

Reflections on Shuttle Diplomacy and Intricacies of Disputed Elections in Africa: A Case of the 2008 Disputed Elections in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Diplomacy has been seen to be a key enabler for bridging the rift between conflicting parties following an election within Africa and even beyond. This reflects the inadequacy and inefficient manner in which elections are run. The role of the international observers has not helped to establish the efficient running of elections in Africa. The study interrogates diplomacy and its intricacies in disputed elections. The interplay between quiet diplomacy and disputed elections is so central in defining democracy as well as fostering peace and stability. The major question that the study sought to answer is what is the relationship between quiet diplomacy in disputed elections in African politics focusing on disputed elections in Zimbabwe. The study findings inform that diplomacy has a central and respectable role in handling disputed elections. Consequently the study concluded that the third party intervention played a central role in addressing the Zimbabwe impasse between the main political contenders.

Keywords: Shuttle diplomacy, elections, disputed elections, Africa, African Union, diplomacy

Introduction

The survival of Africa into the future is hinged upon the efficacy of its systems, processes and procedures (as prescribed by AU and its Regional Communities) as it seeks to bid for space within the comity of nation as a mature democracy. Democracy, governance, continue to be topical issues on the African agenda since the founding of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) now African Union (AU), yet elections (as prescribed by the AU and its Regional bodies) as a yard stick or litmus test of good governance continue to be clouded in numerous challenges. The inadequacies in African electoral systems as continuously red flagged before, during and after elections inevitably demand close monitoring, scrutiny and require appropriate interventions. Consequently, elections in Africa have been seen to be characterized by a diversity of inadequacies demanding third party interventions. Third party interventions come in the form of mediators and arbiters. These interventions have been challenged and defined as devoid of neutrality yet they seek to pronounce credibility, fairness and freeness of such elections. Once an election outcome is contested the international community will not recognise the purported winner of the disputed plebiscite. The world over and indeed Africa, election outcomes and how they are received by the parties are a barometer on how governments, non-state actors and the international community relate in post-election environments. It is now a norm, in the event of contested results that there will be a lot of friction that is witnessed between the contesting parties. This development has a bearing on how much the State will manage events post

the elections. The elections in Africa have always been contested which explains why some scholars believe that those who vote are not as important as those who count the votes.

Background to Disputing of Elections in Africa

The concept of multipartyism has taken Africa by storm and is spreading like fire. This is now believed to be the hallmark of democracy but Professor PLO Lumumba argues that the template of democracy should not be presented through the lens of the West alone. The elections in Africa have been characterised by a diversity of challenges yet they are envisaged to be a regulating instrument for political competition in Africa (Erdmann *et al*, 2007) ^[1]. Elections are thought of as a promoter of democratisation of States (Lindberg, 2004) but for Africa, elections have come with a multiplicity of contests. They are actually dreaded whenever they become due, because of the wide-ranging challenges they come with, since opposition parties in the majority of cases surface just before the election and disappear just after (Alderman *et al*, 2017), For this reason opposition political parties would want to win at all cost, so that it becomes an opportunity for them also to run the affairs of the country. Running the affairs of the country is viewed as an opportunity for them to also enjoy the milk and honey that the country offers those responsible for the affair of the country. For that reason, they would also desire to lose limb and hand take charge of the reigns.

Elections have been the most contested aspect of the politics in Africa, since more often than not they have been disputed.

At times heavily and nastily. The concern arising from disputed or contested elections has always been a cause of debate and interrogation by many critical minds within Africa and beyond

The contesting parties driven by their conflicting ideologies and motivations have been known to fail to accept defeat graciously. In African this has been caused by the ever-burning desire for many to get into power, and to do so at all costs. Many can indeed try every trick in the book to get into power and this includes disputing elections even when the odds are against them. This will be pursued so as to seek international sympathy and attempting to demonise and criminalise the electoral process. True to that desire the international community has always been seen sympathising with losing parties which are usually the opposition political parties. Where the ruling parties have lost and claimed that there was something not right in electoral process they have not really come to assist them but immediately pronounce that democracy has triumphed.

For those in Africa, getting into power is viewed as a fast way of benefitting from resources that a country has. In this vein politics in Africa and indeed getting into power is about striking an opportunity to loot. For this reason, accepting defeat after an election is seen as cowardice and denying oneself an opportunity to amass wealth and secure the reins of power.

The politics in Africa has also been seen to have a third force or hidden hand that drives political pieces or the agenda from behind the scenes. The third force never comes out clear that they have an interest in the affairs of the State and are siding with one of the parties in the political game. To safe guard their interest, these forces back the losing horse by supporting a claim of unfair elections. In the majority of cases those losing elections are opposition political parties. A case in point in recent times is Raila Odinga of Kenya whom the EFF leader Julius Malema of South African (August 2022) has described him as someone who in his entire political life could just not accept defeat. Accepting defeat for him has always been something remote. For him a fair election was about him winning. Each time he lost then the election was defined as being unfair, yet mature politicians ought to understand that democracy is about being rationale, reasonable and adopt objectivity even when it hurts. In this vein Professors PLO Lumumba (2021) ^[8] argued that Statesmen look forward to the next generation when they go through elections but politicians lookup to the next election. What this add up to is the fact that the short-sighted politicians only look at themselves as the ones to benefit from the political process. No matter how well run an election is they will always choreograph acts that discredit the process.

At times the dispute arises from the conflict that characterise the run up to the elections. Once the losing party feels that they were intimidated during the run up to the plebiscite, they will seek to tell the world. They will allege that the terrain was not even for the conduct of a fair and credible contest.

Strategies that Help to Eliminate Disputed Elections

As a way of reducing the prospects of having disputed elections it is paramount to ensure that:

- There is an early deployment of observer missions to monitor the pre-election climate
- Sufficient deployment of security personnel to quell potential for volatility.
- Deal decisively with all individuals and groups fermenting violence before and during an election

- Availing campaigning space to all those within the race.
- Ensure that the election is run by an independent commission

The ruling political parties in Africa have always been accused by opposition political parties for connivance with the electoral Commission to manipulate the election results. Odinga in Kenya also claimed this rhetoric but all his claims were thrown out by a Supreme Court.

Disputed Elections in Zimbabwe in 2008

This election was described as a watershed election that was heavily and closely contested between the main contenders that were ZANU PF and MDC-T. This general election was held to elect the president and Parliament (lower and upper houses). Many social and political commentators have defined this election as having been a period that provided the incumbent president Robert Mugabe of ZANU PF with the toughest electoral challenges since 1980. This was so because of the biting economic challenges that were prevailing at the time to the extent that even his one-time minister of Finance and most trusted ally Simba Makoni went into the ring to challenge him for presidency.

In the run up to this tightly contested election supporters of the opposition party are said to have been harassed, intimidated and victimised through violent attacks by government forces that included the army and the police. The government did not agree with these allegations. Instead the government made counter allegations that it was the MDC supporters that were perpetrating violence. The government went on to define the utterances by the MDC-T as a mere act of mischief, unsubstantiated claim and meant to discredit the ZANU PF led government as well as a way to seek sympathy from the international community. The first round of the result failed to provide an ultimate and conclusive winner. At this stage the political situation was made complex by Tendai Biti from the MDC-T stable who made an announcement of unofficial preliminary results that indicated that the MDC-T had a favourable outcome from the pool which was in violation of the provisions of the electoral Act. In terms of the Act the announcement to results was the preserve of the Zimbabwe electoral commission (ZEC). The announcement of the final result of this plebiscite was delayed significantly to the extent that it steered panic and suspicion within the opposition camp as well as the international community. Resultantly there was growth of sentiments that Mugabe might have been trying to manipulate the results during the period of this silence. When the results were finally released they indicated that the MDC T had won the majority of seats for house of assembly with 47, 9 percent for the presidential candidate while Mugabe was trailing with 43.2 percent. Since the MDC had not secured a majority of the votes as required by law there was need for a run-off election so as to have a result that pronounced an outright winner.

The opposition claimed that the period preceding this run off was characterised by intimidation and violence. Resultantly there was heated tension that resulted in Tsvangirai the president of the MDC-T announcing that he was withdrawing from the election. His argument was that the election was not going to be free and fair. According to `Mugabe this was just an attempt to smear the process by one who had realised that it was not going to be easy to romp to victory. Consequently, the election went ahead as planned and Mugabe was declared the winner. A decision which was not taken kindly and lightly

by the opposition and their sympathisers from the international arena.

The result of the runoff created an impasse. The opposition party MDC-T failed to concede defeat and took their issues globally. This meant that ZANU PF had to engage with the MDC-T and other political formations who had significant representation in the election with a view of coming up with a functional matrix that would take the country forward post the election.

Third Party Intervention in the Zimbabwe Disputed Election

The pressure from several quotas led to the idea of a Government of National Unity being borne. To champion this direction a mediator was decided and agreed on Thabo Mbeki, who was the president of South Africa. The idea of taking aboard Thabo Mbeki as the mediator for the negotiations was meant to reduce the rift between these political formations.

This was paramount because the country was never going to move forward without a workable matrix having been agreed upon by the political parties. Though there were instances when his impartiality was doubted, Mbeki proved through his diplomacy that he had the kind of chemistry that would bring the conflicting parties together, and he did. Diplomacy which is the strategy that Mbeki used refers to the interaction of two or more States through their organs to peacefully achieve, protect and maintain their rights and interests as well as their nationals. The motivating understanding here is the fact premised on the Montevideo Declaration of 1933 on Statehood. This acknowledges that all States are equal once they attain Statehood. In this vein no State can decide to belittle another whatever situation it finds itself in. As much as the world put immense pressure on Thabo Mbeki he solidly stood on the understanding that Zimbabwe was a sovereign State and not a province of South Africa. In all he had to do he was sure not to treat Mugabe like a little boy as much as there were issues in his country for which Mbeki had been engaged as a mediator. He also understood well that a mediator gives the parties room to discuss issues and allow them space to find each other. The solution was not to be suggested by the third party but by the parties themselves.

The many times that the opposition were really hard on him did not sway him into acting in manner that would frustrate the peace. He remained steadfast as he continued to shuttle between the conflicting parties. Shuttle diplomacy entails negotiations between nations carried on by by an intermediary who shuttles back and forth the disputants. This allows him to get to understand the real issues from the disputant's standpoint in an a free environment The opposition according to those interviewed believed Thabo Mbeki had a soft spot for Mugabe since they had worked closely together during the liberation struggles that brought independence to their countries. He however remained unintimidated, steadfast and the conflicting parties came nearer and nearer by day. Ultimately his diplomacy led to a Government of National Unity realising that diplomatic relations are established by mutual consent between States. These may also be terminated unilaterally to register disapproval of some acts and actions by other States. This was not the case here.

Conclusions

- The Shuttle diplomacy employed by Thabo Mbeki was successful in promoting peace and stability in Zimbabwe
- Disputants following a disputed election need to be respected during the negotiations

- The mediator does not prescribe a solution to the conflicting parties but helps them to come up with a solution that will be workable in their circumstances
- Mediators should remain level headed so as to successfully handle the conflict

Recommendations

In view of the conclusion arrived at in this study it is recommended that:

- Third party intervention be engaged when there is a dispute

Contributions from all parties within a conflict need to be considered to arrive at a functional resolution to the conflict.

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