How to strengthen political transitions towards democratic governance in Africa?

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Concept note

1. Contextual background

The richness of African history and culture, its vigor, innovation, and youth all continue to grow continental achievements and cement its importance in the global community. At the same time, internal and global challenges abound with resulting political instability affecting too many African states. Politically, elected officials often fall short in fulfilling their sovereign mission of transforming the needs of the population into concrete political action. Economically, the indicators in terms of development and well-being are weakened by the instabilities of the last decade.

High levels of conflict and violence, exploitation of governance gaps and fragile institutions, exploitation of financial systems, and capture of long-standing local conflict by ideological groups are posing an unprecedented threat across the continent.

With the credibility of state institutions called into question and the social contract undermined fragilities across the political, economic and security spheres are exacerbated. In the resulting crisis, constitutional manipulation or military seizure of power can take the place of transparent democratic processes. The resulting political transition phase is characterized by an intermediate period between two regimes, but is the democratic process diverted for all that? It appears that, in many contexts, political power is *de facto* de-institutionalized to the benefit of the transition phase.

In assessing these events, is the international community able to confront both the immediate crisis being faced and the aspiration or commitment to democratic governance? That the rapid development of violent extremism is further complicating states paths to peaceful democracy cannot be overstated. The international community as a whole is struggling to find integrated solutions to these challenges or to acknowledge the resources required to combat the threat.

When Western-centric assessments result in a categorical condemnation, neglecting the causes and the frustration of political impasse, they may limit the response to superficial or checkbox results rather than allowing the more fundamental system changes that are required. Analyzing the causes and possible solutions to the political crises that led to the breakdown of the democratic process creates spaces for reflection and makes it possible to

formulate recommendations, without endorsing the taking of power by force. While electoral processes and the capacity building of institutions are undeniably important, they become ineffective if complexities in power and political transition are not adequately confronted.

The institutional response should exceed personal cleavages, clans, and lobbies and requires ethical clarity: alternation in the governance of public affairs (res publica) means respect for the people rather than "a debacle" for the losers.

The challenge today is to contribute to efforts to strengthen peace and stability across the continent in the long term. This reflects Togo's renewed expression of determination to continue to play a leading role in the service of peace in Africa, not only by providing its peaceful framework for major regional and international peace conferences but also by putting its know-how at the service of peace on the continent. The recent consecration of Lomé as the "capital of peace, mediation, dialogue, and tolerance" is illustrative of this. Thus, the organization of Lomé Forum aims to develop a new prism for reading the African context by actors from the continent at all levels of governance.

The Lomé Forum is unique in its focus on Africa, its multilateral format, and its emphasis on dialogue, democratic transition, mediation, innovation, and youth engagement. These features will help to make it an important forum for shaping the African discourse on democratic transition, conflicts, and political-security dialogue. Ultimately, political transitions to democratic governance in Africa must be guided by a commitment to promoting the well-being of African citizens and ensuring that they can live in peace, prosperity, and security. This requires a sustained and coordinated effort by African governments, international organizations, civil society groups, and other stakeholders to address the complex challenges facing the continent.

This concept note describes the objectives, expected outcomes, and guidelines that will guide the work of the Forum and presents the panels envisaged as well as the different phases of the process.

2. Objectives

2.1 Overall Objective

It is envisioned that the forum serves as a lasting platform to formulate realistic recommendations going beyond formal facades and to provide a space to undertake dialogue and mediation processes.
The overall objective of the forum's inaugural edition is to engage in a common reflection on the challenge of strengthening the political transition towards democratic governance in the face of complexity at the national and continental levels.

2.2 Specific objectives

More specifically, this forum will aim to:
- Identify and analyze the rationale for a political transition
- Strengthen understanding of the effects and consequences of democratic governance deficits in Africa
- Identify bold and feasible solutions to strengthen democratic governance.

3. Expected outcomes

Sharing knowledge, perspectives, concerns, experiences, and ideas on the specifics of the democratic governance deficit will foster a more nuanced assessment and help participants come up with original proposals. The expected results include:

- A space created for open and true dialogue on the challenges faced in the African context.
- Harnessed creativity and innovation inherent within the continent for proposing models and solutions tailored to local challenges.
- A platform to articulate support requirements of transitioning states to the international community.
- Participants sensitized to democratic governance and share analysis on political transitions in Africa.
- A permanent platform to develop proposals with concrete and realistic actions and to host dialogue and mediation.

4. Thematic overview

4.1 African democracies at half mast

As evidenced by the structural tensions and socio-political crises that threaten stability and development across Africa, democratic governance in the continent has suffered a qualitative regression in recent years.

Africa's entry on the path to democracy, motivated by both national and international events, had raised hopes that violence in social relations and the unconstitutional accession to power would become a thing of the past. In addition, the remarkable convergence of most African governmental systems in favor of representative democracy suggested that the continent had irreversibly joined the democratic family. There is not one African country that does not claim to be democratic. It has become increasingly evident that democracies are susceptible to reversible evolution, if not regressive changes, to the dismay of their most enthusiastic advocates. The recent surge in coups, for example, indicates the ineffectiveness of current approaches to the management of democracy and an unfortunate return to the use of force over dialogue in political competitions, the renewal of the ruling elites, and the resolution of social problems.

Government responses to citizens' expressions of dissatisfaction with poor economic and political governance, corruption, impunity of officials, abuse of power, and human rights violations are increasingly insufficient and often simply unsuitable. The advent of democratically elected leaders has not changed the policies of predation, clientelism, and corruption. While populations have expected and demanded a more equitable distribution of national wealth, too often governments have proven unable to meet these demands.

The policies pursued by African leaders are out of step with the living conditions of a large proportion of the population. This is the case economically, where day-to-day problems are hard to overcome, and socially, where there are few prospects, particularly for young people.

The emergence of violent extremism in this already complex environment has placed further pressure on both communities and governments. Safety needs are real and immediate. Terrorist groups have developed sophisticated

approaches in the recruitment, operations, resource mobilization and power accrual that are easily transferable and cross borders with ease. The agendas of such groups represent the smallest of minorities but are amplified to dominate daily discourse. To balance the immediacy of action with the longer-term programs remains challenging and will require that security is not dealt with simply at the technical level but is assessed within political realities.

Implementation of ambitious programs of economic growth and structural reforms under the overly technocratic impetus of donors underestimates the latent resilience of the population and the protest phenomenon that prevails over a democracy in Africa now at half-mast.

4.2 Political transition: an opportunity to seize for sustainable governance

In times of crisis, there is often an opportunity for the enhancement of democracy and the improvement of conditions to enable the future governance of the affected countries. These objectives can only be achieved if the ensuing political transition gives itself the time and the means to create the conditions to achieve them.

Analysts agree that it is imperative to adopt political and administrative institutions capable of fostering consensual governance of state affairs and more effective oversight of public action. This must consider local history and cultures since democracy, in its genesis, is not an exportable dogma. It is important to take these factors into account in order to find the right balance between universal democratic ideals and local realities to promote sustainable democratic development.

The political transition must be an opportunity for Africa to change the paradigm away from elite democracies to accessible and liberal democracies.

4.3 International Community: a handicap for African political transitions?

In confronting a democratic crisis, the reflex of the international community is to condemn and exert pressure for the rapid organization of democratic elections. From an international point of view, this electoral process meets the democratic requirement and aims to prevent unelected leaders from gaining and remaining in power. This leads too often to a botched election, where transition must actually lay the foundations for reconstruction, peace, and reconciliation.

The political management of the transition is also becoming an issue of power and influence for the foreign actors involved, with support for the transition are too often the object of institutional rivalry, be it multilateral or bilateral. The proliferation of international actors leads to a lack of clarity of international purpose, often blurring initial intervention intent. Attempts at international coordination remain superficial and a significant obstacle for states managing transitions. Discussions on the democratization process of political transition should inevitably focus on actions to be taken in the region so that the challenges of development are treated as an integral part of the democratic project and that the well-being of the citizens is at the center of development policy.

The international community is moving towards an excessively controlling and narrow approach that seems to deny the possibility for countries to propose credible alternative solutions for the management of political transitions. The reliance on external technical models simplifies the work of international functionaries but fails to adapt to individual realities. Willing to control everything from a center, this community ends up denying the exception of societies capable of transforming themselves. The ever-changing geopolitical balances determine the pace of global economic growth, while a large part of the African continent remains underdeveloped and overexploited. Moreover, Africa is marginalized from the heart of decision-making. Sub-regional organizations and international institutions should provide guidance, not obstacles to ambitious and bold reforms. Certainly, any seizure of power by force is regrettable. Nevertheless, the international community must be able to distill which aspects may be the will of the people and support bottom-up change. Condemnation and sanctions on their own have limited impact.

4.4 A consensual political transition

Political transitions must embrace the opportunity of democratization and improve the conditions that guide the future governance of the country concerned. Analysts consider it imperative to adopt political and administrative institutions capable of promoting consensual governance of state affairs and promoting more effective control of public action. This process requires the inclusive participation of all the driving forces of the nation. The alternation between unconstitutional accession to power and democratization therefore invites us to reflect not only on the elements of rupture, but also on the

continuity of medium- or long-term political dynamics. More specifically, the reflections will focus on factors of fragility in African state institutions and how to overcome them, as well as the role of multilaterals, political and security realities inhibiting transitions, and the possibility of proposing African solutions to African problems.

5. Conduct of the Forum

The working sessions will take the form of five moderated panels with a facilitator and an average of five speakers per panel, depending on the theme. Each panel will be followed by a discussion open to all participants. A restitution in the form of a final document will then be prepared by the organizers of the Forum.

The panels, five in total, will address the following themes:

1. Factors of fragility of state institutions in Africa
2. Political and security challenges inhibiting the political transition to democratic governance
3. Building strong institutions and the rule of law in Africa
4. International and sub-regional organizations: what role should they play in supporting political transitions?
5. African solutions: mobilizing continental innovation and agility

6. Participants

The objective of the forum is to ensure multilevel participation that brings together:
high-level government officials, representatives of government (executive, legislative, national, provincial, and local administration), policy practitioners, political parties, civil society, the international community, and the media, as well as leading personalities from business and industry, academia, and professional organizations.