

Elections in Africa and China's Position: African Opinion

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Introduction

Almost half of African conflicts are the direct result of disputed claims over legitimacy of the elections, including leaders staying in power past a designated two-term limit. A successful election can calm a nation (Namibia, 2015), whereas a disputed election can tear it apart (Burundi, 2015, Côte d'Ivoire, 2010, Kenya, 2008) and sometimes cause armed struggle. In 2016, there was unrest in Kenya caused by the elections, where opposition called for electoral commission reforms, demonstrations and a violent reaction from security forces took place; in the Republic of the Congo, where election led to violent protests; in Gabon, where bloody clashes erupted after President Ali Bongo claimed a widely disputed re-election victory. In Ghana, pre-election anxieties put questions about the electoral commission's revision (Afrobarometer, 2019: 35).

Many citizens in African countries say elections are not working well as mechanisms to ensure that people's views are represented and that voters can hold non-performing leaders accountable. Nevertheless, we must admit, that few African countries have achieved improvement in the perceived performance of elections over the past decade.

Level of Trust in Elections in the Continent

Unfortunately people in the countries with upcoming elections, or who have had elections recently, express some of the lowest levels of trust to their results. Such a conclusion was made by Peter Penar, a researcher and lecturer in political science at Michigan State University, on the results of a survey, based on Afrobarometer, an African-led research network, interviews with between 1,200 and 2,400 people in 36 countries (Morlin-Yron, 2016). On average just half (50 %) of respondents say they trust their electoral commission, "somewhat" (25 %) or "a lot" (25 %). Some of the lowest levels of trust are expressed in countries with closely contested elections in 2016 including Gabon (25 %), São Tomé and Príncipe (31 %), and Ghana (37 %). Two thirds of Africans rate their most recent elections as "*completely free and fair*" (41 %) or "*free and fair, but with minor problems*" (24 %). But substantial proportions of the population are skeptical about the quality of their elections. More than four in 10 Africans say that voters are at least "*sometimes*" threatened with violence at the polls (4 %); that opposition parties and candidates are at least "*sometimes*" prevented from running (43 %); that the news media "*never*" or only "*sometimes*" provides fair coverage of all candidates (43 %); and that voters are "*often*" or "*always*" bribed (43 %). Only one third (34 %) of Africans think that votes are "*always*" counted fairly. Several countries with a history of

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election-related violence express low levels of confidence in the vote count, including Kenya (26 %), Zimbabwe (22 %), and Nigeria (6 %). Almost half of Africans say that elections do not work well as mechanisms to ensure that people's views are represented (50 %) or that voters are able to remove non-performing leaders from office (51 %). Countries with the highest levels of dissatisfaction with the representation and accountability performance of elections include Gabon, Morocco, Sudan, Nigeria, Swaziland, and Madagascar (Penar *et al.*, 2016). If a successful election can calm and focus a nation (e.g. Namibia 2015), a disputed election can tear it apart (e.g. Burundi 2015, Côte d'Ivoire 2010, Kenya 2008) and sometimes becomes the reason of violence. In at least 25 African countries conducting national elections in 2016-2017, great attention is focused on electoral management bodies – national electoral commissions – as crucial players in electoral processes and in shaping public perceptions of how well democracy is working. Poor electoral management can enable election fraud and produce public mistrust, protest, and violence.

Citizens' views on election quality are generally consistent. Gabon, where President Ali Bongo claimed reelection, the opposition leader Jean Ping lost by less than 6,000 votes. The country has witnessed post electoral protests, unrest, and bloody clashes. 51 % of citizens have no trust in their election commission, and 25 % say they trust them somewhat. There were unrests in Kenya in 2016, where opposition called for electoral commission reforms. People have sparked demonstrations, accompanied by a violent reaction from security forces. Election malpractices led to violent protests in the Republic of the Congo and in Ghana, where pre-election anxieties brought up question about the electoral commission's revision the voter roll (Penar *et al.*, 2016). *"Those are all very alarming numbers and, it shows an extreme lack of confidence,"* – "Afrobarometer" considers (Morin-Yron, 2016). The researchers have identified a number of key factors contributing to the lack of trust. A history of vote manipulation entrenched in people's memories, lack of transparency of election monitoring bodies and corruption all influence people's trust in the system and many are afraid when casting their vote, the researchers found.

But the counting of votes worries people the most. 38 % of Africans believe votes are only sometimes, or even never counted. Vote counts can be tampered with in many ways, according to Penar. *"This happens at the polling stations. Stuffing ballots, double voting, multiple voting."* Methods for swaying voters may also include threats, actual violence and bribery. Bribery is commonplace in some countries. The bribes may range from giving a little money at the polling stations to being offered seeds or medicines during campaigns. The practice is illegal, and so rather than asking people whether they have accepted bribes, researchers posed the indirect question of how often people in the country face bribery around election time. On average, 43 % of Africans said people are often or always bribed, with nearly 70 % saying voters were bribed at least sometimes. In Mali, 78 % of people said voters were often or always bribed, and in Senegal the figure was 68 %.

Voter intimidation is also a key, the researchers found, with 44 % of those surveyed saying they are sometimes, often or always threatened with violence when voting. *'This makes people afraid of going to the polls'*- experts consider. They called seven African countries, where people are most afraid during elections: Uganda, Gabon, Kenya, Liberia, Egypt, Cote d'Ivoire, Nigeria and seven African countries where people are least afraid during elections: Niger, Cape Verde, Madagascar, Mauritius, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Botswana.

In Africa, the "Afrobarometer" study showed that an average 54 % across the 36 countries believe, that votes are often or always counted fairly in their country.

In Namibia, a new system appears to have boosted voters' trust. *"Namibia has invested in an electronic voting system. Interestingly one of the best countries in terms of trust in their election commission is Namibia, at 74 %"*, Penar says. But while new digital tools can make

it harder to tamper with votes, they can also create problems as they require electricity and technical know-how at the polling stations, something not to be taken for granted in rural areas. While election processes are improving by storing and counting votes digitally, issues with corruption remain (Morin-Yron, 2016).

Africa's Elections of 2019

Africa is the host of two dozen national elections in 2019. Africa's first presidential election of this year in Nigeria on 23 February was very important, because the continent's most populous country with the largest economy and the oil producer selected its leader for the next four years. Buhari won elections in 2015 having promised to put the end to Boko Haram insurgency. While the number of attacks and fatalities linked to Boko Haram has declined since a peak in 2015, Boko Haram, the Islamic State of West Africa (ISWA), remains active in the northeast of the country. In 2018, this organization was associated with 483 violent events and 2,297 deaths in the country, contributing to the internal displacement of nearly 2 million Nigerians. In addition to the militant Islamist group threat in the north, Nigeria is facing security challenges involving growing farmer-herder violence, separatist tensions in the southeast, unresolved grievances in the oil-rich Niger Delta region, and growing criminal violence. The 2015 elections facilitated Nigeria's first democratic transfer of presidential power between candidates of opposing political parties. This progress has been greatly facilitated by the active participation of civil society groups assisting with voter registration (Siegle, 2019). Significant improvements have been realized since the 2011 polls when an estimated 800 Nigerians died in post-election-related violence. The 2019 elections demonstrated progress that has been made. The electoral process was fair and transparent. The new president must sustain alternative approaches in the hotspots where government presence is often lacking and trust in the security services is low.

Another important event for the continent was the South Africa's general and parliament elections on May 8 2019, where voters made their choice between political parties instead of voting for one candidate. In terms of the South African political system, this means that the winning party appoints the President of the country and seats in Parliament are distributed pro rata to the amount of support given to a party in the national election. South Africa is one of Africa's leading economies, so the elections in this country have influence for the rest of the continent. Because of the important role of the South African elections African Union Commission (AUC) has created a short-term African Union Election Observation Mission (AUEOM) for the National and Provision elections in South Africa. Mission comprised a core team of four electoral experts, technical support staff from the AUC and 30 short-term observers (STOs) from various African Union (AU) member states and institutions on the continent. The former President of Tanzania Jakaya Kikwete, was appointed the head of AUEOM. The core team and AUC staff arrived in South Africa on 29 April 2019 and remained until the announcement of final results of the elections. These people were responsible for analyzing all aspects of the electoral process to ensure that they were conducted in accordance with international standards for democratic elections. The AUEOM participation in South African elections demonstrates the African Union aspiration to support transparent electoral process in its member states in accordance with Aspiration N.º 3 of the AU Agenda 2063, aims at good governance, democracy, and respect for human rights, justice and the rule of law in Africa. The conduct of free, fair and credible elections is also widely recognized as being critical to ensuring an integrated, peaceful and prosperous African continent (African Union deploys an Election Observation Mission, 2019).

The pre-election process and the 2019 elections have become the most keenly contested since the end of the apartheid era in 1994. In 1994, the National Party under the pressure from national activists and the international community, held the elections, where the victory was gained by Nelson Mandela's party, the African National Congress (ANC) with 64 % of the vote. In 2019 the three leading parties competed in the elections: the African National Congress (ANC), the Democratic Alliance (DA), and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). Nobody doubted that the ANC would win the 2019 elections in South Africa, despite its public support has declined in the last years in connection with corruption scandals within the party. Corruption flourished during the rule of President Jacob Zuma, the ANC member, who was removed from office before the end of his term in connection with the corruption scandal. He was succeeded by Cyril Ramaphosa, acting President, a close ally of Nelson Mandela. The Democratic Alliance is the main election opponent of the ANC. DA, the "white party", as people call it, was established in 2000, as an opposition to the ANC. It holds a majority in some municipal districts. So the ANC wins, however, it lost in number of the National Assembly seats, in comparison to the result of previous elections. Besides the corruption scandals, South Africa has great problems with energy supply, which also do not improve the rating of the ruling party. The difficulties arise from the fact that the state energy monopoly enterprise ESCOM (Electricity Supply Commission), which provides electricity to 95 % of the country's consumers, faced an unprecedented corruption scheme and has to introduce load-shedding operation mode (scheduled power cuts) even in major cities, such as Cape Town, which affects all sectors of consumers, from households to mining giants. The voters believe that the responsibility for the national socioeconomic problems falls on the ruling party. Over the many years passed after the end of apartheid era, people tend to forget about the heroism of fighters against the ruling racial regime and it also contributes to the ANC losing support of its voters (Malkevich, 2019).

Among the African countries which prepare to elections in October 2019 is Tunis, the country, which went through the "Arab Spring" and the risk of political violence here has not fully receded. So the 2019 elections, therefore, is an important test in the consolidation of non-violent norms to resolve political differences in Tunisia. This country still faces security risks of returning ISIS fighters from Iraq and Syria. It is estimated that some 7,000-8,000 Tunisians joined ISIS in 2014-2015. There is danger, that these fighters would return and provoke instability. Militant Islamist groups are remaining limited in recent years. In 2018, there were 36 such episodes and even fewer fatalities than in 2015, when ISIS attacks at a resort in Sousse and the Bardo Museum contributed to 154 fatalities related to extremist violence in Tunisia that year (Siegle, 2019).

The Foreign Interference in Voting Process in Africa

The very important problem, connected with elections in Africa, is interference of external forces into voting process. There are many cases of support any candidates and parties by the West countries. The former Chinese Special envoy to the Middle East Wu Sike accused the Western countries, that the revolutions that confused the Arab world from the late 2010 had been used by them to push their agenda. "The West is to blame for the refugee crisis confronting Europe after it interfered in the affairs of Middle Eastern countries to try and push its own values, such as democracy, but only caused chaos", – a former senior Chinese diplomat has said (Former China diplomat, 2015).

The USA keep on building its influence at the continent, a strategy implemented through spreading propaganda, even by using radical propaganda tools in some cases. At the

same time, the US actively promotes its globalization concept. However, this approach does not find much response among the local population. The US yet apply their political technology tools and experience in this area to brainwash the population – primarily, through the propaganda content disseminated among young people via the Internet. They apply a traditional technique of spreading “fake news”, when the political score is increased by smearing the rivals.

For example the US strengthens its influence in the country and brings “democracy” to South Africa through a network of non-profit organizations and the experts in political quarters. These forces implement their political projects disguised as humanitarian activities – the fight against AIDS or campaigns for women’s rights. Such networks of influence as USAID, Soros Foundation, etc., are also involved in this process. American advisers are nested in the South African ministries: de facto they drive the country into the debt pit of the American financial system. Some experts tell, that party Democratic Alliance cooperates closely with the US Democratic Party. The DA leader Mmusi Maimane is nicknamed “Obama from Soweto” (Soweto is South Western Township, the area of Bantu compact settlement). Another fact to be considered is that ever since election of George Bush, the DA has been supported by billionaire George Soros, Tom Steyer, and other donors, spreading the American “democracy” across the globe, including Africa (Malkevich, 2019).

The US convinced in their right to interfere in the affairs of sovereign states, but they act in their own interests only. Measures aimed at destabilizing other states are implemented by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). Since its establishment, the NED has been generating opposition and dissenting movements around the world. For instance, in 2011, the Wikileaks portal linked the NED activities with protests in a number of countries (the Arab Spring), including the state coup in Libya and the civil war in Syria. De facto, the NED openly intervenes in the affairs of other states using financial means from various sources. Even more concerns arise from the fact that the Americans themselves seem to have no clue about whom they are financing. Aided by their contracting agents, for instance, South African USAID (which the NED is subordinated to), hiding behind various programs for the “development” of democracy, Americans work with the population, as well as with civil and political groups, exerting direct influence – on them. They lure people into their “team” and vanish after receiving information. The US make no secret of their interventions, brings experts even more causes for concern. Moreover, the US demonstrates in every possible way that they may do that.

It has long been stated by many experts that the interference in the affairs of sovereign states, including elections, has become a US tradition. This usually happens in those countries, where politics is either disturbing for Americans or just does not meet their interests (Malkevich, 2019).

Beijing Model, Washington Consensus and Elections in Africa

As for China, its leadership constantly repeat, that the fundamental Chinese foreign policy principle is non-interference in internal affairs of other states. Critics assert that China is embarking on neo-colonialism in Africa, while others claim the PRC often turns a blind-eye on dictators on the continent – mainly looking for economic gains. In response, the Chinese insists they have increase the ‘bargaining chip’ for African countries to negotiate any trade deal with Western nations, will continue to show mutual respect for the continent and will not yield to pressure from the West over its cooperation with Africa. As Mr. Dai Bing, Deputy Director General for African Affairs at the Ministry of

Foreign Affairs told journalist in Beijing that China and Africa friendship “*has come a far long way and there will be no political string attached*” to giving aid to countries on the continent. As Mr. Dai said, *China is not looking to replicate its one party style of governance in Africa*, adding that the main principle of bilateral relationship with African countries is “*non-interference with the country’s politics*”. China sincerely supports the development of Africa, and will not interfere in African domestic affairs. “*We will not impose our will to others and have no political terms in (to) our assistance*” (Senkpeni, 2017).

Since the holding of the China-Africa Forum in December 2015, trade, investments, and bilateral cooperation between China and Africa have made significant inroads as the Asian nation – now the world’s second largest economy – continue to show interest in accelerating the cooperation. Ten plans, nominated by this Forum, are fulfilled. On the next China-Africa Forum in Beijing in 2018, China proclaimed new plan of eight items which must come with African countries prioritizing important goals based on the African Union’s Agenda 2063. This plan fulfillment will help the continent get over the development period and solve people’s everyday life problem. Besides economic and trade success, politics is a key factor to sustaining China-Africa relations. China has called for stability in policies like tax incentives for investors, security and skilled manpower in African countries – and experts say only political stability can achieve the aforementioned. West African countries like Sierra Leone and Liberia prepare for general and presidential elections. The positive comment came from Beijing on these events. Since re-establishing diplomatic ties with PRC Liberia under the leadership of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, has benefited millions dollars from China in aid. China is also including peace keeping forces into UN and African Union peacekeeping operations in Africa and renders health care support; significant amongst them – support during the Ebola outbreak. Bilateral relations in recent years between the Asian economic superpower and the West African nation have also seen projects worth millions too. The latest being the agreement to modernize the country’s main international airport and the construction of a US\$50 million ministerial complex in Monrovia. Concerns about China’s support for a definite candidate in Liberia’s elections have linger especially as Sirleaf’s Vice President Joseph Boakai has tossed his hat in the race for the presidency, but China reechoing its stance allays fears over the election’s result consequently derailing the existing friendship (Senkpeni, 2017).

Chinese position in question of African elections and their future political systems is supported by Africans. Simplice F. Asongu argues, that in Africa the “*Beijing Model*” outdoes the “*Washington Consensus*”. She says, political stability and economic growth have priority, while democratic values “*can wait*,” because most Africans believe that “*food, shelter, health, and good sanitation*” are more important than “*the right to vote*.” They make a choice Chinese model instead of Washington Consensus. The Beijing Model is known for its non-interference in foreign policy. The model advocates “*strong economic and political leadership, which is essential to growth and stability*.” The model championed by the West places a premium on human rights and democracy, while the one advocated by China is more concerned with political stability and economic growth. The principles China favors – like political stability, trade, and counterterrorism – than human rights. Africa’s policymakers also consider that strong economic and political leadership is essential to growth and stability. The fastest way to build a strong middle class in Africa would be to move toward the hierarchy of principles that China’s model promotes (Asongu, 2018).

He Wenping, a Chinese scholar from Charhar Institute compared USA and US president Donald Trump’s reaction on Africa which surprised the African countries with China’s

one. The most typical was the reaction of Nigerian Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka, who angrily said in a speech at Oxford University that if Trump won the election he would cut up his green card and start packing up to leave the country. African intelligentsia felt itself disappointed because of Trump's words on Africa – and more importantly of a concern that Trump's 'America first' stress and trade protectionism will further marginalize Africa in the foreign and economic policies of the US. Trump attempts to conceal his very negative views on Africa and Africans.

“Although we don't know yet whether real estate developer Trump's comment on Africa will be a basis for President Trump's Africa policy, it may be anticipated that changes in American fiscal, economic and diplomatic policies when Trump is in the White House is likely to bring about harm rather than blessing to Africa. Assistance to Africa may well be cut, which will affect countries dependent on American aid, such as Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo. As the US has been a leading source of aid to Sub-Saharan Africa, reduced American assistance and investment will naturally lead to decrease of available financial resources for African development” (Wenping, 2017).

On Oct 24, 2016, Afrobarometer, which conducts surveys in African countries, released a report detailing citizens attitudes toward China and published a report titled *China's Growing Presence in Africa Wins Largely Positive Popular Reviews*. The poll was conducted among 54,000 people from 36 African countries. 63 % of respondents thought China's economic and political influence in their country was positive. In Mali, 92 % of citizens said China's influence in Mali was positive. The countries in which less than half of the respondents had a positive opinion about China's influence included Algeria, Egypt, Ghana, Lesotho, Madagascar, Morocco and Zimbabwe (Dionne, 2016). According to the poll results, most Africans believe China has made contributions to their countries' development through its economic and political activities in Africa. They give positive evaluations to China's infrastructure investment in Africa, its business and trade activities and products made in China. Besides a good impression of China's role in African economic development, the report also shows that respondents regard China as a model of national development second only to the US in popularity. In this connection, if the Trump administration truly adopts a policy to marginalize Africa, the US may well lose its status as the favorite model of development among African people to China (Wenping, 2017).

Neither the Washington Consensus nor the Beijing Model has all the answers. But, as Rwanda has demonstrated, if discipline and strong leadership are improving lives and delivering public goods, perhaps liberal democracy should be a long-term priority. The World Bank had praised Rwanda's recent “*remarkable development successes*”, which it said have helped reduce poverty and inequality, based on the exports of mainly coffee and tea. Paul Kagame has run Rwanda since 1994. In 2000 parliament elected him president. He won presidential elections in 2003 and in 2010, and again in 2017 after gaining approval by referendum to stand for an unprecedented third term. To his admirers he is a visionary leader, but to his critics he is a despot who tolerates no opposition. On September 2, 2018, Rwandans voted in parliamentary elections. The polls were projected to reinforce the dominant majority of President Kagame's ruling party Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF). Since the end of Rwanda's 1994 genocide, the RPF has retained an absolute majority in the Rwandan legislature – in large part due to its decisive role in the military victory that helped to stop the genocide. While the RPF won 40 of the 53 open seats in elections, opposition members from the Rwanda Green Party gained two seats in the parliament, with the remaining seats falling to members of RPF allied parties. It marks

the first election in post-genocide Rwanda in which the citizens have voted members of an opposition party into parliament. The African Union Election Observation Mission considered the elections to be *“peaceful, free, and fair.”*

Africans Opinion on China in Africa

As for China and China-Africa relations, during the opening ceremony of FOCAC Summit in September 2018, President Xi discussed China’s *“five-no”* approach to engagement with Africa, based on the values of *“sincerity, friendship, and equality”* underpinning China-Africa cooperation. The tenets of the approach are *“no interference in African countries”* pursuit of development paths that fit their national conditions; no interference in African countries’ internal affairs; no imposition of our will on African countries; no attachment of political strings to assistance to Africa; and no seeking of selfish political gains in investment and financing cooperation with Africa, which he further noted *“could apply to other countries as they deal with matters regarding Africa.”* According to a recent blog post by famous specialist on China-Africa relations Yun Sun, these remarks highlight China’s efforts to reaffirm the message that its development cooperation in Africa is based on mutual respect and support, especially in light of critiques that the China’s Belt and Road Initiative constitutes *“neo-colonialism”* or a *“debt trap”* (Coopley, 2018).

Opinion surveys and research on China-Africa ties are generally positive about Chinese engagements. Although China is a latecomer to Zambia’s decades-old copper industry, it has quickly established itself as an ambitious rival to *“traditional”* mining partners like Australia and South Africa. As almost everywhere in Africa these days, Chinese contractors are building highways, dams, and other large infrastructure projects. Zambia even boasts two Chinese-built special economic zones, and has recently allowed banking in the Chinese renminbi instead of dollar, or euro to facilitate trade with China. For a long time now, Zambia has been at the leading edge of China’s drive to expand its relations with the continent. Many Chinese have migrated to Zambia, setting themselves up in mining, farming, commerce and small industry.

At the same time Zambia has become one of the first African countries where the role of China and of Chinese people in the country became an explicit and potent political issue. During the campaigning for elections in 2006 and 2008, the Michael Sata, made a sport of baiting China, calling its business people in the country *“profiteers,”* not investors, and denouncing Chinese for *“bringing in their own people to push wheelbarrows instead of hiring local people.”* *“Zambia has become a province of China,”* Sata thundered in one campaign rally back then. *“The Chinese are the most unpopular people in the country because no one trusts them. The Chinaman is coming just to invade and exploit Africa”* (French, 2011).

Anti-Chinese sentiment was further fueled by violence against workers at Chinese-owned copper mines. In 2006, at one mine, Chinese managers opened fire on workers protesting over back pay and working conditions, injuring several employees. A year earlier, 50 Zambians had been killed at the same mine by an accidental blast at the company’s explosives plant. In 2010, at another mine, two Chinese managers were charged with attempted murder after opening fire on a group of employees protesting poor working conditions. Earlier this year, before the election season got underway, the case against the Chinese was quietly dropped, feeding resentment in some circles about China’s fast-growing political influence. So election rhetoric offers a way to chart anti-Chinese sentiment in Africa, which is increasingly harnessed for electoral gain. Anti-China propaganda helped Michael Sata to win presidential elections in Zambia in 2011, when he outstripped incumbent President Rupiah Banda. On the eve of Zambia’s presidential

elections one of the most common tropes about the vote was to describe it as a referendum on China. So election rhetoric offers a way to chart anti-Chinese sentiment in Africa, which is increasingly harnessed for electoral gain.

China's presence is felt almost everywhere in the country nowadays, from the big Bank of China billboard ads that welcome visitors in Chinese and are among the first sights that any passenger arriving at the Lusaka airport sees, to the city's markets, streets, and shopping malls, where Chinese who were all but invisible just a few years ago now abound. The most politically significant aspect of this presence, though, is the high-profile projects that China rushed to complete in time for the election. These include the newly delivered and fully equipped 159-bed Lusaka General Hospital, and a striking 40,000 seat stadium in Ndola. China's ambassador Zhou Yuxiao, a veteran of several African postings spoke of these contributions to Zambia's developments, calling the hospital "a grant". *"Among all nations, I think China is doing the best at getting resources from countries and putting back into those countries?"* – Zhou told. – *"Can you find any other country that is doing better?"* When the ambassador was asked what the Americans had contributed to Zambia, he marked that they employ local people and put them as observers at each polling station. *"What else? I haven't seen any road being built by them, any school, any hospital that can serve society for long. Maybe training election people is their biggest contribution"* (French, 2011).

Sata's anti-Chinese sentiment helped him to defeat incumbent President Rupiah Banda. But is this an emerging pattern – or a sporadic political occurrence in African elections? The more recent example – the elections in Zimbabwe in summer 2018, when the opposition candidate Nelson Chamisa of the MDC alliance using strong anti-China rhetoric and promises to expel Chinese businesses if he will win, tried to galvanize popular support against the incumbent Emmerson Mnangagwa of the ZANU-PF. His efforts however have no success because he had 44.3 % to 50.7 % loss to Mnangagwa (Aidoo, 2018).

China as an important development partner and provider of infrastructure and financial resources for many African countries. Nevertheless, anti-China rhetoric has some appeal: African elections are essentially about the economy, and China is a significant economic player. Beijing has edged out Western economies to become the most crucial economic partner to many African countries. With South Africa's unemployment rate more than 26 % in 2018, even the continent's top performers and Beijing's major partners need to increase trade and investments, and build resilient economies that provide and protect jobs. Opponents can blame the willingness to accept an expanding Chinese economic influence, but if they win, they may decide to follow through with their anti-China pronouncements, or not. For example, recently, new president of Sierra Leone Julius Maada Bio canceled a Chinese-funded airport project signed by his predecessor, after referring to Chinese projects as "a sham" during a campaign debate (Aidoo, 2018).

Foreign involvement or domination of extractive sectors can easily elicit popular discontent. China's increased interests in these sectors no doubt sparks intense political debates, especially when there are reports of mistreatment of local mine workers or increased Chinese involvement in unregulated mining activities. Hardships of Zambian mine workers in Chinese-owned mines also explain the anti-China moods that fueled Michael Sata's victory in 2011.

Chinese involvement in illegal gold mining in Ghana incurred local resentment, which featured in the 2016 vote that elected Nana Akufo-Addo – who promised to deal with the situation. While some research show that local population near the Chinese-operated mines enjoy better infrastructure and social services, anti-Chinese sentiments are also highest around these areas.

A 2016 Afrobarometer survey of African countries indicated an average of 35 % of respondents perceived the quality of Chinese products in Africa as problematic for China's image. Despite the benefits of providing cheaper options of products to African consumers, people don't want to see substandard materials in infrastructure building, or risk purchasing fake pharmaceutical products. African politicians often remind voters that cheap Chinese textiles and other goods compete with local products, and these declarations can be exploited on the campaign trail to influence voters at the polls. To some pro-Western politicians, China's increased engagement in Africa is nothing more than "new colonialism". For pro-China African politicians, China-Africa engagement means immense job creation, much-needed infrastructure, and most significantly, the chance to meet electoral promises with an injection of foreign capital with few conditions. The anti-China view, alternatively, sees the opportunity to remind voters of high rates of unemployment, particularly among the youth, and stir up popular anger to defeat incumbency.

Conclusion

What does China mean for African countries and for Africans if it becomes an influence factor in African elections? For a global China, the benefits of increased economic engagement in Africa and becoming the continent's preferred development partner comes with the burden of ensuring the viability and sustainability of these projects. A politically stable Africa would likely enhance these benefits – but Africa's democratic cultures may sometimes feature not-so-friendly political rhetoric. Nevertheless there is opinion in Africa that for many Africans the current increase of Chinese investments and loans mean that China may remain a major factor in future African elections.

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