



U.S. Election Support in Africa

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Testimony by

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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, Members of the committee, I am honored to speak before your committee on the National Endowment for Democracy's support for elections in Africa. NED began funding civil society organizations working on elections in Africa 25 years ago, when we made the first such grant to an organization called GERDDES to monitor the historic elections in Benin in 1990. Since then, NED has supported hundreds of groups engaged in a broad range of activities that have contributed to election processes. Last year NED made nearly 250 grants in Africa, averaging about \$40,000 each, to mostly indigenous civil society organizations. Perhaps as many as half of these were supporting election processes in some way. We have learned some lessons and identified some trends over the years and would like to offer ten points for the committee's consideration.

First, we know that elections are a necessary but not sufficient condition for democracy. No country can claim to be a democracy if it does not hold elections, but we have many examples of countries that hold elections, and that are not democratic. In other words, there must be an "enabling environment." Democracy requires freedom of speech and assembly, freedom of association, and the rule of law, among other conditions. Thus, in the context of elections, NED has supported many NGOs providing civic education, monitoring human rights violations, raising policy issues, and providing forums for citizens to express their views. Strong institutions such as independent courts and electoral commissions are also important, which our partners will also often work with. Elections can be vitally important for determining a country's political trajectory; they spark public interest in government, and should therefore be as inclusive and participatory as possible. Elections in Africa have tended to get better over time, according to the political scientist Steffan Lindborg, giving citizens and institutions practice, knowledge, and familiarity with democratic culture. Elections thus create a virtuous circle that reinforces the free press, civic organizations, accountability, political competition, and other democratic values.

Second, elections are not simply a one-day event, they are a process. The campaign period and the aftermath of the election are also critical. Election Day itself may appear to be peaceful and well-organized, but if the opposition has been sufficiently undermined beforehand or the rigging has been well-engineered, then the

elections cannot be said to be free and fair. Thus, NED supports domestic observation groups that may follow the process for months and even years beforehand. Currently many African leaders have attempted to change the constitution to enable them to run for more than two terms, and civil society groups have raised the alarm. This was most recently so in the case of DRC, which is NED's largest program in Africa. Most of our nearly 50 partners in DRC are focused on the current political process, including elections later this year and next year. NED grantees in the DRC and other countries have assisted and advised the electoral commission, observed and supported voter registration, audited the voters list, monitored media coverage, conducted opinion polling, assessed adherence to campaign promises, organized debates between candidates, and held voter forums. Many groups are making use of social media, as well as radio and television, to encourage participation.

Third, elections usually serve as a means of conflict resolution, as was demonstrated most dramatically in South Africa in 1994, but we have learned all too well that elections can also lead to violence. For this reason, we have also supported many groups promoting peace and resolving conflict, often in the context of elections. Through CIPE, for example, NED supported the Kenya Association of Manufacturers, which was instrumental in ending the violence following the 2007 elections. In Zimbabwe, NED supported many groups successfully advocating for peaceful elections two years ago. Currently in Nigeria, NED has made grants to groups such as SEMA to train citizens in the north on conflict resolution, a women's organization promoting Christian-Muslim dialogue, and the Fund for Peace to monitor and map violence, among many others. NED's partners in Cote d'Ivoire have buttressed the fragile reconciliation process in the run-up to elections later this year. Likewise in Burundi, various NED partners are promoting peaceful elections, training journalists to avoid incitement or hate speech, and bringing opposing political activists together to debate peacefully.

Fourth, even flawed elections can provide space for civil society organizations to conduct civic education and raise policy issues. Governments may feel compelled to allow such activity to lend at least a veneer of legitimacy to the process. Even in relatively closed systems such as Sudan, Chad, Rwanda or Ethiopia, NED is supporting civic groups that can take advantage of what space exists and gradually expand it, educate citizens about their rights, and lay the foundations for a future democratic dispensation. Such programs need not legitimize a flawed process, as long as democratic forces have chosen to participate. In Rwanda last year, a NED partner conducted virtually the only international observations of the national elections that were held there. During Sudan's 2010 elections, NED partners composed the domestic observation coalitions that made considerable headway in expanding political rights. In Cameroon, a NED partner is pressing for freedom of assembly, despite restrictions on political party activity caused by new anti-terrorism legislation.

Fifth, engage youth. Africa is the world's youngest continent, and as events in Senegal and Burkina Faso demonstrated last year, they are moving to the frontline of political change, whether through elections or popular uprisings. In partnership with the World Movement for Democracy, just last weekend NED brought together nearly 100 young democratic activists from across Africa to share lessons and experiences regarding these transitions. Youth are impatient; they have the energy; increasingly, they have nothing to lose. NED's partners are pointing youth in a democratic direction, instead of a life of crime, apathy, or Boko Haram. In Nigeria, YIAGA is helping the electoral commission test its new computerized election equipment; and YOSPIS, Youngstars, and the YMCA are encouraging youth participation. In Uganda, the Students for Democracy and UYONET are working to persuade youth not to follow the corrupt electoral practices of their elders.

Six, support women. Women have been politically marginalized in much of Africa, but when given the chance, have provided tremendous leadership in both civil society and the government. Studies have shown women politicians are significantly less corrupt than their male counterparts. NED is supporting several projects of IRI and NDI to cultivate women's political leadership in Africa, and can claim some tangible results. Also of note, with NED support the Solidarity Center working to expand the role of women within unions and labor associations in Africa. With NED funds, the Nigerian Federation of Women has produced a series of television videos (at a small fraction of what they would cost in the US) promoting women's participation in the elections. In Somaliland, women and youth organizations provide all the monitors for the successful elections that country has held. In Uganda, CEWIGO had impressive success in cultivating a new generation of female politicians.

Seven, don't pick a winner. We have often seen in Africa that today's democratic champion can readily become tomorrow's despot. Fred Chiluba of Zambia, Laurent Gbagbo of Cote d'Ivoire, Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal, Charles Taylor of Liberia, and most recently, Salva Kiir of South Sudan are notable examples. And even sympathetic, democratically elected leaders can fall prey to corruption, ineptitude, and scandal. NED respects pluralism and the political process in support of free and fair elections. Normally, party training is not conducted within 30 days of an election, funds may not support the candidacy of candidates for public office, and, by and large, whatever political loyalties our partners may have, their programs are non-partisan. Although NED opposes dictatorship, we do not advocate "regime change." Rather, we seek to support peaceful, democratic methods of political reform and development. A free and fair process is essential. More must be done to encourage good governance by democratically elected leaders.

Eight, the stakes in African elections can be very high. "The politics of the belly" still rules much of Africa, meaning that political office often affords the best opportunity for securing material wealth through patronage to clients and constituents. Losing an election can mean impoverishment, retribution, and worse. Hence, the enormous and sometimes violent efforts by some leaders and their followers to maintain power, and the perpetuation of corruption. For this reason, NED has supported many groups conducting investigative reporting, campaigning against corruption, and monitoring politicians' behavior. Other groups have stressed the notion of fair play, the opportunity for a second chance, and the fact that elections are not worth killing or dying for. Citizens also need to understand that elected officials are their servants and representatives, not their masters and patrons. They should not sell their vote for a bag of rice, as NAYMOTE, one of NED's long-time Liberian partners has successfully campaigned.

Nine, elections are not a panacea. Democratic elections do not necessarily bring about economic development, end corruption, or settle conflict, as has already been suggested. Democracy does not equal good governance. Democratically elected leaders may not adhere to democratic values, and they may not be great friends of the US. Conversely, undemocratic governments such as Ethiopia and Rwanda may provide good governance, reduce corruption, promote economic growth, and remain faithful US allies. Democracy may provide material benefits and stability over the long term, but we believe that it is democracy's intrinsic value, the freedom, dignity, and possibility for citizens to change leaders peacefully through elections that is most important, and that warrants strong American support. Thus NED has recently funded programs by NDI and IRI that are training Africa's political leaders in democratic values, as well as other leadership skills. NED's NGO partners frequently cite as their greatest impact the change in behavior and consciousness that they have brought about in their societies. Indeed, over the last 25 years, the democratic discourse in Africa has only grown more powerful. There are alternative "narratives" that are competing, such as the calls to end term limits and developmental authoritarianism, but elections continue to be the fundamental political reference.

Finally, Africans want elections. Elections matter. This is not to deny that in some countries election fatigue may have set in, that citizens are apprehensive about violence, or that corruption, impunity and a dearth of democratic dividends has not caused apathy. Many Africans may still vote along ethnic lines, or because the chief says to do so, out of loyalty to a political party, or without a full understanding of the democratic process. But anyone who has observed an African election can testify to the obvious commitment and enthusiasm of voters who may stand in line for hours in the hot sun to cast a ballot. Most of all, NED's partners support participation, citizen awareness, and mobilization. Considerable energy and money is invested in the process by governments and candidates, and the discussion in the media and the streets is often highly politicized, especially around election time, showing how important elections are considered to be. Afrobarometer polling shows that most Africans support democracy, even if they don't like their elected leaders. Elections may often be imperfect, democracy may still be a work in progress in Africa but NED and its grantees are optimistic about the future. Elections are and will continue to provide an important opportunity for change. In many countries on the continent where democracy has not yet consolidated, elections are an important driver for mobilizing participation, examining the record of accomplishment of government officials, and engaging the citizenry in taking responsibility for their own future.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Committee, I look forward to your questions.