
DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL AFFAIRS

JUNE 2020
AFRICAN UNION COMMISION
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Following the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic within African Union (AU) Member States and its impact on electoral processes, on 27 May 2020, the Department of Political Affairs (DPA) of the African Union Commission (AUC) in collaboration with the Association of African Electoral Authorities (AAEA) and Election Management Bodies (EMBs) Networks of Regional Economic Communities (RECs) convened the first virtual peer-learning consultative meeting under the theme “the COVID-19-19 Pandemic and Elections in Africa”. The meeting which was presided over by H.E Minata Samate Cessouma, the Commission of Political Affairs of the AU brought together 152 senior electoral officials from EMBs, civil society organisations, international non-governmental organisations and independent election experts. It is offered them the platform to exchange experiences and challenges on how best to conduct inclusive, peaceful, democratic and credible elections within the context of the ongoing public health emergency posed by COVID-19 pandemic.

The following key issues, recommendations as well as lessons emerged from the virtual meeting of African EMBs:

(a) Emerging Issues

Among others the following are some of the key question/concerns raised by participants during the meeting:

- How should voter registration be carried out without citizens getting infected?
- How can political parties organise their primaries and electoral campaigns within the context of restrictions on public gathering and movement and without the risk of spreading the virus?
- How can EMBs and stakeholders carry out voter education and sensitization during the period of COVID-19?
- What can EMBs do on Election Day to reduce overcrowding in polling stations on Election Day and during counting and tallying of votes?
- How do EMBs identify voters on Election Day without the risk of infection given that voters will have to remove their face masks in order to be properly identified?
- How do EMBs manage polling materials and polling station set up such as booth and inks effectively to reduce the risk of infections?
- How can EMBs provide opportunity for persons with symptoms or persons who have tested positive for the virus to vote?
(b) Lessons-learnt

Based on presentations by countries that have already held elections and those preparing for elections, contributions and comments by participants, the following lessons were drawn:

- **Intensification of public education and media campaigns in national and local languages on measures taken by EMBs to make the electoral process safe:** Mali, Guinea and Tanzania used the approach during their respective electoral processes such as voter registration and Election Day.

- **Provision of free protective and sanitary materials:** Most EMBs have provided and others are planning to provide alcohol sanitisers, temperature checks and hand washing kits, masks and gloves for election personnel and citizens on during voter registration and on Election Day.

- **Recruitment and training of dedicated personnel on COVID-19 issues:** The EMBs of Chad, Tanzania and CAR introduced the role of a dedicated polling station clerk responsible for ensuring that voters comply with health and safety measures.

- **Collaboration with the health authorities:** To ensure strict compliance with safety measures, most EMBs stated that they are working with or did work with health authorities in designing measures for the prevention of the spread of COVID-19 during each phase of the electoral process.

- **Provision of special arrangements for voter registration inspection and verification:** EMBs will provide online, SMS and call centre facilities for inspection of the voter register and verification of registration and polling station allocation details. The EMBs (Tanzania, Ghana, Cote d’Ivoire and Seychelles) introduced these measures to reduce in-person visits to EMB offices for the verification of voter registration details.

- **Social distancing at registrations centres and polling stations:** To ensure compliance with social distancing requirements at polling stations, for instance, the Electoral Commission of Ghana plans to mark the queue areas at polling stations with paint to ensure compliance with the 2 metre distance.
• **Reducing overcrowding at registration centres and polling stations**: Some EMBs are putting plans in place to create additional polling streams at polling stations in order to reduce the number of voters assigned to each polling station. This however comes at the cost of recruiting additional staff and setting up additional voting facilities.

(c) **Recommendations**

Participants made the following recommendation for consideration of the AU and its member states and EMBs planning to organise or postpone their elections:

- Political parties and candidates should consider using virtual campaigns and social media platforms for their campaigns and related activities to avoid contribution to the spread of the pandemic.

- EMBs should consider distributing free masks in polling stations on Election Day to encourage voter turnout.

- EMBs should increasing the number of polling centres and booths to avoid overcrowding on Elections Day. The will ensure that polling stations are not overcrowded and the hours voters spend in polling stations reduced. This could include extending voting hours.

- EMBs should consider the possibility of conducting tests for both full time and ad hoc staff of EMBs, observers and technical support providers before and after the elections.

- AU Member States considering postponing their elections should engage in broad-based consultation with all electoral stakeholders to prevention political instability.

- The AU should establish a platform for continuous experience sharing for African EMBs to provide ongoing updates from countries that have held elections and serve as a peer learning opportunity for countries that are preparing for elections.

- The AU should come out with the proposed guideline on elections and pandemics as soon as possible for the benefit of countries yet to hold elections.
1. INTRODUCTION

The magnitude and impact of novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic is unprecedented in contemporary Africa and globally. In response to the adverse effects of COVID-19 pandemic, African Union (AU) Member States have put in place various policy response measures such as partial or total lockdowns; restrictions on social/public gatherings (including churches and mosques); restriction of public transportations; closure of learning institutions; closure of non-essential offices, businesses, restaurants and other facilities; closure of ports of entry and exit and deployment of security forces to ensure adherence to COVID-19 control regulations.

Prior to the outbreak COVID-19 pandemic in Africa, 18 elections were scheduled to take place in Africa in 2020. Some of the elections have already taken place in Guinea, Mali, Cameroon, Comoros and Togo. Other countries have contemplated postponement of their elections due to the risks posed by the COVID-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic directly affects the execution of mandate of Election Management Bodies (EMBs) as institutions responsible for organising elections. Albeit a sovereign consideration, the decision to postpone or hold elections during the period of the pandemic have health, constitutional, political, security and democratic implications for AU Member States.

Against the above background, on 27 May 2020, the Department of Political Affairs (DPA), African Union Commission (AUC) in collaboration with the Association of African Electoral Authorities (AAEA) and Election Management Bodies (EMBs) Networks of Regional Economic Communities (RECs) convened the first virtual peer-learning consultative meeting under the theme “the COVID-19 Pandemic and Elections in Africa”. The meeting brought together 152 senior electoral officials from EMBs, civil society organisations, international non-governmental organisations and independent election experts. It is offered them the platform to exchange experiences and challenges on how best conduct inclusive, peaceful, democratic and credible elections within the context of the ongoing public health emergency posed by COVID-19 pandemic.

2. OPENING REMARKS

(a) Remarks by Mr. Wafula Chebukati, President of the General Assembly of the Association of African Electoral Authorities and Chairperson, Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission, Kenya

1 The opening session was moderated by Dr. Khabele Matlosa, Director of Political Affairs, African Union Commission.
Mr. Wafula Chebukati, President of the General Assembly of the AAEA and the Chairperson of the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) of Kenya, in his opening remarks expressed appreciation to all the EMBs present for making time to participate in the meeting. He also thanked members of the AAEA who participated in the EMBs Forum of 28 – 29 November 2019 during which they were able to interact without risk or worry and recalled how the world has changed since then as a result of the pandemic. He stated that this virtual consultative meeting had come at the right time when EMBs are also the middle of the pandemic adding that it poses constitutional and political risks in election management that requires sustainable strategies to manage. He mentioned that fact that some African countries have had to postpone their elections, including that of Kenya, because of the pandemic although some countries had gone ahead to hold elections oblivious of the risks involved. He pointed out that the entire process of elections involves human interactions which cause risks to all, including EMB staff. He said, one important question that all EMBs should ask was how elections should be managed henceforth, how should political rallies and election campaigns be managed and how to we deal with the issue of observers, especially international observers, who could no longer travel to observe elections due to travel restrictions. Mr. Chebukati also mentioned the fact that several African countries are required by their constitutions to hold elections this and next year which present a dilemma as to whether to hold elections under such a challenging situation or renew the mandate of incumbents, adding that either of those could lead to constitutional instability. He further stated that the situation posed by the pandemic requires that EMBs work together and learn from each other by putting in place safeguards and adopt a new-normal. He concluded by thanking the AU for holding the meeting and called on the organisation during this point in history to advice governments on how to address political instability that could break out as a result of the pandemic.

(b) Opening Remarks by H.E Minata Samate Cessouma, Commissioner of Political Affairs, African Union Commission

H.E. Minata Samate Cessouma, Commissioner for Political Affairs, AUC in her welcome remarks thanked all participants for making time to participate in the meeting. She informed participants of the demise of two chairpersons of EMBs (Mr. Amadu Salif Kebe of Guinea and Dr. Ahmed Djaza of Comoros) who were members of the AAEA and took the opportunity to extent condolences to their families and members of the AAEA.

She stated that COVID-19 is a global pandemic which has affected the African continent in several respect: social, economic and humanitarian. She mentioned the fact that the first cases of COVID-19 on the African continent were recorded in early February and
has since affected almost all African countries. She stated that the pandemic has impact on electoral processes in Africa and raises new challenges in electoral processes in term of health, budget and security. These challenges, she said informed the need for the DPA to organise the virtual meeting in order to discuss strategies for organising elections under the pandemic.

The Commissioner mentioned that for the year 2020, there were plans to hold 18 elections (presidential, legislative or local) across the African continent. Among these countries, Mali, Guinea and Burundi have organised elections amid the COVID-19 pandemic and that the meeting presented the opportunity to learn from the countries that have already held elections. She stated that there are also some Member States planning to hold or postpone elections during the year 2020. She added that the decision to hold or postpone elections are constitutional prerogative of Member States and that it is important that consultations are held to ensure that elections meet national and international standards.

She highlighted the fact that provisions of the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG) requires Member States of the African Union to hold regular, peaceful, democratic elections. It is therefore absolutely necessary that consultations be held among stakeholders on electoral process to guarantee legitimacy while preserving public health. She also mentioned that the fact the COVID-19 has affected the programs and activities of the AU but added that the AU was ready to support EMBs as they seek to strengthen their capacity to hold elections under the current challenging circumstances. She stated that the meeting provided the opportunities to find solutions to meeting the challenges. She mentioned that fact that draft guidelines are being developed to enable Member States take a decision on either conduct or not conduct elections under the current situation.

Finally, she expressed the conviction that the meeting will be able to meeting its objectives and concluded her remarks by wishing participants fruitful deliberations.

3. CONTINENTAL PERSPECTIVES ON COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND ITS IMPACT ON ELECTIONS IN AFRICA

Mr. Guy Cyrille Tapoko, Head of Democracy and Electoral Assistance Unit, Department of Political Affairs, African Union Commission

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2 Session was moderated by Mr. Calixte Mbari, Head of Division DGHRE, Department of Political Affairs, AUC
The focus of the DPA is on only countries holding presidential and legislative elections although other countries have local elections and referenda. From continental perspective 18 elections had been planned, six of which have already been held in Cameroon, Comoros, Togo, Guinea, Mali and Burundi. Depending on how COVID-19 continue to spread the following countries will be holding elections before the end of the year. These include Guinea, Malawi (fresh presidential election), Tanzania, la Cote d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Chad, Central African Republic, Niger, Seychelles, Somalia and Egypt. Ethiopia had earlier postponed her elections as a result of the COVID-19.

The impact of the COVID-19 on elections in Africa include postponement of election such as in Ethiopia mentioned earlier and South Africa where local government elections have also been postponed. The COVID-19 also have impact on the electoral cycle such as voter registration and campaigns due to full or partial lockdown imposed by government across the continent which involved various restrictions on movement and gathering. For elections that have been held during the COVID-19, there has also been impact on voter turnout as well as the deployment of international election observers. In addition, technical assistance provided by the AU has been affect since experts cannot be deployed in the field. There is also political impact of COVID-19 on the mandate of political office holders where postponement of election could lead to political instability. It is important that all postponement of elections are carried out in conformity with the constitutions of AU Member States. In a situation where elections are held within the context of the pandemic and majority of citizens do not participate, it could affect voter turnout and political participation. Given that most countries have re-allocated resources to fight the COVID-19, funds meant for elections could also be affected. In conclusion, it is important that Member States continue to provide resources to enable EMBs carry out their activities.

**Plenary Discussions:**

A number of participants made comments, recommendations and or raised questions relating to issues raised during presentation or relating to the theme of the meeting in general.

The representative of the national elections commission of Libya during his contribution indicated that the country has planned to hold local elections in June for 6 municipalities amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and war. In his contribution, he also mentioned that the possible impact of COVID-19 included: the training of polling staff who will be deployed on polling day; managing queues in relation to all the health protocols such as social

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3 Mr. Salim Ben Tahir, High National Election Commission, Libya.
distancing; wearing masks and the use of sanitiser which needs to be observed in and outside of polling stations. He also expressed concern with regard to: the identification of voters on Election Day without the risk of infection given that voters will have to remove their face mask in order to be identified; how to manage the voting screens/booths to avoid the risk of infections and whether voting screens will have to be sanitised after each voter has used it; and whether there will be risk involved for voters to dip their fingers in the same ink bottle. He made two suggestions relating to the use of transparent face shields which in his opinion are very expensive; and the use of SMS to help people identified their polling centres.

Another participant from Zimbabwe Electoral Commission in her contribution stated that the country has a number of parliamentary and local council by elections that have had to be suspended as a results of the COVID-19 pandemic. Her main concern was how to ensure inclusiveness during this period to ensure that those who are sick (from COVID-19-19) are not denied the right to vote.

The Chairperson of Elections Cameroon\(^4\) used to opportunity to clarify that Cameroon does not have any pending elections in reaction to earlier presentation that the country had some outstanding partial elections.

Participant from the electoral Commission of Angola was of the view that while COVID-19 represent a challenge, it could also represent opportunity to improved electoral processes. Her concern with regard to the COVID-19-19 in relation to how EMBs and stakeholders could carry out voter education and sensitization during the period of COVID-19 when moving is restrict and budget constraints; and how to reduce campaign period and the number of people to be involved in campaign in order to avoid overcrowding. She suggested that on Election Day voting can start early, and reduce the number of voters in a polling station, increasing polling booths and polling centres to reduce infection?

The representative from the office of the Chairperson of the Electoral Commission of Guinea wanted to know if there were cultural and linguistic differences in how elections are conducted in francophone and Anglophone countries?

Mauritania electoral commission representative stated that the country does not have election until 3 years. He mentioned that legislation and constitutions should be the best way to approach challenges to electoral processes during the pandemic and learn from countries that have held elections within the context of the Covid-19. He stated that in view of the fact that elections cannot be postponed for ever, solution must be found in

\(^4\) Mr. Eno Abrams, Chairperson, ELECAM.
order to organise elections including resorting to electronic voting and other innovations. He said during the 2018 election in Mauritania some voters were able to vote remotely, an experience that others can learn.

Chairperson of EMB Uganda stated that the normal ways of holding campaign will pose problem. He proposed that there should be virtual campaigns and on social media. He also suggested that on Election Day, the number of people in queues should be reduced to ensure better social distancing. He stated further that EMBs must also follow health guidelines to avoid the spread of the virus.

4. ORGANISING ELECTIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC: LESSONS LEARNT: EXPERIENCES OF MALI AND GUINEA

(a) The Republic of Mali

Mali was compelled to hold legislative elections because the term of office of the country’s National Assembly had been extended twice previously and stakeholders were asking for the renewal of the term of office of members of Parliament. In addition to measures taken at the national level to check the spread of the pandemic, the EMB used video clips, radio and TV in French and local languages to increase awareness about the COVID-19. Some stakeholders also supported with awareness creation including youth volunteers who showed people how to wear masks, washing of hands and how to follow health protocols. The volunteers were also deployed on Election Day for the distribution of free masks and showing voters how to wash their hands. In addition the EMB set up information centres and network of local communicators who embarked on sensitisation programmes in towns and villages to enable voters receive information on the elections and Covid-19. To further enhance the success of its COVID-19 interventions, the EMB partnered business leaders who provided masks, sanitisers and handwashing facilities in support of the elections and worked the Ministry of Health. Other partners included the EU and UNDP, USAID etc. Finally, the EMB supplied free masks to voters which raised voter turnout.

In response to a question on the evaluation of the EMB on the rate of infection after the elections, the EMB stated that any rise in infections could not be attributed directly to the elections since several factors account for the spread of the virus.

(b) Republic of Guinea

Guinea held legislative elections and a referendum on 22 March 2020. To put the elections in context, Guinea also had similar situation like Mali where the mandate of
the National Assembly had expired and needed to be renewed. The elections also took place in a difficult context where the opposition had boycotted the polls because of complaints relating to the voters’ register and the outbreak of violence.

According to the EMB of Guinea, the country, by the time of the elections on 22 March had only four (4) reported cases of COVID-19. Based on its previous experience on the management of Ebola cases, measures were put in place including the tracing of people who had entered the country from outside, gathering was limited to 20 people and there was curfew.

Some of the measures put in place by the EMB before the elections included hand washing for people entering the premises of the EMB, taking of temperatures and social distancing during meetings. On Election Day, handwashing kits were supplied at all polling stations, social distance and the wearing of masks were enforced. The EMBs stated that during the tallying process and the announcement of final results social distancing measures and health protocols were enforced including insisting that journalists who covered presses conference wore masks.

The EMB also took steps to ensure that immediately after the elections, staff of the EMB were asked to proceed on leave for 14 days. This measure was further extended until May 2020. During the period, the offices of the EMB were disinfected. Before offices were opened, all staff of EMBs were expected to be tested before returning to office.

Currently the EMB is putting measures in place to prepare for presidential election scheduled for October 2020. In conclusion, lessons that need to be drawn relates to electoral laws, particularly with regard to how the AU can come out with electoral laws that can be adapted to situations such as the COVID-19.

In response to a question by a participant, the EMB stated that it will be important for experts and international observers would will want to assist countries or observe elections to show prove that they tested negative of the virus before entering the country.

**Plenary Discussions**

During plenary, the some participants raised the following questions and made comments:

The representative of ECONEC sought to know to expand testing for ad hoc staff of EMBs and experts who support the work of the electoral commission? He also wanted
to know how experts and international observers tested negative could be allowed to enter countries to support electoral processes without being quarantined.

A participants from the Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC) requested additional clarification on the use of volunteers especially with regard to what were the challenges and what they did on Election Day?

The representative of the EMB of Algeria posed a question on whether the COVID-19 constitute a legal exception that could necessitate the changing of electoral calendar in Africa. He then added a comment that there will be the need to for national consensus on postponing of election. In addition AU Member States should conduct evaluation to assess whether free and fair election can be held under COVID-19. He also suggested the need for innovation including online voting in addition to creating a platform for sharing experiences by those who have already held elections.

The following were some of the lessons that could be learned from Mali and Guinea who have held elections under COVID-19:

(d) Provision of protective gear including masks and gloves for election personnel;
(e) Mandatory use of masks by voters and observers, and provision of hand sanitisers, and hand washing kits at polling stations;
(f) Special arrangements for practicing social distancing at the polling stations to avoid crowding.
(g) Extensive media campaigns and sensitisation to create awareness on the pandemic in French and local languages;
(h) The use of youth volunteers in the distribution of material and the use of masks;
(i) Testing of the staff of EMBs and taking of temperature of people entering the facilities of the EMB;
(j) Working with media houses to establish election information centres, which provided a platform for outreach by the EMBs and the health authorities; and
(k) Disinfection of the premises of EMBs.
5. THE ROAD AHEAD: CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES OF PLANNING AND MANAGING ELECTIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC

(a) Public health challenges posed by COVID-19 by Dr. Ahmed Ogwell Ouma, Deputy Director, African Union Centres of Disease Control

The Africa CDC has released a number of guidelines which could be useful for conducting elections. These include the Guideline on Social Distancing which explains why social distancing is important with three key messages. The first is that close contact with individual for up to 15 minutes constitute an automatic risk. It is therefore important to reduce contact to less than 15 minutes. The second is the need for authorities to reduce direct individual contact through social distancing measures from people we do not know have the virus or not. And the third is that where social distancing cannot be observed it is important to wear a face mask and avoid touching to reduce infection for oneself and family members. The Africa CDC is also working on Guidelines for Easing of Lockdown, which encourages AU Member States to conduct an internal assessment of their health systems to effectively manage a possible upsurge in confirmed cases; ensure that there are systems in place to detect people who are infected; undertake a phased approach to reopening; and the need to build capacity to intervene in identified hotspots.

For the purposes of elections, places of mass gathering should be opened gradually and cautioned that opening up too much represents risk. In view of that, it would be important for governments to receive clear advice from health experts on hold elections since elections carry risk in terms of increasing infections that can lead to high cost and political instability. In conclusion, the Africa CDC is prepared to support African countries preparing for elections. Finally, there is the need to ensure discipline to reduce the risk of infection on large scale in Africa.

Part II: EMBs Perspectives of countries scheduled to hold elections in 2020 (political, legal, technical and operational challenges and strategies)

West Africa
• Ghana: Mrs Jean Mensa, Chairperson, Electoral Commission of Ghana (EC)

Ghana has to hold elections in line with the Constitutions on 7 December 2020. To that end, consultations has been held with stakeholders and the Government COVID-19

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5 Session was moderated by Mr. Robert Gerenge, Principal EMB Advisor, DPA, AUC.
6 The Guidelines were published on 29 May 2020.
The first impact of the COVID-19 was delays on the elections calendar for 3 months and most activities have therefore been scheduled for June 2020 with the hope that there will be flattening of the curve in June 2020. In terms of upcoming activities for the EC, efforts will be made to update the EC biometric data for registration and voter verification. New biometric and verification machines will be used for the elections. Effort is also being made to compile a new voters’ register for over 15 million Ghanaians. The voter registration is supposed to have begun in April but now it will start in the middle of June for 40 days after which the exhibition of the voters register will follow in September 2020 and then nomination of candidates.

A number of measures have been outlined by the EC to ensure that the pandemic does not spread during the implementation of the pandemic. The first step is extensive public education to inform citizens about measures that the EC will use to curb the virus to build public confidence. Public education will be carried out in English and six major local dialects. To ensure mass use of masks, people in rural areas will be provided with free masks. Second, people entering registration centres will have their temperatures checked and those with high temperatures directed to nearest hospitals. In addition, sanitation materials will be provided at the entrance to the registration centres. Third, scanners will be wiped before other registrants use it and staff of the EC will also be dressed in protective gears to ensure that they are not infected. Fourth, floors will also be marked to ensure the 1 meter social distancing space for people. Fifth, there is a COVID-19 task force and the elections security task force who will go round registration centres and ensure that all the health protocols relating to the pandemic are adhered to. Sixth, the Information Services Department present in 275 districts in Ghana will also be employed to engage in public education on the message of the EC to help curb the spread. Finally, district offices of the EC will also assist with the registration of the aged and people with disability so that they do not have to go to the registration centres to register in order to minimise the risk and provide such persons with safe space for registration. In conclusion, the EC will have no choice but to prepare for the 7 December 2020 elections in line with the Constitutions of Ghana.

･ *Cote d’Ivoire: Mr Koné Sourou,* Vice Chairperson, Commission Electorale Indépendante (CEI)

The pandemic has delayed the activities of the CEI which should have started in April with voter registration. Given improved condition in the management of the virus, the CEI has resumed it activities for elections expected on the 31 October 2020 in line with the Ivorian constitution. The timeline of activities for the CEI are as follows: First is engagement with stakeholders on the revision of the voters register which was ongoing after which the recruitment and training of over 30,000 personnel who will be involved in
the voter registration will begin. Second is the actual registration of voters which will begin on the 10 - 24 June in over 11,000 registration centres throughout the country. There are over 6 million voters who have already register and therefore the new registration will only target about 600,000 new voters. The final voters registered is expected to be ready by the 23 September 2020. Third is the printing of the voters register which is expected to be completed by 20 October 2029 to be used for the elections. The CEI has introduced online system for people already registered and who need to make changes online to reduce the number of people who will be physically present at the registration centres. For those who have to be in registration centres, the wearing of mask is compulsory. To conclude, the elections in la Cote d'Ivoire will be held in compliance with the constitution and hopefully the COVID-19-19 infections would have gone down by then.

- **Burkina Faso : Mr Newton Ahmed Barry, Chairperson, Commission Electorale Nationale Indépendante (CENI)**

Burkina Faso will hold presidential and legislative elections on 22 November 2020. Voter registration which had begun in January 2020 had to be suspended in March due to the COVID-19 pandemic but has since resumed since 8 May to be completed by latest 17 July 2020 because there is a national consensus that elections should be held as planned. As a results of the pandemic there was a funding gap that have to be filled in order to put health protocol in place during the registration process. It is hoped that the pandemic would have reduced by November when the elections will be held and that the country will learn from other member countries of the ECOWAS who have already held elections during the COVID-19.

**Eastern Africa:**

- **Somalia : Mrs Halima Ismail Ibrahim, Chairperson, National Independent Electoral Commission, (NIEC)**

The pandemic has affected the NIEC in its planning for the 2020 federal and parliamentary elections in line with the new electoral laws which will allow Somalis to elect their leaders on the basis of one-person-one-vote for the first time in 50 years. The NIEC is just 5 years old and will therefore be impacted more negatively by COVID-19 pandemic in relation to its electoral operations, compared with other well established EMBs. Among the measures being taken by the NIEC to ensure that the elections take place are as follows: the NIEC has developed a COVID-19 protocol and business continuity plan to protect staff and safeguard their staff; introductions of flexible work approach allowing staff to work from home and use virtual meetings include
engagement with political parties. When necessary, Commissioner and senior secretariat arrange a roster and go to the office on need basis only. Field offices staff also work from home; and provision of zoom licences to staff to allow them to hold several departmental and board meetings.

In terms of the actual impact of the COVID-19 on the planning of elections and electoral timelines, suspending of internal and external flights; the inability to operational staff physically; delays in the work of an ad hoc legal review committee set up to address gaps in the electoral law; the suspension of the work of Parliament since February are the main challenges. Parliament's delay in resuming session means there will be delays in finalizing amendment to the electoral law and the political parties’ law. Parliament is expected to resume on 6 June 2020 and the ad hoc committee will present its report to it for the final amendments to the electoral law to be adopted. There will also be financial impact from the COVID-19 since the NIEC depends on donors and the Federal Government for budget.

The NIEC has the mandate to set the date for the elections at least 180 days before the voting date in line with the electoral law. This requires that the NIEC should make the committee report to Parliament on 27 May 2020. Considering the uncertainty, the NIEC was reviewing its planning to ensure that the historic one-person-one-vote take place safely.

- **Ethiopia**: *Mrs Soliyana Shimelis*, Communication Advisor, National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE)

Ethiopia had planned to conduct election on 29 August but had to suspend all the electoral operations by the NEBE due to the COVID-19. According to the NEBE this happened at a time when materials had been bought and plans were in place to start voter registration. Once government imposed restrictions, it was no longer feasible to continue to training for personnel who were to assist with voter registration. The main challenge at the time was uncertainty with regard to timelines particularly with regard to how long the COVID-19 was going to last, the impact on public finances, among others. The delays meant that the NEBE is still incurring cost in relation to warehouse expenses and so state and donors will have to provide more funding when the time comes to resume electoral activities. From the political perspective, the constitution of Ethiopia requires that elections should be conducted every 5 years and the government replaced. However, there are no legal openings in the constitutions that addresses the questions of what would happen if elections could not be held given that this is the first time Ethiopia could not meet the constitutional requirement or holding elections on time.
While waiting for the time when it would be conducive for the NEBE to resume electoral activities, the NEBE has built different scenarios that could be done with different timelines to the public and government institutions. The Board is also planning to integrate health protocols into its activities and introduce technology into certain aspects of its work.

- **Tanzania : Justice Mbarouk S. Mbarouk**, Vice-Chairperson, **National Electoral Commission (NEC)**

The NEC outlined a number of steps that have been take in view of the COVID-19 to reduce the risk of infections. First, the NEC held consultation with health authorities to get a better understanding of the problem and the measures that have to be taken during the voter registration process. Second, consultations were also held with political parties to inform them of the measure that have been taken to ensure that the process goes on with minimum risks. Third, the NEC included in its procurement health material that were needed to protect its staff and citizens during the voter registration period. These materials included masks, gloves, sanitizers and handwashing facilities all of which were distributed in registration centres to registration clerks and those who went to register. Instructions were included in the training of the registration clerks to ensure that there are few people at the centres at each point in time and other health protocols were observed. In addition, public education was carried out to assure the public of the efforts that measures had been made to ensure their safety. Currently preparations are ongoing for the general election on 4 October 2020 and the NEC will learn from the experiences of the voters’ registration in preparation for the elections to ensure that all the necessary measures are put in place to against the COVID-19.

- **Mr. Mabrouk Jabu**, Vice-Chairperson, **Zanzibar Electoral Commission (ZEC)**

The virtual meeting had provided the opportunity for the ZEC to receive ideas on how to conduct elections scheduled for October this year since some the challenges they anticipated have been raised by other participants and solutions provided. On the COVID-19, the infection started at the end of March 2020. With 134 cases recorded, 6 deaths and only 19 admitted still on admission the ZEC had hopes that maybe by October elections could be held without any cases. For the October elections, the ZEC will take the following measures: meeting with all stakeholders and health experts to discuss measures to be put in place to protect voters; put in place protection measure for voters in polling centres such as availability of health material; ensure that political campaigns follow health guidelines; reduction of the number of people to allowed in polling stations, counting and tallying centres at a time. For ZEC, operational challenges would include increase in the elections budget and budget shortfall. In addition electoral
materials to be procured from abroad could affect procurement plans if the COVID-19 continues and also some voters may also like to stay at home for fear for catching the virus.

**Southern Africa**

- **Malawi:**  **Mr Sammy Alfandika,** Chief Electoral Officer, Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC)

Malawi is organising fresh presidential elections after the nullification of the 2019 presidential election by the constitutional court on 3 February 2020 and was also confirmed by the Supreme Court on 8 May 2020. At the time of the ruling the COVID-19 was not a threat in most part of Africa and Malawi so that order was that fresh elections be held in 150 days. When the pandemic begun, the MEC approach to Court to vary to 150 days within which elections were to be held but this did not work. The Supreme Court has ordered that the elections be held within the 150 days imposed by the lower court although Malawi has 101 cases of the COVID-19, 4 death and 60 active case and 36 recovered. To hold elections within the context of COVID-19, the MEC has put the following measures in place to ensure that the live of voters and staff of MEC are not at risk: procurement of protective materials including hand sanitizers, liquid soup; observation of all health protocols at each stage of the electoral process; suspension of all crowd poling activities such civic education and road shows; and ensure that we do not gather more than 100 people as the government has prescribed. Other measures include the use of radio, TV and print media to reach out to voters. The campaign period had experienced breaches in terms of measures to contain the COVID-19 because political parties had flouted the rules and therefore the COVID-19- team had to discuss with political parties to ensure that they observed the measures in place.

In term of challenges, the MEC mentioned human and financial resources: funds from partners were not forth coming and also competing use of Police who are needed to enforce COVID-19 measures and at the same time support electoral activities. Other challenges include travel restrictions and lack of flights to deliver materials.

- **Seychelles:**  **Mr Danny Lucas,** Chairperson, Electoral Commission of Seychelles (ECS)

The ECS will follow all health guidelines provided the committee set up by the Public Health Commission as election date approach during the last quarter of the year. Among the measures to be taken by the ECS are: social distancing, vigilance and
hygiene; setting up screening points; installing washing facilities at the school premises where voting will take place; distribution of hand sanitizers, masks and gloves to voters on Election Day; actual physical demarcation will be in place to ensure that voters are able to observe social distancing; and rapid processing of voters by making available additional voting booths.

In view of the COVID-19, the ECS will carry out voter education using media platforms focusing on social distance. There is existing valid register and the processing additional registration for new voters has begun. The Commission will also use website applications and SMS for voters to check their status.

In terms of impact on the legal framework for elections, there are no laws to allow for postponement or cancellation of elections. This is an issue that will be discussed with political parties. An additional challenges is how to source election material given that most countries have COVID-19 restrictions and official who even manage to travel to procure materials will have to be quarantine at their destinations and also on their return back to Seychelles.

Central Africa

• Central African Republic: Julius Rufin Gouadé Baba, Spokesperson and Rapporteur, Autorité Nationale des Élections (ANE)

The Central African Republic is still a post conflict country. In 2016, an elections were held to end the conflict. The constitution of the country provides a five-year mandate renewable once. The constitution is also clear that under no circumstance should the mandate of the president be extended. Base on the constitution, an electoral calendar has been developed by the ANE for the first round of elections on 27 of December 2020. However there is an ongoing debate that the elections cannot be held as planned under the COVID-19 situation.

To address the challenges posed by the COVID-19, the ANE has developed measures in addition to those of the government. The measures include: the recruitment of staff dedicated specifically to COVID-19 issues. That means there will be four personnel at voter registration centres there instead of three. This has added additional cost to ANE budget but additional resources will be mobilizes to be able to keep pace with preparations in order to comply with the constitutional deadline.

There are ongoing attempts to introduce a bill for the president to remain in office in case there is a force majeure. The debate on the issue is characterised by partisan
interest. For the ANE, preparations are ongoing and a number of lessons has been learned from the meeting that can be taken into account.

• Chad: Mr. Mahamat Ahmat Choukou, 2nd Vice-President, Commission Electorale Nationale Indépendante (CENI)

Boundary demarcation has already been carried out as required by the CENI under a new law. Also before the 2016 presidential elections, a new biometric voter register was developed and now has to be revised. There are discussions between the CENI and political parties to prepare for the revision of the voters register and hold election on 13 December 2020. However the COVID-19 has had impact on preparations which poses challenges for operations. The CENI will therefore adopt measures available at the national and international levels in its activities to avoid the spread of the virus. In addition, the CENI will consider adding a health support staff to support polling station activities at an additional cost. The CENI is hopeful that in spite of the COVID-19 the registration and campaigns will not be affected and deadline for the election will have to be followed.

North Africa:

• Egypt: Mr Lashin Ibrahim, Chairperson, National Elections Authority (NEA)

All precaution measures at being taken by the NEA to protect all those involve in the elections. This include the provision of materials such as sanitizers and fumigation of all voting centres, social distancing in all polling stations, commissioners ensuring social distance, wearing of mask and grows by all including observers and media. All campaigns have to take place on media platforms. The NEA will increase polling stations and reduce the number people in polling station at a time. Voters and officials will still have to sign attendance sheets and voters also need to be verified. Health officials will be consulted on the use of ink to ensure that they are not sources of infection. The media will be used on voter education and results of elections published.

- Key issues:
  - Most EMBs have obligation to hold election in line with national constitutions. Most national constitutions do not anticipate alternative to not holding elections.
A number of EMBs are working with national institutions to implement comprehensive measures to ensure that each stage of their electoral process is protected from risk of infections from the COVID-19.

Most EMBs have taken steps to include in the procurement PPEs and other materials in their budget. Some of the materials will be distributed for free to voters.

Special measures will be taken into account on Election Day to avoid overcrowding by increasing the number of polling booths or extending voting hours.

Most EMBs have taken steps to introduce some level technology to enhance online process to reduce face to face process that can help reduce possible risk of infections.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

(a) Concluding Remarks

In her closing remarks the Commissioner for Political Affairs thanked all participants and urge EMBs to share with the DPA their electoral timelines enable the Commission assist them. She raised issues such as respecting constitutional deadlines and risking the life of citizen. She stated that what has become clear from the meeting was that the holding or postponing of elections in such crisis situation should be based on consultations to consensus.

It is also important from the meeting that electoral calendar should be reviewed in order to hold elections. It also came out clearly that elections are sources of conflict and instability and COVID-19 comes to add to it and needs to be addressed. It is important to re-examine the economic impact of the COVID-19 in take into account in reassessing our time tables. With regard to electoral campaigns, it would be important to avoid the usual crowd gathering and find another way of organisation meeting/campaigns in a way that avoid challenges. With regard to electronic voting, the challenge will be in regard to the low level of literacy but it an issue that is worth considering. She insisted that all health measures should be followed during elections Lifting of lockdown needs to be done in a gradual manner as the CDC said. It is important to include all stakeholders and experts in doing that. It is also important to increase screening centres and include compulsory testing for those who are going to vote. Closing of bothers also
means that some vulnerable groups cannot be cared for. We need to adapt ourselves to new legal orders because of the situations. With the increasing number of infections, there is the need to increase public education because some African countries are minimising the existence of COVID-19. Therefore organising elections require that all stakeholders are taken on board to avoid the spread of the disease especially.

She concluded that this type of meetings need to continue to exchange experiences and promised that all the recommendations will be taken into account especially with respect to the guidelines on elections and COVID-19.

**Recommendations**

Participants made the following recommendation for consideration of the AU, its Member States and EMBs:

- Political parties and candidates should consider using virtual campaigns and social media platforms for their campaigns and related activities to avoid contribution to the spread of the pandemic.

- EMBs should consider distributing free masks in polling station on Election Day to encourage voter turnout.

- EMBs should increasing the number of polling centres and booths to avoid overcrowding on elections day. This will ensure that polling stations are not overcrowded and the number of time voters spend in polling stations reduced. This could include extending voting hours.

- EMBs should consider the possibility of conducting tests for both full time and ad hoc staff of EMBs, observers and technical support providers before and after the elections.

- AU Member States considering postponing their elections should engage in broad-based consultation with all electoral stakeholders to prevention political instability.

- The AU should establish a platform for continuous experience sharing for African EMBs to provide ongoing updates from countries that have held elections and serve as a peer learning opportunity for countries that are preparing for elections.

- The AU should come out with the proposed guideline on elections and pandemics as soon as possible for the benefit of countries yet to hold elections.
Virtual Peer-Learning Consultative Meeting of African EMBs on COVID-19-19 and Elections in Africa

Wednesday, 27 May 2020: 15h00-18h30 East African Time (GMT+3)

Programme

Moderator: **Dr. Khabele Matlosa**, Director of Political Affairs, African Union Commission

15:00 – 15:05 Remarks by **Mr. Wafula Chebukati**, President of the General Assembly of the Association of African Electoral Authorities (AAEA) and Chairperson, Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC), Kenya

15:05-15:15 Opening Remarks by **H.E. Ambassador Minata Samate Cessouma**, Commissioner of Political Affairs, African Union Commission

Moderator **Mr. Calixte Aristide Mbari**, Head of Democracy, Governance, Human Rights and Elections Division, Department of Political Affairs, African Union Commission


Presenter: **Mr. Guy Cyrille Tapoko**, Head of Democracy and Electoral Assistance Unit, Department of Political Affairs, African Union Commission

15:25-15:45 Plenary Discussion

15:45- 16:05 Organising elections in the context of COVID-19-19 pandemic: Experiences and Lessons learnt from elections held in Guinea and Mali

*Presenters:*

- **Mali**: **Mr Dajié Sogoba**, 1st Vice Chairperson, Commission Electorale Nationale Indépendante (CENI)
- **Guinea**: **Mr Kabinet Cisse**, Acting Chairperson, Commission Electorale Nationale Indépendante (CENI)
16:05-16:25 Plenary Discussion

Moderator Mr. Robert Gerenge, Principal Advisor to EMBs, Department of Political Affairs, African Union Commission


Presenters:

**Part II: Public health challenges posed by COVID-19-19 pandemic and guidelines for mitigating against the spread in elections context**

By: Dr. Ahmed Ogwell Ouma, Deputy Director, Africa Centres for Disease Control (Africa CDC)

**Part II: EMBs Perspectives of countries scheduled to hold elections in 2020 (political, legal, technical and operational challenges and strategies)**

**West Africa:**

- Ghana: Mrs Jean Mensa, Chairperson, Electoral Commission of Ghana (EC)
- Cote d’Ivoire: Mr Koné Sourou, Vice Chairperson, Commission Electorale Indépendante (CEI)
- Niger: Mr Issaka Souna, Chairperson, Commission Electorale Nationale Indépendante (CENI)
- Burkina Faso: Mr Newton Ahmed Barry, Chairperson, Commission Electorale Nationale Indépendante (CENI)

**Eastern Africa:**

- Somalia: Mrs Halima Ismail Ibrahim, Chairperson, National Independent Electoral Commission, (NIEC)
- Ethiopia: Ms Birtukan Mideksa, Chairperson, National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE)

Mrs Soliyana Shimelis, Communication Advisor
• Tanzania: **Hon. Justice (Rtd) Semistocles Kaijage**, Chairperson, National Electoral Commission (NEC) Justice Mbarouk S. Mbarouk
  
  **Mr. Mabrouk Jabu**, Vice-Chairperson, Zanzibar Electoral Commission (ZEC)

**Southern Africa:**

• **Malawi:** **Mr Sammy Alfandika**, Chief Electoral Officer, Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC)
• **Seychelles:** **Mr Danny Lucas**, Chairperson, Electoral Commission of Seychelles (ECS)

**Central Africa:**

• **Central African Republic:** **Julius Rufin Gouadé Baba**, Spokesperson Autorité Nationale des Élections (ANE)
• **Chad:** **Mr. Mahamat Ahmat Choukou**, 2nd Vice-President, Commission Electorale Nationale Indépendante (CENI)

**North Africa:**

• **Egypt:** **Mr Lashin Ibrahim**, Chairperson, National Elections Authority (NEA)

17:40-18.20 Plenary Discussion

18.20-18.30 Closing remarks and way forward by **H.E. Ambassador Minata Samate Cessouma**, Commissioner of Political Affairs, African Union Commission
The African Union (AU) is a continental body consisting of the 55 member states that make up the countries of the African Continent. It was officially launched in 2002 as a successor to the Organisation of African Unity (OAU, 1963-1999).