The Role of Citizen Polling in Building Democratic Resilience

Presentation to the ECOSOCC Citizens’ Forum on Democracy and Unconstitutional Changes of Government in Africa

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What public opinion is and is not

- Public Opinion represents the aggregation of individual opinions on public matters - where all opinions deserve equal treatment regardless of whether the individuals expressing them are knowledgeable about an issue or not.
- Public opinion is distinct from opinions on private matters.
- Every opinion of an individual is not a public opinion - not even those opinions to which a majority of citizens agree are all public opinions.
Public Opinion and ‘truth’

• Public opinion does not necessarily imply a strong, clear and united conviction of the masses.
  – To be sure, there are subjects on which the majority of the people are united in their opinion, and when this is the case, public opinion has a mighty force indeed.
  – But most often, public opinion involves several small groups of people, each group’s views in conflict with those of the other groups.

• Public opinion’ does not always represent the ‘truth’ - the public can be wrong
Linking public opinion and democratic politics

• “Unless mass views have some place in the shaping of policy, all the talk about democracy is nonsense,” V.O. Key Jr., Public Opinion and American Democracy, 1961:7

• “Open interplay of opinion and policy is the distinguishing mark of popular rule,” Harold Lasswell, 1941:15

• “The most persuasive driving force [that links opinion polls and democracy] is electoral accountability - which anticipates that elected leaders in a democratic nation will not deviate far from voters’ opinion” Shapiro, 2011:984-985
Measuring Public Opinion: What is Afrobarometer?
What is Afrobarometer?

- A pan-African, non-partisan survey research network that provides reliable data on the experiences, evaluations, and aspirations of African citizens regarding democracy, governance, and quality of life.

  ➔ Goal: To give African publics a voice in policy making

- Eight rounds of surveys have been completed in up to 39 countries since 1999. Round 8 surveys (2019/2021) covered 34 countries.

- Round 9 surveys are currently underway, expected to be completed by October this year in up to 40 countries.
Where Afrobarometer works
African citizens’ perspectives on democracy and accountable governance
Respondents were asked: There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternatives?

Only one political party is allowed to stand for election and hold office.

The army comes in to govern the country.

Elections and the National Legislature are abolished so that the President can decide everything.

(% who “disapprove” or “strongly disapprove”)
Support for presidential term limits
34 countries | 2019/2021

Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: The Constitution should limit the president to serving a maximum of two terms in office.

Statement 2: There should be no constitutional limit on how long the president can serve.

(\% who “agree” or “agree very strongly” with Statement 1)
Support for democracy
34 countries | 2019/2021

Respondents were asked: Which of these three statements is closest to your own opinion?

Statement 1: Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government.

Statement 2: In some circumstances, a non-

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Overtime support for democratic norms/institutions
| 30* countries | 2011-2021

- % who “agree” or “agree very strongly” that the Constitution should limit the president to serving a maximum of two terms in office.
- % who “agree” or “agree very strongly” with that the president must always obey the laws and the courts, even if he thinks they are wrong.
- % who “agree” or “strongly agree” that we should choose our leaders in this country through regular, open, and honest elections.
- % who “agree” or “agree very strongly” that Parliament should ensure that the president explains to it on a regular basis how his government spends taxpayers’ money.
- % who “agree” or “agree very strongly” that many political parties are needed to make sure that [citizens] have real choices in who governs them.
- % who “agree” or “strongly agree” that it is more important for citizens to be able to hold government accountable, even if that means it makes decisions more slowly.

*Compliance with court decisions includes 28 countries. Support elections to choose leaders and support parliamentary oversight include 29 countries.
Lagging delivery of democracy and democratic institutions
Supply of democratic institutions
30* countries | 2011-2021

- Elections mostly/completely free and fair: 66% to 65%
- President obeys laws and courts: 62% to 59%
- President accountable to parliament: 60% to 58%
- Perceive country to be a democracy: 54% to 52%
- Satisfied with democracy: 50% to 43%

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Trends in crime and security concerns and performance
Burkina Faso and Mali | 2011-2021

"Crime and Security" identified as "most important problem"

- Burkina Faso
- Mali

Government handling crime and security "fairly" or "very well"
Concluding thoughts
Implications for promoting constitutionalism and democratic consolidation

- Public opinion can help to strengthen democracy **by pressuring political leaders to adhere to democratic principles** (cf: Public opinion and third term campaigns across Africa, democratic erosion etc).

- Conversely, weak public attitudes on democracy can encourage political leaders to relax or eliminate key democratic institutions.

- Public Opinion helps to set the broad limits of constraints and identifying a range of policies within which decision-makers must **choose** if they are not to face retaliation in competitive elections.

- All actors should support efforts to meet the democratic and accountable governance aspirations of citizens across African nations and regions; this would constitute a solid basis for productive and lasting partnerships with Africa state and non-state actors.
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