yielded to popular demands and stepped down in 1991. While some observers noted that there could be improvements in the future, most agreed that the elections were free, peaceful and credible. Zambia made the process look relatively easy, but elections are, in fact, a complex undertaking. The process begins long before Election Day and endures well beyond the moment the last ballot is counted.

In addition to continued engagement with Zambia, USAID is working with electoral officials, political parties, and civic activists to prepare for upcoming polls in several other countries, including Nigeria, Burundi, Cote d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso and the Democratic Republic of Congo. In each case, citizens are eager to exercise their right to vote.

In Burundi, where political violence remains a serious concern, USAID's support for peaceful and credible elections typifies the best practice of starting such work long before the campaigning begins. Soon after the conclusion of the 2010 elections, which brought the post-conflict transition government established by the Arusha Accords to an end, we commenced a series of assessments to understand the electoral landscape, identify needs, and recommend possible interventions. By April 2013, we launched programs to encourage inclusive dialogue around the 2015 elections as a proactive way of addressing concerns about political violence. Since then, USAID has supported efforts to foster an inclusive political climate ahead of Burundi's presidential, parliamentary, and local elections cycle, which will begin later this spring. By working with local partners, our programs encourage a culture of inclusive dialogue and democracy, based on the principles of mutual respect and tolerance enshrined in Burundi's Constitution and the Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement. Our programs support civic education, media, peaceful youth engagement in elections, conflict early warning and response systems, and technical assistance to the Independent National Electoral Commission.

Former U.S. Special Envoy for the Great Lakes Region and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Russ Feingold said in February that the "United States is urging the Burundian government to ensure that the upcoming elections are consistent with the Arusha Accords, which state unambiguously that no president shall serve more than two terms. It is our belief that upholding Arusha, including its provision on term limits, is key to maintaining a still fragile stability in Burundi in the near-term." USAID and its partners in Burundi are poised to adapt and respond to the changing political environment. At the moment, we are focused on training of local observers, conflict monitoring, media training, peacebuilding activities, voter education, and providing economic opportunities that reduce youth vulnerability to political manipulation. The international community and civil society continue to monitor the voter registration process. Fortunately, despite some shortcomings, so far, the voter registration process has proceeded peacefully. Nevertheless, we are also supporting local organizations that monitor and report on any human rights abuses that could occur around the elections.

By far the most consequential election this year in Africa will take place in Nigeria. Peaceful and credible elections are crucial to development in Africa's most populous country, and these upcoming elections are likely to be among the most competitive in the country's 55-year history. In fact, Afrobarometer's December 2014 public opinion survey showed the two presidential candidates – President Goodluck Jonathan and opposition candidate Muhammadu Buhari – in a dead heat. Since then, the Boko Haram insurgency has complicated the election by

decreasing security in the North East and creating more than 1.2 million internally displaced persons<sup>ii</sup>.

The United States continues to strongly believe that free, fair and transparent elections in Nigeria are essential. Secretary of State Kerry stated last month that the United States was deeply disappointed by the decision to postpone the elections from February 14 to March 28. I want to use this opportunity to reinforce the importance of ensuring that there are no further delays. I will be traveling late next week with Assistant Secretary of State Linda Thomas-Greenfield to Nigeria prior to the elections. The international community will be watching closely to see if the Nigerian government maintains its commitment to guarantee voter security and access to the polls to the maximum extent possible, including in the North East Zone, and accurately counts the votes cast throughout the country.

USAID's current assistance to Nigeria draws upon best practices and lessons learned from more than 15 consecutive years of elections support to that country. In close partnership with the United Kingdom's Department for International Development and other donors, we support Nigerian efforts to professionalize electoral administration, address electoral conflict and reduce violence, increase participation of marginalized voters, and professionalize political parties. We also support civil society's efforts to observe the electoral environment and the actual polling, independently verify vote counts, and promote peaceful participation.

Our work in electoral administration supports the operations of the Independent National Election Commission, or INEC. INEC's objective is to improve the quality of the elections while cultivating public confidence in credible processes and their outcomes. Our assistance strengthens INEC's capacity to train an estimated 1.2 million permanent and ad-hoc electoral staff; coordinate security planning; improve communications, voter education, and public outreach; and create more effective election dispute resolution mechanisms. Across Nigeria's 36 states, INEC's Election Operations Support Centers will monitor the deployment of materials and collection of ballots. To date, INEC has distributed 55 million voter cards to just over 80 percent of registered voters – a huge improvement over the 2011 elections, which many observers called the most credible in Nigeria's history.

While support for institutions is important, we are also focused on promoting non-violence, acknowledging that the 2011 elections were the most violent in Nigeria's history, with 800 fatalities in the immediate post-election period and over 65,000 displaced.<sup>iii</sup> USAID and its partners have been supporting youth participation in political processes and the promotion of peaceful elections. In late 2014, we helped launch a "Vote - Not Fight" campaign with the headlining support of non-partisan Nigerian musicians such as rapper *2face Idibia* and other celebrities, as well as political leaders who signed a non-violence pledge called the Abuja

Accord. These activities both get out the youth vote and advocate for non-violent participation in Nigeria's democracy.

Lastly, we are strengthening Nigerian civil society's efforts to hold candidates, parties, the INEC, and other officials accountable by observing and reporting out on their own elections. Our partners are training and deploying more than 3,000 domestic observers for the rescheduled March 2015 presidential election. These observers are trained in how to conduct a "quick count," which is a systematic observation methodology that independently measures the quality of election-day processes and official voting results. We've also helped create a conflict early warning system that has deployed 774 locally recruited observers in every single local government area in Nigeria since last November. They will provide information on emerging trends that are likely to impact electoral processes and risks for conflict through bi-weekly critical incidents reports in the pre-election period.

### **Challenges and Lessons Learned**

Organizing and conducting credible, legitimate, and peaceful elections is not without its challenges. While ordinary Africans appeal for transparent elections and leadership accountability, too many political leaders continue to manipulate the electoral process, challenge constitutionally mandated term limits, and use other undemocratic means to maintain a grip on power. According to Freedom House, the average tenure for leaders in "not free" countries is 18 years, whereas in "free" or "partly free" countries, the average is less than five years. While the number of long-ruling African "Big Men" is declining, ten leaders today have been in power over 20 years.<sup>iv</sup> President Obama noted while in Ghana that history is not on the side of those who use coups or change constitutions to remain in power, he posed that, "Africa needs strong institutions, not strongmen."

In response to this challenge, one of the key lessons we've learned is that strong institutions and credible elections tend to be mutually reinforcing. In several countries in sub-Saharan Africa, political parties and leaders who have pursued politics as a zero-sum game are gradually being replaced by a new generation of leaders with greater trust in the rule of law and in the non-partisan, independent institutions that conduct and oversee elections. In Mozambique and Namibia, voters recently elected new presidents after the incumbents retired in accordance with their constitutionally-mandated term limits. One of these statesmen, former Namibian President Pohamba, recently won the Mo Ibrahim prize for good governance.

In contrast, where leaders try to cling to power, their actions can backfire and create costly and unnecessary political crises that threaten years of development progress. Last October, 200,000 people in Burkina Faso took to the streets to protest now former President Blaise Compaoré's plan to circumvent his term limits. USAID is providing support to Burkina's transitional government, civil society organizations, the independent electoral commission, and political

parties to hold presidential elections and restore democratic governance. Yet this example points to another critical lesson for the U.S. Government and its partners: our support alone cannot determine the success of an election, particularly when leaders ignore or rewrite the rules, and deliberately weaken their own institutions, to serve their own interests.

This delicate balance between powerful leaders and their interests on the one hand, and the need for strong and independent institutions on the other, highlights the key to USAID's approach to elections. We aim for our elections programs to contribute to the entire political process, not just the immediate event on Election Day. Our work in Zambia, Burundi and Nigeria demonstrates that long-term engagement over several years can be enormously helpful in developing those institutions needed to keep political systems resilient in the face of unexpected shocks like the death of a president or an armed insurgency, or long-simmering issues, like ethnic violence and corruption. USAID and its partners have been fortunate to receive strong support and guidance from this Subcommittee that allows us to pursue this important work.

## **Conclusion**

A few decades ago, many African politicians and their supporters blamed the United States and other Western democracies for imposing unrealistic standards on their governments and political systems. But today, African citizens point to the examples of countries like Zambia, Ghana, Benin, and Namibia, to claim democracy as an effective model for Africa. Elections are only one step in a long process that is required for true democratic transformation. Indeed, sustained support for the process of democracy—from the halls of government in the capital to the village council, and across the full range of citizens groups and other independent voices in between—will be critical to creating and sustaining an environment where it can grow and thrive.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify this afternoon. I look forward to your questions.

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<sup>i</sup> Radelet, Steven, *Emerging Africa: How 17 Countries are Leading the Way*, Center for Global Development, 2010

<sup>ii</sup> International Organization for Migration <http://www.iom.int/cms/en/sites/iom/home/news-and-views/press-briefing-notes/pbn-2015/pbn-listing/boko-haram-may-have-displaced-ov.html>

<sup>iii</sup> Human Rights Watch <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/05/16/nigeria-post-election-violence-killed-800>

<sup>iv</sup> Freedom House presentation at USAID in February 2015 cited 10 leaders in power more than 20 years, and an additional four leaders more than 14 years (Republic of Congo - Brazzaville, Djibouti, Rwanda, DRC).