



# Impact of Democratic Recession on EMBs in Africa

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# Introduction

- ▶ The 'Third Wave' of Democratization in the 1990s put many African countries on the trajectory of democratic development, with periodic elections at which voters have opportunity to choose their representatives into the executive and legislative arms of government.
- ▶ Election Management Bodies (EMBs) have since played crucial roles in the preparation for, and administration of, elections
- ▶ Although, as Diamond (2015) noted, majority of these democracies that emerged in the 'Third Wave' "remained illiberal and unstable", many embarked upon electoral reforms driven by the independent EMBs in search for electoral integrity and genuine democratic development.
- ▶ Such efforts, however, have become increasingly constrained since the mid-2000s, the time that came to be known as the era of democratic recession (Diamond 2015) or democratic backsliding (Bermeo 2016)

# Intro...

- ▶ During this period, and in particular in the past decade, EMBs have been in a precarious situation, as they have faced remarkable challenges to their relative autonomy/independence, and general performance, in their efforts to enhance and entrench electoral integrity in the preparation and conduct of free, fair and credible elections
- ▶ The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) noted that in 2019, Democracy declined globally, on the African continent, and more particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa. For example, the average score for SSA fell from 4.36 in 2018 to 4.26 in 2019, the worst score since 2010. Only Mauritius was classified as a “Full democracy”; in deed, 24 countries recorded a decline due to deterioration of the electoral process and political pluralism (Amoros 2022)
- ▶ And globally, according to the Economist (2022), democracy continued its ‘precipitous decline in 2021’ (economist.com)
- ▶ According to the Democracy Report 2022, “The level of democracy by the average global citizen in 2021 is down to 1989 levels, with the democratic gains of the post-Cold War period eroding rapidly in the last few years” (drishtias.com). The report noted further: there are 89 democracies and 90 autocracies, of which 60, representing 44% of the world population or 3.4 billion people, are classified as “electoral autocracies”.

## Intro...

- ▶ However, although the challenges posed by democratic recession are enormous, they are not insurmountable.
- ▶ Democrats need to pursue reforms to strengthen institutions and the electoral legal framework, to entrench electoral integrity and deepen democratic development.

# Key Features of Democratic Recession

- ▶ There are three (3) major features of global democratic recession, and their combined impact has devastating impact on African EMBs. These are as follows:
  - ▶ Heightened politics of identity. Identities such as race, ethnicity and religion have been weaponized, and are used against competitors /opponents in the electoral arena, and quite often, against the EMBs as well. Consequently, this has significantly contributed to the erosion of the independence of EMBs, weakening of their performance and undermining electoral integrity
  - ▶ “Strongman Politics”, a situation in which, as Obama once said, “those in power seek to undermine every institution or norm that gives democracy meaning”.
  - ▶ Bad, exclusionary, governance, which is insensitive to, and suppressive of, the needs and aspirations of majority of citizens, and which only panders to the self-serving objectives of “Strongman” politicians
- ▶ In flawed and/or hybrid democracies, where virtually all SSA countries are classified, the impact of all these features of democratic recession is phenomenal in terms of undermining and obstructing electoral integrity and democratic development.

# Election Management Bodies (EMBs)

- ▶ Since the 1990s, elections in SSA have increasingly been organised and conducted by independent EMBs, legally constituted and drawing their powers for this responsibility from constitutional provisions and parliamentary Acts
- ▶ In general, EMBs are:
  - ▶ mandated to fully and impartially implement norms, regulations and procedures contained in the electoral legal framework
  - ▶ empowered to issue supplementary electoral regulations binding on election officials and workers; political parties and candidates, as well as their representatives, voters,
  - ▶ expected to develop procedures for voter and candidate registration; voting; and vote counting
  - ▶ (see [aceproject.org](http://aceproject.org); The Electoral Knowledge Network , Election Management Bodies)

# EMBs...

- ▶ To satisfy the global expectation that EMBs conduct elections with integrity, they are expected to:
  - ▶ Administer the electoral process in accordance with the law
  - ▶ Maintain professional, neutral and transparent administration
  - ▶ Adopt procedures to safeguard the integrity of its operations
  - ▶ Identify and assess integrity risks and take preventive or corrective action
  - ▶ Promote voter awareness of electoral integrity
  - ▶ (See [aceproject.org](http://aceproject.org), *ibid*)
- ▶ It can be said that the extent to which an EMB conducts elections with integrity is to large extent correlated with the extent to which elections contribute to democratization and democratic development in a country.
- ▶ In this sense, electoral integrity is key to democratic development and to arresting/reversing democratic recession

# EMBs...

- ▶ Electoral Integrity is defined as:  
“any election that is based on the democratic principles of universal suffrage and political equality as reflected in international standards and agreements, and is professional, impartial and transparent in its preparation and administration throughout the electoral cycle” (Annan and others, 2012)
- ▶ While many EMBs have made progress in enhancing electoral integrity in their countries, the era of democratic recession has substantially eroded the achievements.
- ▶ Indeed, African EMBs seem helpless as reckless incumbent leaders, even political parties and candidates, push their countries towards reversal to authoritarianism rather than desirable democratic consolidation.



# Impact of Democratic Recession on EMBs Performance

- ▶ This could be highlighted as follows:
  - ▶ Political interference in the appointment of Commissioners and other election officials
  - ▶ Obstruction of legal reforms that would improve the integrity of elections
  - ▶ Spates of violence occasioned by the weaponization of identities during elections, especially ethnicity and religion
  - ▶ Underfunding of EMBs and/or delays in releases of needed funds for electoral operations
  - ▶ Whittling down of the relative autonomy of EMBs
  - ▶ Irregularities perpetrated in compilation and declaration of results
  - ▶ Electoral Politics is excessively monetized, with voters and officials induced or bought by candidates, their agents and other supporters

# Conclusion

- ▶ “Strongman politics” more often than not undermines the rule of law and due process. It brings pressure to bear on public officials and institutions, including EMBs and election officials, for the advancement of self-serving objectives, thereby undermining the preparation and conduct of free, fair and credible elections.
- ▶ Weaponization of identities in the electoral arena, not only ignites electoral violence; it also intimidates voters and depresses voter turnout. In essence, it frustrates and undermines popular aspirations for democracy, its development and its consolidation
- ▶ EMBs need to protect and defend their independence to conduct elections with integrity, in spite of the challenges being posed by democratic recession.
- ▶ They can do this by being professional, non-partisan, impartial, and creating a level playing field for all parties and contestants, as well as, by upholding the highest ethical standards of conduct in all that they do

# Conclusion...

- ▶ Regionally, continentally and globally, EMBs need to share knowledge and experiences of how best to safeguard their independence and the discharge of their appropriate roles in substantive democratic development, and on how to entrench electoral integrity, in spite of democratic recession
- ▶ Domestically, each EMB also needs to strengthen alliances, cooperation and collaboration with credible civil society organizations for the advancement of democratic development, struggles against the challenges posed by democratic recession and the cause of electoral integrity
- ▶ Democratic recession should be contained sufficiently to prevent reversal to authoritarianism of either the civilian or military varieties.

# References / Related Reading Materials

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