

## WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN AFRICA: AN UPSIDE OF CONFLICT?

By Dr. Stephanie M. Burchard

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Liberia President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, right, speaks with U.S. ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power during a news conference in the city of Monrovia, Liberia, Tuesday, Oct. 28, 2014. (Source: AP Photo/Abbas Dulleh.)

Dr. Stephanie M. Burchard is a Research Staff Member in the Africa Program at the Institute for Defense Analyses.

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Togo troops in riot gear approach protesters in the capital city of Lome, Togo, on November 21, during clashes with protesters calling for the president to withdraw from a presidential vote in March 2015. (Source: AP Photo/Erick Kagan.)

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IDA's Africa team focuses on issues related to political, economic, and social stability and security on the continent.

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## Conflict and Gender Quotas

There are two prominent explanations for the significant increase in women's political representation in Africa. First, the number and nature of conflicts in the post-colonial period have led to several important sociopolitical changes. For example, revolutionary movements, such as those found in South Africa and Zimbabwe, demanded equality and the protection of human rights. By explicitly incorporating women into their ranks, these movements helped to shatter myths about the role of women in politics and society. Similarly, women-led peace movements in Uganda and Liberia demonstrated the ability of women to mobilize and to effect change. Members of movements such as these were often invited to participate in post-conflict nation-building dialogues. In Rwanda, because the 1994 genocide decimated the adult male population—the immediate post-genocide population of Rwanda was approximately [70 percent female](#)—it was necessary to include women in the post-conflict political sphere.

Second, changing international political norms have also exerted an influence on women's political representation in Africa. A few high-profile [international conferences on women](#) held in the 1980s and 1990s strongly advocated for the increased participation of women in politics. Specifically, the 1985 [Third World Conference on Women](#) held in Nairobi, Kenya, was a major turning point for improving women's representation because it explicitly called for countries to adopt constitutional and legal measures to ensure that women were no longer politically marginalized. As several countries in Africa began revising their constitutions in the 1990s, either after conflict or as a result of pressures to liberalize, they were influenced by calls from [domestic and international women's groups](#) to adopt gender-based quotas. Although there are several different types of [gender-based quotas](#), the goal is ultimately the same: to create a specific legal requirement for women's representation in legislative bodies. Currently, [at least half](#) the countries in sub-Saharan Africa have mandatory quotas in place, and several have voluntary quotas in place at the political party level. Further, there appears to be a link between women's presence in the legislature and their [increasing presence in executive cabinets](#) in Africa, suggesting that their holding seats in one political institution may have a spillover effect on others.

## Meaningful Representation?

Although women's political representation at the elite level has increased over the past two decades, the full impact of this increase is still unknown. The surge in the number of women legislators in Africa can be linked to an increase in the



number of [women engaging in various political behaviors](#) such as talking about politics, participating in demonstrations, and contacting their politicians. In countries where women occupy between 25 and 35 percent of legislative seats, the [gender gap between men's and women's political participation \(except for voting\) all but disappears](#).

The act of voting, however, seems to remain unaffected. Some have suggested that when citizens are made aware of the importance of their vote, women tend to vote less frequently than men. The reasons differ based on the specific electoral context. For example, in [Uganda](#), a get-out-the-vote campaign undertaken in the suburbs of Kampala had the unintended consequence of decreasing women's turnout. The researchers behind the campaign theorized that in elections where the potential for violence is high, voter mobilization strategies may remind women how much is at stake and encourage them to stay home out of fear. In [Mali](#), where women are "traditionally unwelcome actors in the public sphere," a civic education program meant to increase political participation of both men and women resulted in decreased levels of voter turnout among women. It turns out that although the program helped to "close the gender gap in civic and political knowledge," it increased the social costs for females who wanted to vote: many reported "explicit threats of sanctions from male relatives and village elders."

## Conclusion

Women have increased political participation across Africa; however, these gains are not uniform, and there are context-specific barriers to the participation of women in certain political arenas. In particular, the act of voting seems to remain unaffected, which may reflect the poor conduct of some elections, societal reluctance to fully embrace women's participation, or some other unmeasured factor that broadly discourages women from voting. Interestingly, [autocratic countries](#) report higher levels of women's elite political participation than their more democratic counterparts, suggesting that progress can be compelled to some extent. It may also be that many of the countries that lag in women's participation (e.g., Botswana, Mali, and Swaziland) have not experienced the type of conflict that results in a reordered society. Countries such as Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, South Africa, Angola, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe all experienced devastating conflicts that radically transformed their societies and provided openings for women to enter into politics.

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Togo troops in riot gear approach protesters in the capital city of Lome, Togo, on November 21, during clashes with protesters calling for the president to withdraw from a presidential vote in March 2015. (Source: AP Photo/Erick Kaglan.)

Gnassingbé was installed by the military in 2005 after his father, Gnassingbé Eyadéma, in power since 1967, died in office. Later that same year, after he'd stepped down due to regional and international pressure, the younger Gnassingbé won a disputed election marked by violence. It resulted in a [power-sharing](#) agreement with the opposition that was facilitated by the European Union and the Economic Community of West African States. The unity government launched a number of inclusive institutions and reforms, with peaceful legislative elections held in 2007. In the lead-up to the 2010 presidential elections, several opposition parties withdrew from the inclusive accord over disagreements on the composition of the electoral commission. After Gnassingbé again won the poll, the opposition protested, decrying the result as fraudulent.

Over the past several years, political tensions have remained high as the opposition has staged intermittent demonstrations for political reform, with a [spike](#) in protests and political violence in the lead-up to long-delayed legislative elections held in July 2013. As highlighted in the July 17, 2013 [edition](#) of *Africa Watch*, an agreement was signed between Gnassingbé and the opposition just before the legislative elections. The agreement, which contained a number of government concessions—including increased opposition representation in the electoral commission—helped to ease tensions before the poll. UNIR overwhelmingly [won](#) the elections, consolidating its majority in parliament and decreasing the likelihood of far-reaching reforms.

The 2013 agreement did not go far enough for the often-divided opposition in Togo, as evidenced by the most recent protests. The opposition groups involved included the eight-party Combat for Political Alternative in 2015 (CAP2015), the broader Let's Save Togo Collective (CST, Collectif Sauvons le Togo), and the Rainbow Coalition (CAEC, Coalition Arc-en-Ciel). During the protests, opposition protesters held signs [saying](#), "Without reforms, no elections" and "50 years for the father and the son is enough." Gnassingbé has [ruled out](#) any changes to the existing constitution, which does not contain term limits. At the pro-government rally, UNIR supporters held signs that [read](#), "Don't touch my constitution."

Codjo Delava, the Secretary General of the National Alliance for Change (ANC), the main opposition party, [commented](#) on the chances of Togo following the path of Burkina Faso: "I'm not hoping it can happen. But there is a chance it can happen. This is not our hope, but if Faure Gnassingbé continues to refuse to implement political reforms so that elections can be free and fair, so that [the] presidential mandate can [be] limited, maybe it will happen."

Although Gnassingbé has not yet [declared](#) his candidacy for the 2015 elections, several factors militate against the Burkina Faso scenario occurring in Togo or term limits being introduced. These include the factionalized nature of the



opposition, UNIR's large majority in parliament, and the reality that pushing for rapid constitutional reform and term limits is much more difficult than simply vetoing them. As Gilles Yabi [argued](#), "It's a lot easier to block a revision of the constitution, which was the case in Ouagadougou [capital of Burkina Faso], than to force reform of the constitution." Constitutional reform would need to be passed by parliament, which, given UNIR's commanding majority and refusal to pass a reform bill on [June 30](#) earlier this year, looks unlikely.

That said, a piecemeal agreement that makes some concessions along the lines of the July 2013 accord does appear likely. [Discussions](#) between Gnassingbé and the opposition candidate, Jean-Pierre Fabre, are already under way. But until Gnassingbé makes at least token concessions, opposition protests will likely continue, with an attendant risk of low-level violence.

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