

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE MEANING OF DEMOCRATIC ELECTIONS

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Jeane Kirkpatrick, Scholar and former US Ambassador to the United Nations define Democratic Elections as not merely symbolic....

"They are competitive, periodic, inclusive in which the chief decision makers in a government are elected by citizens, who enjoy broad freedom to criticise government, to publish their criticism and to present alternatives."

Jealous of the above definition, article 2(2) of the Cameroon Constitution states that "the authorities responsible for the management of the State shall derive their powers from the people through elections by direct or indirect universal suffrage, unless otherwise provided for by the constitution". Article 2(3) states that "the vote shall be equal and secret, and every citizen aged 21 years and above shall be entitled to vote".

On the other hand, article 3 states that "political parties and groups shall help the electorate in the making of voting decisions. They shall be bound to respect the principles of democracy, national sovereignty and unity. They shall be formed and shall exercise activities in accordance with the law".

According to the learned scholar, Kirkpatrick, democratic elections are competitive, when opposition parties and their candidates enjoy the freedom of speech, assembly and movement necessary to voice their criticism of the government openly and to bring alternative policies and candidates to the voters. Simply permitting the opposition access to ballot is not enough. Elections in which the opposition is barred from airwaves, has its rallies harassed or its newspapers censored are not democratic. The party in power may enjoy the

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advantage of incumbency, but the rules and conduct of the election contest must be fair.

Democratic periodic elections do not mean electing dictators, or Presidents-for life. The elected officials must return to their voters at prescribed intervals to seek their mandate to continue in office. Those who failed in the execution of their democratic duties run the risk of being voted out of office.

Furthermore, in democratic election, the population of the citizens of the voting age in the country must include a large portion of the adult population. A government chosen by a small exclusive group is not democratic. Another important element in democratic elections is that voters should be permitted to cast their votes in secret to minimize the effect of intimidation. Ballot boxes and vote counting should be conducted openly as possible so that the citizens are confident that the results are accurate.

Accepting the results of the polls is also an important ingredient to be respected in democratic elections by the actors concern. No matter who wins, both sides should accept the results and strive to contribute to solving the common problems of the country. If the incumbent party loses, it should be readily and peacefully turn down power and vice versa. After all, democratic elections are not a fight for survival, but a competition to serve.

The above notwithstanding, the losers always find it difficult to accept undemocratic election results. Civil wars, uprisings, demonstrations and coups d'états are some of the products of undemocratic elections. Democracy in itself guarantees nothing. It offers instead the opportunity to succeed as well as the risk of failure. It is a promise that free human beings, working together, can govern themselves in a manner that will serve their aspirations for personal freedom, economic opportunity, and social justice. In the words of late Josef Brodsky, Russian-born poet and Nobel Prize winner, "A free man, when he fails,

blames nobody." The citizens of democracy must take responsibility for the fate of the society in which they themselves have chosen to live.

Commenting on the imposition of candidates against the principle of democracy, the first magistrate of the Buea Municipality (Lord Mayor), a soft-spoken, apocalyptic and refined politician who also doubles as the current Section President for CPDM Fako III said "any attempt by Yaounde to "doctor" the official and democratically elected councilors' list for the upcoming elections for his constituency will be considered as suicidal by the militants."

Free and democratic elections, therefore, is the central institution of a democratic representative government. And the principal mechanism for translating that consent into governmental authority is the holding of free and fair elections. Election rigging, fraud, intimidation and commercialisation of votes are not within the concept of democratic elections. The use of unorthodox means to achieve political power is therefore unacceptable.