

Democracy Gains Ground in Africa

7 May 2010

Africa's democracy is gaining ground despite challenges posed by delayed elections and negotiated "unity" governments, said regional leaders in a plenary session on the final day of the World Economic Forum on Africa.

"However, the benefits of democracy must lead to economic development and help reduce poverty – to improve the quality of life of ordinary people," said Jacob G. Zuma, President of South Africa. "You can't eat democracy," he added.

Democracy is not a simple matter, stressed Zuma. "Elections are not sufficient – democracy means far more – including strong institutions enshrined by a constitution," he said. Pointing to challenges in Zimbabwe, Zuma stated that "problems are often at the level of implementation."

Idriss Ndélé Moussa, President, Pan-African Parliament, South Africa, declared that "Zimbabwe's transitory unity government is necessary to stop the conflict and violence, but afterwards the country needs to return to representative democracy with a clear executive and a powerful opposition."

Citing concerns about "creeping coups" where leaders perpetuate power by changing the constitution, Salim Ahmed Salim, Prime Minister of Tanzania (1984-1985); and Chairman, Mwalimu Julius K. Nyerere Foundation, Tanzania, said: "The major deficiency is institutions," which can act as a counter-force to entrenched power.

There has been much progress towards democracy in post-independence Africa, reflected Raila Amolo Odinga, Prime Minister of Kenya.

During the last 15 years Africa has moved towards constitutional order, political stability and democracy. "I am an Africa optimist," he added. Odinga pointed to the Kenyan success story as one of the most liberalized economies in the region – with a strong civil society, free media and democratic institutions – helping to overcome the insidious effects of nepotism, cronyism and tribalism.

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