



## More trees have fallen...but the forest is still growing: Recent trends in African politics

(based on the *African Economic Outlook 2008\**)

by Federica Marzo

- ◆ Political and social troubles worsened in 2007, but the long term trend is positive.
- ◆ Progress towards democracy continues, despite some severe setbacks.
- ◆ Democratic institutions need to foster dialogue and social cohesion.

While stability and democracy in Africa are improving, the 2007 snapshot shows fragile democratic institutions that are often unrepresentative, even after elections. Freedom of the press, the rule of law and government transparency remain weak and corruption is widespread at all levels of politics and the economy. Political and social instability also grew, even in countries thought to be traditionally stable.

This general picture is nonetheless misleading. While tensions picked up again in 2007, according to the 2008 *African Economic Outlook's* annual table of political indices, the long-term trend is still encouraging, showing that progress in the last ten years has been important.

The large majority of African countries enjoy rising stability, while in several fragile states normalisation is slowly progressing. More and more countries are legitimising their governments through universal elections. More than 54 million Africans participated in the 19 presidential and parliamentary elections held in 18 African countries in 2007. However, at 32.9 per cent, the turnout rate was rather low, partly because in the two largest countries that went to the polls last year, Nigeria and Egypt, only 13.4 per cent and 31.2 per cent of the registered voters respectively, cast their ballots. There was also massive abstention in Algeria.

Most elections were peaceful. Two incumbent heads of state were re-elected by wide margins in West Africa – Amadou Toumani Touré in Mali (71.2 per cent) and Abdoulaye Wade in Senegal (55.9 per cent). New presidents were elected after two rounds of elections in Mauritania (Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi with 52.9 per cent) and Sierra

Leone (Ernest Bai Koroma with 54.6 per cent). However, there were serious problems. The Nigerian polls in April were branded “not credible” by European Union observers because of the level of cheating and violence, and in Kenya unrest followed highly contested presidential elections, characterised by fraud and high political violence.

This twist towards instability was largely due to the persistence of long-term conflicts or tensions. In Chad, since 2006 the situation has become tense and clashes between several groups of rebels and the national army have increased in number and in intensity. The west of Sudan remains plagued by the Darfour war, with the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) on the brink of collapse. In northern Uganda, and on the DRC's borders to the north and east, acts of war are continuing. Ethnic clashes remain a great cause of concern, especially where weapons coming from war zones or ex-conflict zones are becoming widespread, as in eastern Africa, and in the Great lakes region, where weapons from neighbouring Somalia present a problem. In Kenya, the level of political violence and crime had risen considerably since 2005 and literally exploded in 2007, mostly attributed to ethnic clashes and exacerbated by adverse climatic conditions. Serious trouble and hardening of the regime in Zimbabwe, whose economy collapsed in 2007, led to harsh repression. Troubles increased in countries that were recently enjoying remarkable stability. Common to Mali and Niger, the Touareg rebellion intensified while Algeria suffered from a renewal of terrorist attacks, as did Morocco.

The major change compared to 2006 is that instability rose slightly even in traditionally stable countries. Rising dissatisfaction amongst the population due to the

cost of living, especially for food and fuel, was at the root of several demonstrations in Senegal, Zambia and, more recently, in Burkina Faso and Cameroon. Poor living conditions and insufficient basic services also fuelled unrest in South Africa, where the AEO's political indices deteriorated sharply, due to demonstrations and strikes caused by the widespread perception that the post-apartheid government is not doing enough for poverty reduction, redistribution and service-delivery improvement. In this context, the year 2007 shows that rising tensions can be brought about by the democratisation process itself, when the political debate between government and opposition becomes tense, and when people make use of their civil rights to voice their discontent through demonstrations, strikes and abstention during elections. What continues to distinguish the continent, though, is the very high level of violence often associated with demonstrations of social dissent. However, these troubles are expected to remain isolated episodes, provided that government strategies to absorb price shocks in the immediate future are successful in meeting people's needs and if they succeed in developing a constructive dialogue with the different components of society.

On the positive side, the 2007 Corruption Perception Index produced by Transparency International and included in the AEO shows that Africa is producing encouraging results in the fight against corruption. Across the continent, several countries recorded significant improvement, including Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa and Swaziland. Three out of those four nations have ratified the United Nations Convention against Corruption. On the other hand, conditions have deteriorated in a few countries (Burkina Faso, Egypt, Mauritius and Mauritania). No significant changes have been observed for countries at the bottom of the list. In 2007, Angola signed the African Union Convention on Preventing and Combating Corruption, bringing the number of African countries having signed to 41 out of 53 since 2003. In addition, thanks to the six new ratifications, including Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Senegal and Zambia the convention can now enter into force. Since high levels of corruption are often associated with high political instability, the fight against corruption remains a benchmark for the stabilisation of the continent.

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