



The Nexus between Identity and Political/Electoral Participation in Africa: Comparative Experiences


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Presentation Outline

- **Linking identification and political/electoral participation**
 - **Biometric voter registration experiences in Africa**
 - **Dividends for political participation: the changing African landscape**
 - **Conclusion: Policy Conversation beyond Commerce**
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Linking identification and political/electoral participation

- ▶ The main form of political participation by ordinary citizens is through selection of leaders through elections or influencing decisions through referenda
- ▶ Prescribing **who participates** and **who does not** is important in any political process in defining the integrity of the process
- ▶ It is in this regard, that the identification process becomes very critical as it is **an enabler of fulfilment of rights and obligations of citizens**, particularly in holding leaders to account.
- ▶ Identification and registration of voters is more of **a political process than technical** and is often exploited for whatever narrow political gains
- ▶ Whilst ordinary citizens are poised to be the main beneficiary of any voter registration system are to be the citizens, **evidence in Africa shows mixed results and consequences transcend geographical borders.**



Recent Biometric Registration Experiences (1)

- ▶ **The first case to explore is the retrogressive performance of biometric voter registration in DRC.** In 2005, it was generally successful and contributed to credible elections. In 2011, the biometric voter register was at the heart of contested elections, despite the heavy financial investment of the international community.
- ▶ Currently, DRC is undertaking a new voter registration process, 20,000 kits were procured. Whilst the voters card served as a quasi national ID in the context where ordinary national IDs were inexistent, the trust in the biometric voter register was low hence the call for a new voter registration rather than updating the previous register.
- ▶ It is important to appreciate how the challenges of the 2011 elections impacted on the subsequent electoral cycle. The EMB had to be disbanded and a new one reconstituted. One would ask whether heavy financial investment in biometric is worthy of the kind of returns as manifested in the breakdown of political order in DRC.

Recent Biometric Registration Experiences (2)

- **Ghana: Presents a classical case of legal bottlenecks within a context of progressive voter registration reform in attempt to enhance the integrity of the voter register.**
- The country adopted biometric voter registration for the 2012 elections. Also introduced was the biometric verification device on polling day which had to authenticate finger prints of voters.
- There was a major hurdle as the verification device failed in many places despite the voters having been duly registered. The legal bottleneck was that one had to be authenticated by the biometric verification device, hence leading to the disenfranchisement of voters.
- **2012 Presidential results : John Mahama 50.7%, Akufo-Addo 47.74%.**
- Subsequent legal reforms for the 2016 elections allowed registered voters to vote even when the biometric device did not authenticate them

Recent Biometric Registration Experiences (3)

- **Kenya presents a mixed picture within the context progression with regard to the 2013 elections.**
 - The 2013 elections were the first after the new constitution and the post-election violence. The Krieglar Commission had recommended an overhaul of the register and Kenya decided to adopt a biometric voter registration. Kenya adopted the Ghana model which included electronic voter identification devices to identify voters on polling day.
 - Given that Ghana had faced major hurdles without a legal fall back for voter authentication in 2012, Kenyan IEBC officials who participated in the elections as observers quickly went back home to correct this by ensuring that there is a fall back in case the EVIDs do not authenticate voters (the EVIDs malfunctioned on election in Kenya). This particular experience saved Kenya from another crisis. Massive disenfranchisement would have had a far reaching impact in Kenya than it had for Ghana.



Recent Biometric Registration Experiences (4)

- ▶ **Uganda presents a case where adoption of a largely successful biometric voter registration system is overshadowed by a highly contested political environment**
- ▶ Uganda adopted a system where a biometric voter register is extracted from the national civil registry. Despite the challenges, it was generally hailed as cost-effective measure. The biometric verification machines worked in most polling stations. In a few isolated cases, it was due to human rather than machine error due to putting wrong codes.
- ▶ The Ugandan success was, however, overshadowed by general lack of political consensus on the electoral process including a political level playing field that was largely contested.



Conclusion

- ▶ Investing in biometric voter registration is not a magic bullet to any country's electoral challenges
- ▶ Legal bottlenecks can undermine the benefits of investment
- ▶ Lesson-learning has enabled countries overcome challenges faced in others through peer-learning
- ▶ Investing in biometric voter registration is part of the opportunity cost meant to contribute to facilitate rather than undermine dividends for democracy.
- ▶ The citizens who pay for the costs of investing in heavy technology are increasingly becoming impatient with the economic returns for democracy in Africa.
- ▶ The general trend and landscape in Africa shows that there is more pressing need for social and economic gains for democracy. Whilst this may imply the important role for biometrics in enhancing political participation, there are no guarantees unless people see sustained evidence of returns from such an investment.