Chapter 4
Embracing Biometric Voter Registration in Africa:
Pros and Cons

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ABSTRACT

One of the major reasons for poor voter turn-up in transitional and post conflict countries in Africa is the credibility and legitimacy of the voter's register. Many voters are disfranchised, and many of the voter's registers are erroneous and lack credibility. This has created a wave of mistrust and discontentment amongst the voters and many prefer not to participate in the election process. Yet, the most fundamental form of exercising good democracy is through participating in regular free and fair elections. However, before a free and fair election is carried out, relevant electoral bodies and authorities normally establish a comprehensive, credible and inclusive voters' list, also called a voters' register. This chapter discusses manual voter registration in Africa and its challenges. It further discusses biometric voter registration systems in different African countries; the opportunities it provides to pacify and redeem voters' registers. Finally, this chapter informs relevant governments in Africa on the most critical success factors for adopting biometric voter registration.

INTRODUCTION

The post-colonial era in many African nations was characterized by various forms of dictatorship and autocracy, and many military coups and instability were rampant. Only a few countries namely; Botswana, Mauritius, and The Gambia experienced

extended periods of peaceful multiparty democratic elections (Burchard, 2015). However, by the early 1990s, a great wave of democratic elections swept through a number of African countries. According to Burchard (2015), the majority of nations in sub-Saharan Africa moved away from authoritarianism and moved towards democratic electoral regimes. However, some countries practiced anocracy, or hybrid regimes that occupy the space between democracy and autocracy (Burchard, 2014). In this kind of hybrid democracy, many regimes restrict political freedom and competition and use elections more as a façade for their continuing rule, as in the Central African Republic (CAR) and Rwanda (Vorrath, 2011). There was an increase in the number of anocratic regimes in Africa from 17 in 1991 to 24 in 2012 (Burchard, 2014). In fact, almost half of the 24 countries that have recently held elections are showing a worrying tendency to maintain or even step up authoritarian measures and political exclusion (Vorrath, 2011). However, 2000 to 2012 saw significant gains where many countries transitioned from anocracy to full democracy (Burchard, 2014). Compared to the authoritarian type of governance or even anocracy, full democracy has been fronted as the most preferred method of governance for a number of reasons. Frist, democracy is believed to be more conducive for economic growth and social development (Lipset, 1959; Burkart, 1995; Przeworski et al., 2000). For example, in nations such as Ghana, Mauritius, Namibia and South Africa, free and fair elections led to the emergence of strong democratic institutions and huge leaps in economic and political development (CAE, 2009). Secondly, democratic governance is also believed to be a more stable system of government in the long run compared with dictatorships, single-party systems, and the like, which are prone to civil strife and coups d'état (Feng, 1997; Przeworski et al., 2000). In Liberia and Sierra Leone for example, credible elections have fostered national reconciliation and an end to years of armed conflict and civil war (CAE, 2009; Burchard, 2015).There are very low chances that democracies engage in significant external conflict or war with each other, making the wide spread of democracy a likely precondition for global peace (Owen, 1994; Hensel et al., 2000).

Whereas Africa is celebrating wide-spread formal democratic reforms cultivated since the beginning of post-colonial era, there is still a lot to be done in deepening its democratic reforms. This is because the electoral processes in many African countries continue to be marred by accusations of bad practices, boycotts, gerrymandering, forms of repression and sheer violence (DDP, 2008). According to Vergne (2009), violence, intimidation and fraud has been recorded in most developing countries. Electoral fraud According to Systemic Peace report (2012) is a common occurrence and more than 50 percent of elections in Africa can be characterized by harassment, intimidation, or some other form of electoral malfeasance. Approximately 14% of all

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