

The Trans-Saharan Elections Project

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The need for “regular free and fair elections to institutionalize legitimate authority of representative government as well as democratic change of governments” is enshrined as a basic principle of the African Union in its African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance. The frequency of elections has indeed increased dramatically in Africa since the arrival of the “Third Wave” of democratic change in the early 1990s. While the results of the past two decades have been highly mixed, in virtually every country elections have been accepted as the “normal” mode of acceding to public office, and are now held with some regularity. The reiterated processes of elections has, in turn, produced intense debates about their conduct, and over the years there has been an increased awareness that the need is not just to avoid cheating on election day but to consider much broader issues such as the impact of varying choices of electoral systems, the importance of the larger institutional infrastructure and the rules of game, the role of social and political organizations in elections, and the management of the mechanics of electoral processes.

Over a two-year period (2010-12), the UF “Trans-Saharan Elections Project” will sponsor a series of exchanges and seminars that will bring together elections specialists from six target countries—Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Senegal—with a wide range of American professionals involved in elections, to comparatively examine the challenges and issues involved in ensuring electoral freedom, fairness, and transparency. The project, co-directed by Leonardo A. Villalón and Daniel A. Smith, is funded by a grant through the



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A key goal will be to share experiences, so as to shape understanding and knowledge, and thus to contribute to discussions which will have real and substantive impact in the Trans-Saharan countries. On the US side, the exposure to electoral issues in a set of African countries that are otherwise strikingly different is intended to provide a more nuanced understanding among American professionals about the challenges and promises of electoral democracy in Africa. The six target countries present a highly interesting set of cases. All are relatively poor countries, and primarily Muslim, but with a broad range of experiences in elections and democracy: Senegal and Mali are frequently described as democracies today; Niger has experimented rather tumultuously with establishing democracy; Burkina Faso has experienced a very cautious political opening, without democratic transition; and Mauritania and Chad each have had

challenging histories and more limited experiences with elections.

In conjunction with partner institutions in each of the six countries, project activities over two years will bring six Elections Fellows from each of these countries to the US, to participate in two comprehensive learning programs on elections. Moving from the University of Florida in Gainesville, to the state capital of Tallahassee, and then on to Washington, the programs will comparatively examine electoral processes at local, state and national levels. They will draw on visits to organizations and presentations by a broad range of professionals involved in elections: academics, government officials, civic groups, consultants, and media. In return, two delegations of Americans, representing these various constituencies, will visit the six African countries to learn more about their experiences and to share insights more broadly. The project will, in addition, produce a website and other materials to serve as important research

resources for both faculty and graduate students working on these understudied countries.

The West African partner organizations with which we will collaborate in setting up the project include:

The West African Research Center (Senegal)

www.warc-croa.org

WARC is the overseas center for the West African Research Association, managed in conjunction with the Senegal-based Association de Recherche Ouest Africain, and a member of the Council of American Overseas Research Centers (CAORC). The Center thus has a strong network of ties across West Africa, as well as extensive experience organizing programs in Dakar. WARC will serve as the first point of contact and will host the orientation sessions for the American delegations.

Centre Pour la Gouvernance Démocratique (Burkina Faso)

cgd-igd.org

The CGD, led by a well-known Burkinabé Political Scientist, is one of the most respected research and democratic advocacy organizations in the region. It undertakes a wide range of activities in partnership with local as well as international organizations, including projects on electoral administration and monitoring. Final sessions of the US delegation visits will be held at CGD.

EISA-Chad Country Office (Chad)

www.eisa.org.za/EISA/chad.htm

EISA (formerly Electoral Institute of Southern Africa) is an international network with country offices in six African countries, including Chad. EISA's mission is to "promote credible elections and democratic governance in Africa,"

and the Chad office has been extensively in projects involving the training of elections observers.



Reseau Appui au Processus Electoral au Mali (Mali)

APEM is an organized network of 49 NGOs working directly to support the transparency and legitimacy of the electoral process in Mali. Created in 1996, on the eve of the contested 1997 elections (the second in the country's democratic history), APEM has continued to play a central role in national discussions about the electoral process in Mali. Its activities have included extensive programs of citizen education, training of election observers, and working with political parties on fraud prevention.

Université de Nouakchott, Faculté des Sciences Juridiques et Economiques (Mauritania)

The Faculty of Law and Economics of the University of Nouakchott, which is in the process of planning the establishment

of a working group on the organization, administration and analysis of elections.

LASDEL, Laboratoire E'Etudes et Recherches sur les Dynamiques Sociales et le Développement Local (Niger)

www.lasdel.net

LASDEL is an independent organization working in various domains of applied social science research. It has emerged as one of the most important social science research organizations in the Francophone West African region. LASDEL has recently begun to work in the field of elections, and hosted an international conference on the "Electoral Processes in Africa" in September 2010.

Mouvement Citoyen (Senegal)

www.mouvementcitoyen.sn

Mouvement Citoyen is a dynamic civil society organization, founded in 2002 by a noted Senegalese democratic activist, and quickly attracting significant national and international attention for its activities in the field of citizenship training, democracy promotion, and working with the media. The Mouvement has a particular mission to work with youth and women, and in promoting the participation of women in electoral processes.

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