

SUPPORTING DEMOCRATIC GROWTH IN AFRICA

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International Organizations
Democratic Backsliding in Sub-Saharan Africa
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Chair Bass, Ranking Member Smith, and members of the subcommittee, it is an honor to testify before you today. I ask that my full written testimony be admitted into the record.

I will start by highlighting several trends we at Freedom House observed in Sub-Saharan Africa in the most recent version of our *Freedom in the World* report:

- First, we are seeing lots of volatility in the state of freedoms and democracy: of the 12 largest score declines globally, seven are in Sub-Saharan Africa, but of the eight largest improvements, six are in the region
- Second, West Africa, previously considered the democratic leader among Africa's subregions, is of particular concern: of those seven large score declines, five are from countries in West Africa
- Third, freedom and democratic governance is enjoyed by far too few Africans: only 9% of people in Sub-Saharan Africa live in countries that Freedom House categorizes as Free

Citizens bear the brunt of democratic backsliding. They are attacked when they peacefully protest in opposition to the government, as in Guinea and Cameroon. They are unable to use the internet when the government restricts access, as in Ethiopia and Chad. Civil society groups face excessive limitations on their activity, as in Tanzania and Burundi, and

journalists are threatened and detained, as in Zimbabwe and Nigeria. Governments are developing new methods to limit citizen activity, such as requiring bloggers to meet stringent registration requirements, as in Uganda, and using COVID-19 as a pretext for closing political and civic space

Amidst these challenges, it is vital to recognize progress, which too often evades the headlines. In Malawi, civil society and the judiciary succeeded in resisting a deeply flawed election process, leading to a rerun which saw the incumbent president defeated. They did so through peaceful protest and strict adherence to rule of law by Supreme Court justices. In South Africa, leaders most responsible for the ruinous period of state capture are slowly but surely moving closer to being held to account. Later this year Ghana will hold elections that are not attracting much outside attention, because institutions and democratic processes are widely viewed to be strong enough to withstand political machinations.

In the interest of time I will focus the rest of my remarks on recommendations.

Recommendations

My first recommendation concerns American messaging. While that messaging is often strongly supportive of democracy, it is inconsistent. This is inevitable, as competing American interests will always lead to modulated messaging based on the context. But we need to strive for greater consistency across countries and regions in how we speak about democracy. To cite one example, the United States and much of the rest of the world has rightly criticized the undemocratic change of power in Mali – a textbook example of a coup. But when leaders in Guinea and Cote D’Ivoire – and in Rwanda, Chad, Uganda and elsewhere before them – sought to change the rules of the game to extend their time in office, amounting to an undemocratic extension of their tenure, the American voice has been muted. This contradiction does not go unnoticed among Africans and contributes to a sense that the United States places security interests above democratic concerns, and pulls punches when issues involve our perceived allies.

Second, and building on my first recommendation, the United States should consider changes to term and age limits that allow incumbent leaders to extend their time in office as, essentially, a coup against the constitution, and respond accordingly. These moves by leaders who have already served two terms are an usurpation of power that deny the country and its citizens the many benefits of leadership rotation. Most important, they are broadly unpopular with citizens: polling by Afrobarometer consistently demonstrates that approximately three quarters of Africans favor two term limits for their leaders.

Legislation requires that when a military overthrows a duly elected government, many forms of assistance to that country are suspended. As a matter of policy, the United States should adopt a similar approach when a leader changes the rules to benefit himself or herself: that move should trigger an automatic across-the-board review of all assistance to the country, and elements of that assistance that benefit the executive and upper echelons of government should be suspended. Congress should consider institutionalizing this policy through legislation. That way, leaders will know that if they choose to change the rules to benefit themselves, they will automatically face consequences. This policy should apply globally, not just to Africa.

Third, countries where citizens are bravely seeking to move past decades of authoritarianism deserve rapid and substantial support from the United States. Opportunities to buttress successful citizen-led movements for democracy are rare. In Sudan the long overdue process of removing the country from the list of State Sponsors of Terrorism may soon conclude, but that is not enough. The United States needs to support the civilian component of Sudan's transitional government at every step of the long road toward democracy and do all that it can to revive Sudan's economy.

In Ethiopia there are deeply concerning signs that the government is reaching for tools of repression that many hoped were relegated to history. Nonetheless, Ethiopia remains on a tentative path to democratic elections that can be transformative. In this context, the decision by the United States to withhold development assistance from Ethiopia in a

quixotic and counterproductive effort to influence Ethiopia's negotiating position concerning the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam is bad policy that should be reversed. Now is not the time to curtail support to Ethiopia's more than 100 million citizens and inhibit their efforts to democratize.

Similar to Sudan and Ethiopia, nascent democratic transitions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, The Gambia and Angola also call for strong U.S. support.

Finally, as Africa grapples with the COVID-19 pandemic on top of challenges to democratic governance, Freedom House strongly endorses H.R. 6986, the Protecting Human Rights During Pandemic Act. This bill, which is up for a vote in committee this week, would provide financial assistance to bolster democratic institutions, civil society groups, and human rights defenders and would require the Secretary of State and Administrator of USAID to develop a strategic plan for how to address global human rights violations that occur during the pandemic.

Permit me to conclude with a broader observation: the ability of the United States to advance democracy around the world, including in Africa, is directly tied to the strength of our democracy at home. The United States remains broadly popular in the eyes of Africans, but many of them are closely watching the strength of our institutions and how we manage our differences through peaceful, democratic processes.

Thank you, and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

Addendum: Key Findings for Sub-Saharan Africa from Freedom in the World 2020

Democratic backsliding in West Africa accelerated in 2019, a trend that continues in 2020. Benin, previously one of the continent's top performers, held legislative elections from which all opposition parties were effectively excluded. The flawed process, which featured an internet shutdown and violence against antigovernment protesters, contributed to a

remarkable 13-point decline in the country's Freedom in the World score. Senegal's presidential election went forward without two of the country's most prominent opposition figures, who were barred from running due to criminal cases that were widely viewed as politically motivated.

Opposition parties were able to compete in Nigeria's 2019 general elections, but the balloting was marred by major procedural irregularities and a rise in violence and intimidation. The manipulation of online content during the electoral period and the government's increasing hostility toward the media threatens free expression. In Guinea, which is set to hold a presidential election in October, protesters turned out in an attempt to block President Alpha Condé's drive to change the constitution and run for a third term and faced government harassment.

East and Southern Africa present more of a mixed picture. In Tanzania and Uganda, the space for independent civic and political activity continues to shrink as incumbent leaders work to silence dissent as potentially volatile elections approach. Actions by the Zimbabwean government are intensifying human suffering and trampling constitutional rights, including the abduction, torture and sexual abuse of young female activists and arrest on baseless charges of a prominent journalist and opposition leaders.

However, there is notable progress in some authoritarian states as they proceed with tenuous reforms. While it remains to be seen whether the military in Sudan will abide by its power-sharing agreement with prodemocracy protest leaders and cede control to civilian leadership, the Sudanese people have already experienced initial improvements in political rights and civil liberties.

Angola's early progress after a change in leadership in late 2017 was dramatic, but the momentum has slowed, and the results of President João Lourenço's reform agenda, with its emphasis on battling corruption, have yet to be fully realized.

In 2019 Ethiopia made notable strides under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, reforming restrictive laws and allowing previously banned political groups to operate openly. But developments in 2020 have been deeply concerning, especially the increasing frequency and intensity of interethnic and religious violence. Postponing nationwide elections in the face of COVID-19 was understandable, but there has been little dialogue with the political opposition concerning a roadmap for rescheduled elections. The government's use of repressive tools in its periodic crackdowns in response to instability—including arbitrarily arresting citizens and shutting down the internet—echoes tactics employed by previous Ethiopian leaders and directly threatens the progress made over the last two years. The polarizing narratives and threats of violence endorsed by some members of the opposition, and even certain parts of the diaspora, are also of grave concern.