

The Trans-Saharan Elections Project (TSEP)

LEONARDO VILLALÓN & DANIEL SMITH

The UF “Trans-Saharan Elections Project,” funded by a grant through the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs involves a two-year series of exchanges and seminars that 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. The goal of the project, co-directed by Leonardo A. Villalón and Daniel A. Smith, is to comparatively examine the challenges and issues involved in ensuring electoral freedom, fairness, and transparency.

The frequency of elections has increased dramatically in Africa since 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. The reiterated processes of elections has, however, also 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 electoral systems, the importance of the larger institutional infrastructure and the rules of game, the role of social and political organizations, and the management of the mechanics of electoral processes. Importantly, these very issues preoccupy many intense American political debates about electoral reform. A key goal of the TSEP project is thus to share experiences, and to stimulate discussions that will have real and substantive impact on our understanding of elections.

The first year of the project has been highly successful in accomplishing these goals. In January 2011, Villalón and Smith traveled to all six participating countries so as to select participants for the first round of seminars in the US. This selection was done collaboratively with representatives of the US Embassy Public Affairs Office in each country and, crucially, our local country partners in the TSEP project. They include:

- CGD, Centre Pour la Gouvernance Démocratique (Burkina Faso)
- EISA-Chad (Chad)
- APEM, Réseau Appui au Processus Electoral au Mali (Mali)
- Université de Nouakchott, Faculté des Sciences Juridiques et Economiques (Mauritania)
- LASDEL, Laboratoire E’Etudes et Recherches sur les Dynamiques Sociales et le Développement Local (Niger)
- Mouvement Citoyen (Senegal)

The first US-based TSEP program for African visitors took place in May 2011, with 15 elections specialists representing all six countries taking part. Beginning in Gainesville, Florida, the group took part in a series of talks and seminars on the UF campus, met numerous municipal elected officials, and visited institutions involved in managing local elections, including the offices of Alachua County Commissioner of Elections Pam Carpenter. A highlight of this visit was the opportunity for participants to “vote,” using sample ballots and vote scanning machines, as well as to witness the counting and verification procedures.

Moving on to the state level, the group traveled to Florida’s capital in Tallahassee, where they were

received by numerous state officials, including Florida’s Secretary of State Mr. Kurt Browning. The opportunity to engage with key actors involved in the debate about a controversial proposed law (since passed) modifying Florida’s electoral procedures provided a particularly interesting perspective on elections for the African participants. An additional panel discussion on Florida’s experience in the highly contested 2000 presidential elections was also of great interest. From Florida the group traveled to Washington DC, where they had the opportunity to again meet with key institutions involved in US election management at the Federal level. The three weeks culminated with a day-long seminar at the US Department of State, during which participants were able to meet a number of American officials as well as exchange ideas and experiences with two other delegations visiting the US.

From 28 June to 22 July, 2011, an American delegation undertook the planned return visit to the Trans-Saharan region, visiting all six participating countries in what proved to be an intensive and challenging, but also highly successful, trip. In addition to the TSEP co-directors, the delegation was composed of the three other American elections specialists:

- Judge Nikki Ann Clark of the Florida First District Court of Appeals in Tallahassee, where she has served since January 2009. In 2000, Judge Clark was one of the judges who presided over the litigation involving the Bush v. Gore election dispute.
- G. Neil Skene, Jr., a lawyer and former journalist in Tallahassee, with long experience as a journalist covering courts, government and



American politics. Skene served for seven years as president of Congressional Quarterly Inc.

- Roger Austin, a lawyer and Gainesville based political consultant specializing in all areas of state and local electoral campaigns. From 1989 to 1992, he served as the Political Director and Legal Counsel for the Republican Party of Florida.

With the active participation of our partner organizations, as well as with significant input and help from the alumni of our recent US-based program, a diverse set of activities was programmed in each country. In each country there was a major public event in the form of a roundtable on elections involving the US delegation as well as the African alumni from the May program. These discussions were universally marked by a high degree of local interest, evoking much discussion of a very high caliber with frank and stimulating exchanges on difficult and important issues.

In addition to these public events, the program in each country included a series of meetings and exchanges with important actors, institutions and organizations involved in the electoral process. These included, among others: a meeting with the director of the National Bu-

reau of Elections in Chad; meetings with the new Minister of Justice and with the president of the Independent National Electoral Commission in Niger; meetings with the coalition of opposition parties and with the main officers of the current ruling party at their headquarters in Burkina Faso; meetings with the President of the Constitutional Court and with the Minister of Justice in Mali; meetings with the president of the University of Nouakchott and other high officials in Mauritania; meetings with both the coalition of opposition parties and with a deputy to the National Assembly and key supporter of the ruling party and actor in the upcoming highly contested electoral struggle in Senegal.

Various other activities organized by the local hosts immensely enriched the trip and the experience for the American delegation. Highlights included a visit to the town of Kiota in Niger, seat of a very important branch of the Tijaniyya Sufi Muslim order, where the group was received as guests by the most senior members of the religious family. Another highlight was the day-long visit to a rural meeting of elected officials with their constituents in the rural council of Fissel in Senegal, a unique opportunity to see local

democracy in action in West Africa.

Taken as a whole, the activities and meetings of the first year of the TSEP project have been highly effective in helping us achieve key desired outcomes. In events on both sides of the Atlantic, the program has increased understanding of the American electoral system—“warts and all”—among the African specialists, making the important points that democracy and elections are never perfect, require constant vigilance, and can always be improved. Secondly, the American participants came away with a rich and nuanced understanding of the key issues surrounding elections and democratic development in West Africa, including both the challenges and difficulties presented by those contexts as well as the remarkable efforts of individuals and civil society groups in struggling for positive outcomes in each country. We look forward to a successful second round of exchanges in 2012.

Leonardo Villalón is associate professor of political science and former director of the Center for African Studies. Daniel Smith is professor of political science and affiliate faculty in the Center for African Studies.