

African elections provide reasons for hope

LONDON (AP) - Liberians voted on a Tuesday in November and will swear in their president in January — just like Americans. So far things have gone smoothly enough to count as a miracle after 14 years of civil war and chaos, but now the country has to ensure the election is no mere pantomime of Western democracy.

For all of Africa's strides toward democracy after decades of living under dictatorships, violence and fraud have been features of many of its elections this year. Ivory Coast, once a model of African statehood, is so torn by civil war that its Oct. 30 election was canceled.

But the continent also saw some of the real thing, and reason for hope.

In Burundi, once a slaughterhouse of ethnic conflict, voters handed former rebel leader Pierre Nkurunziza the presidency in August, and he took office pledging to bring rival Hutus and Tutsis together.

Foreign election monitors praised Tuesday's runoff vote in Liberia, in which Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf appeared poised to become Africa's first elected woman elected president. Her rival, George Weah, cried fraud. But as was noted by Denise Dauphinais, an expert on attempts to build democracy in fragile countries, at least he went through proper channels, lodging his complaint with Liberia's Na-



Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf
presidential candidate of the
Unity Party in Liberia.

tional Election Commission.

"It's a good sign that (Weah's camp is) willing to have the process sort itself out in an orderly manner," said Dauphinais, who has worked for Washington-based IFES, the International Foundation For Electoral Systems, in such places as Liberia and Somalia.

When citizens do not trust the system, the results can be bloody.

Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, who overthrew a brutal Marxist junta in 1991, has been touted in the West as a democratic-spirited leader, but at home he is seen as increasingly autocratic. In May, parliamentary elections in Ethiopia were marred by what European Union monitors described as widespread human rights abuses. Opposition

supporters took to the streets, and scores were killed in clashes with police.

Similarly, Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe, who led the former British colony to freedom from White rule in 1980, labels his opponents traitors and stooges.

Mugabe's party took 108 of the 150 seats in the country's parliament in March. Monitors reported little evidence of fraud, but human rights groups said none was needed because the opposition was already so intimidated.

"Some very skilled, often unscrupulous, ruthless political operators have been able to turn democracy to their advantage," said Stephen Ellis, a researcher at the Netherlands-based Africa Studies Center. They "embrace the forms of democracy but empty it of its substance," he said.

South Africa set a benchmark for African democracy in 1994 with its first all-race election. Skeptics who said it wouldn't work were confounded by the iconic image of joyous voters peacefully standing in long, looping lines at the ballot stations, and the scene has since been replicated over and over in Africa.

South Africa continues to stand out as being among the most democratic of African countries. So do neighboring Botswana and the West Afri-



People walk inbetween taxis in Monrovia, Liberia on Wednesday. Election officials began investigating fraud complaints by soccer superstar turned candidate George Weah, who alleges poll workers stuffed ballot boxes for his opponent in Liberia's first postwar election.

can state of Ghana, which was once synonymous with coups and dictatorship.

Progress is not always assured. Mwai Kibaki was elected on an anti-corruption ticket that captured the imagination of Kenyans in 2003, ousting longtime leader Daniel Arap Moi. But Kibaki's anti-corruption fervor appears to wane when it comes to investigating his own party.

But democracy keeps breaking out in unexpected places.

Thousands who fled war-ravaged Congo have been returning to register for a June 2006 vote, the country's first in 45 years. In July, Ugan-

dans voted overwhelmingly for a return of multiparty politics, banned for 19 years by a president who argued that parties only inflamed tribal divisions that had drenched the country in blood. Presidential elections are expected next spring.

Africans are now looking beyond the simple act of voting. Timothy Ntanda, a 54-year-old Ugandan a farmer, said multiparty politics are fine, but only so long as the losers accept the result peacefully.

And in Bujumbura, the Burundian capital, businesswoman Christine Nahimana says that while optimistic, she wants the government to

make sure officials implement its promises, otherwise "democracy will fail."

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Tutu happy with South Africa's strides

By Melde Rutledge
Special to Sentinel-Voice

GREENSBORO, N.C. (NNPA) - At a press conference Thursday at the Greensboro Coliseum, Archbishop Desmond Tutu said that he is still amazed at the progress South Africa has made after the country's abolishment of apartheid 11 years ago.

"You keep having to pinch yourself and say, 'No, this can't be South Africa,' when you see the kind of things that are now permitted, which previously were prohibited by law," he explained.

Sponsored by Guilford College, Tutu, 74, spoke to a sold-out audience in the War Memorial Auditorium on campus later that evening.

During his lecture, Tutu spoke to the audience for nearly an hour about the power of "truth" and "forgiveness." He said that both may not be easy to obtain or

bestow, "but it is possible. ...Because this is a moral universe, and right is going to prevail."

Tutu was the first Black Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, South Africa. He became the first Black person to lead the Anglican Church in South Africa on September 7, 1986, and retired as archbishop in 1996.

In 1984, Tutu was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize "as a unifying leader figure in the campaign to resolve the problem of apartheid in South Africa."

South Africa's racially-based apartheid laws touched almost every aspect of social life until its official dismantlement in 1994. This included prohibition of marriage between non-Whites and Whites, and non-Whites prohibited to live or work in White areas unless they were granted a pass.

Not heeding these strictly

enforced laws would lead to fines, whippings, death or life in prison, the sentence rendered to former South African President Nelson Mandela.

Thousands of those arrested for protesting against apartheid, were also subjected to acts of torture while being detained by police. Some died as a result.

Mandela was released from Robben Island maximum security prison after 27 years of captivity, and he became the first democratically elected president of South Africa in 1994. He chose Tutu to chair South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission to investigate the injustices committed during the apartheid era.

Beginning in 1995, those who believed they had been victimized by apartheid, were able to come forward and recount their stories of abuse, during the

commission's hearings. Perpetrators of violence could also give testimony and request amnesty from prosecution.

"I believe that it is important for people to confront the truth," he said.

He told reporters that the expression, "let bygones be bygones," is not the best practice a victim should perform to obtain reconciliation — saying that by just covering up the wound instead of healing it will always cause the incident to return to haunt the victim.

"The perpetrators have to face up to the horror of what they did and consequences of that," said Tutu.

The South African TRC presented its final report in 2003, after more than 22,000 people testified; 6,000 applied for amnesty, and more than 1,000 missing people were accounted for. The hearings were generally re-

garded as a successful tool in reconciling those victimized by apartheid's stranglehold in the country. It also became a model for other countries across the globe, including Sierra Leone, Peru and the United States.

"It seems to help people be able to tell their story, and to tell it in a safe environment, a safe place where they are not being harassed," Tutu explained, referring to the hearings.

On June 12, 2004, more than 500 community members witnessed the swearing in ceremony for the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the first of its kind in the nation.

Tutu said, "If you want reconciliation, then there are going to be moments which are going to be awkward, because it is confrontational."

Melde Rutledge writes for the Carolina Peacemaker.