

DIRECTORATE OF INFORMATION & COMMUNICATION

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H.E. Minata Samate Cessouma briefs Permanent Representatives Committee on the impact of COVID-19 on elections

H.E. Ambassador Minata Samate Cessouma, African Union Commissioner (AUC) for Political Affairs on May 14, 2020 briefed the Permanent Representatives Committee (PRC) on the effects of COVID-19 pandemic on electoral processes in Africa and the efforts being made by the department to mitigate various concerns in relation with the political sector.

The brief centered on the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic on elections, as it could limit compliance with the provisions of our Charter of Democracy, Elections and Governance as well as the constitutionally defined electoral calendars of the Member States of the African Union.

The Commissioner said despite health risks for their populations, some countries have confirmed the holding of their elections in the coming weeks and listed May 20, 2020, for general elections in the Republic of Burundi, and July 02, 2020 for the new presidential election in Malawi, after the cancellation of the 2019 polls.

“The African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, in force since February 2012, calls on the member states of the African Union to hold regular, transparent, free, fair and peaceful elections,” she said.

The Commissioner said the briefing becomes imperative as it would provide an opportunity for the continent to ponder on the impact of COVID-19 on electoral processes, saying that several African countries are either preparing to organize elections or have already held polls during the first quarter of the year 2020.

She said all like other crises of this nature and magnitude, COVID-19 has negligible implications on the electoral agendas of our Member States.

The Commissioner explained that at least 18 presidential, legislative or general elections are scheduled to take place on the continent in 2020. This excludes Municipal or local consultations, which not numbered by the Commission but are planned in several countries on the continent.

“Since the beginning of the year, legislative elections have been held in the Union of the Comoros, and in the Republics of Cameroon, Mali and Guinea. Only the Republic of Togo organized a presidential election during this period. The Commission deployed electoral observation missions (AUEOMs) to Comoros, Cameroon and Togo. Due to COVID-19, we were unable to do same in Mali and the Republic of Guinea”, She added.

The Commissioner said that if the situation fails to improve, the Commission would not be able to deploy AUEOMs or honour the training and technical assistance commitments in the countries holding elections.

She said that the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia officially opted for the postponement of its legislative elections, noting that the decisions to hold or postpone elections were variously appreciated by the political classes of the countries concerned.

The Commissioner said that legislative and or presidential elections are planned in Tanzania, Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Chad, Central African Republic, Niger, Seychelles, Somalia and in Egypt in the last quarter of this year.

She listed the following issues as part of effects of Covid-19 pandemic on electoral processes in Africa;

- Constitutional dilemmas linked to fundamental legal provisions for term limitations on elective offices such as presidency, national assembly or local government institutions. In contexts where incumbents are completing their final terms, election postponement may engender constitutional crises.
- Should such crisis arise, at the political level, it is necessary to ensure that all decisions relating to the postponement or the holding of elections in times of health crisis comply with the constitutional provisions of the States.
- Challenges of legitimacy may arise if citizens, compelled to go to elections in a prohibitive context of public health emergency, decide to boycott the polls. This will significantly affect turn out of voters and the inclusive character of the elections.

The Commissioner said it is evident that the above-mentioned challenges have combined implications for peace and security on the continent, given the potential vulnerabilities to elections-related tensions and instabilities. It is also worth highlighting that the risks of elections-related political instability could aggravate the humanitarian and socio-economic deficits orchestrated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Furthermore, the Commissioner recommends the following to Member States:

- Considerations for rescheduling or proceeding with scheduled elections should be carried out based on the consensus of all stakeholders and in line with the constitutional framework of the country concerned. It is important to carefully assess the COVID-19 threats in order to better prioritise interventions towards safeguarding public health while allowing for better election preparedness and the preservation of the participatory and inclusive hallmarks of democratic elections.
- In cases where elections must hold as scheduled, it is essential undertake commensurate preventive measures. For example, the holding of electoral campaigns only through the media, including community radios, without face-to-face or group meetings. Such campaigns could also be done with vehicles equipped with megaphones.

The Commissioner encourage African countries that decide to hold elections in the current context, to observe the preventive measures enacted by the WHO and Africa CDC which include Social distancing between voters and at polling stations, compulsory wearing of protective masks for electoral agents and voters, disinfecting the polling centres and stations before and after the vote among others.

Commissioner Minata said the Department of Political Affairs plans to organize a virtual consultative meeting of African election management bodies at the end of May 2020, to reflect, exchange experiences and explore strategies for organizing or postponing elections in such contexts.

She explained that the Commission, in collaboration with the PRC Sub-Committee on Human Rights, Democracy and Governance and partners, is working to develop guidelines for the benefit of member states that hold elections in public health emergencies such as COVID-19 and natural disasters.

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