

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF NONCOMPETITIVE ELECTIONS IN SEMI-AUTHORITARIAN COUNTRIES?

By Dr. Stephanie M. Burchard

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Demonstrators opposed to a third term for President Nkurunziza dive to the ground as army soldiers shoot in the air to disperse the protest, in the rural area of Mugongomanga, east of the capital Bujumbura, in Burundi Wednesday, June 10, 2015. (Source: AP Photo/Berthier Mugiraneza.)

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RUSSIA AND AFRICA—MEASURED RE-ENGAGEMENT

By George F. Ward

The end of the Cold War marked the beginning of the end of a period of intense Russian engagement with the continent of Africa. [By the mid-1980s](#), the Soviet Union had signed hundreds of agreements with African countries. Moscow had offered training in the Soviet Union to around 25,000 African civilians at the university level, and thousands more had graduated from Soviet military and political schools. Soviet training programs on the continent had reached at least 200,000 Africans. The Soviet Union had concluded technical and economic assistance agreements with 37 African countries and trade agreements with 42. By the end of the 1990s, this dense network of relationships had deteriorated markedly. Newly democratic Russia closed embassies and cultural centers in Africa and terminated development projects. Trade atrophied. During the current decade, indications of increased Russian interest in Africa have appeared, and researchers are examining "[Russia's Return to Africa](#)." In assessing this reported trend, several questions need to be addressed. How extensive is Russian re-engagement? Why is Russia focusing anew on Africa? What does Russia bring to the table in its engagements with Africa? Where will re-engagement lead? [more...](#)



Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, right, speaks with Madagascar's ambassador in Russia Eloi Maxime Alphonse Dovo during a reception marking Africa Day in Moscow, Russia, Thursday, May 22, 2014. (Source: AP Photo/Pavel Golovkin.)

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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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Ethiopian Elections

On May 24, Ethiopian voters turned out in mass to cast their ballots for the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). In power since 1991, the EPRDF, a coalition of four political parties, claimed a decisive victory, [winning all 547 seats in Parliament](#). The National Electoral Board of Ethiopia estimated turnout at [more than 90 percent of registered voters](#). Ethiopian elections typically generate significant turnout, with levels routinely reported [between 80 and 95 percent](#).

Despite healthy levels of voter participation, electoral competition has been severely limited in Ethiopian elections. In the 2005 election, the country's most competitive to date, the opposition coalesced around eight political parties. Although the opposition had won at most 12 seats previously, they looked poised to win at least [180 seats](#). Before the official results of the May 2005 were released, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi announced that the EPRDF had won a majority of seats and was forming a government. He also instituted a month long ban on demonstrations.

The opposition cried foul, alleging that massive voter fraud had taken place. Beginning in June, protests broke out in several major cities across the country. From June through November, security forces fired liberally upon protesters, [killing close to 200](#) in total. As many as 20,000 protesters were arrested on charges related to the protests. The subsequent election, held in May 2010, saw the opposition's gains reversed; they were awarded only two seats.

Burundian Elections

Despite repeated calls from international and domestic actors to postpone elections, on June 29, Burundi held legislative and local government elections. The ruling party, the National Council for the Defense of Democracy-Forces for the Defense of Democracy (CNDD-FDD), claimed to have won [at least 77](#) out of 100 seats in the legislature. The ruling party also reported very high turnout in many rural areas, claiming that more than 98 percent of registered voters had participated in the election.

The election was held under significant protest and duress. Incumbent president Pierre Nkurunziza has pressed ahead with his bid to secure a [controversial third term](#), plunging the country into chaos. His regime survived a [coup attempt](#) in May. Protests have taken place almost daily in the capital Bujumbura. [At least 70 have been killed](#) since the end of April, and [more than 144,000](#) have sought refuge in neighboring countries.

Seventeen political parties [boycotted the elections](#), stating that it was not possible to conduct free and fair elections under the circumstances. In a bold move, the African Union announced the day before the election that [it would not be sending an observation mission to Burundi](#) because it also believed the conditions for a free and



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fair election would not be met, given the “prevailing political and security environment.” As further evidence of the problematic conditions under which the elections were organized and held, [several key government officials fled the country out of fear for their lives](#), and the [private media have been virtually shut out](#) and shut down. Although regional leaders and international leaders have been encouraging Burundians to engage in a constructive dialogue to resolve the political impasse and postpone the next round of elections, presidential elections are still currently scheduled to be held on July 15.

Reasons for Noncompetitive Elections

Elections such as these are obviously not meant to provide a meaningful forum for citizens to express their preferences on policy or leadership. What purpose do such noncompetitive elections serve? Autocratic or nondemocratic elections may be held to allow for a [controlled distribution of power and resources](#) among a specific subset of the political elite. Elections can serve as a means of periodically rotating power among and between the political elite within the ruling party to forestall internal challenges to power. Elections, sanctioned and organized by the party in power, can also send a strong message to members of the political opposition regarding the strength of the party in power, deterring opposition to the regime. Under certain circumstances, semi-authoritarian elections can also provide a government with valuable information it needs to maintain power, such as its geographic distribution of support and the location of potential opposition strongholds.

Modern Ethiopian elections, although generally noncompetitive, have been an important method by which the regime has maintained its power. The 2005 elections provided the government with valuable information about those who opposed it and where they operated. After the significant breakthrough the opposition seemed to make in the 2005 elections, the government [responded](#) by threatening opposition members and their supporters, shutting down private media outlets, and enacting legislation to [curtail civil society activity](#). The combination of the EPRDF’s dominance in the 2010 and 2015 elections and the very high voter turnout (over 90 percent turnout in both) was intended to [discourage the opposition](#) from further challenging the regime’s hold on power.

In Burundi, the message is similar, but the immediate consequences are more dire. The country is teetering on the edge of civil war. The most recent elections lacked even the most basic veneer of legitimacy. A number of important stakeholders, including regional leaders and the African Union, exerted considerable pressure in an attempt to convince the government to postpone the elections. Not holding elections, however, would have been interpreted as a concession that the ruling party was apparently not willing to make. By holding the elections, and by drumming up substantial voter support, the ruling CNDD-FDD has attempted to demonstrate to the opposition its power, support, and popularity. Unfortunately, the opposition is now claiming that [force is the only recourse it has left](#), which does not bode well for a peaceful resolution.

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Current Russia-Africa Relations—A Varied Picture

In looking at the facts and figures that describe Russia's engagement with Africa, two caveats are in order. First, significant proportions of Russia's international commercial relationships are carried out through [offshore entities](#) and therefore may not be counted as Russian in international trade statistics. Second, statistics related to Africa are [notoriously inaccurate](#). Keeping these factors in mind, it is worth looking at the reported statistics regarding Russian re-engagement in several areas.

- **Trade is growing, but is still modest.** In 2000, [Russia's overall trade with Africa](#) was reported to have been about \$1 billion. Over roughly a decade, trade expanded more than tenfold, reaching \$11 billion annually in 2012. These numbers were [dwarfed](#) by U.S. trade with Africa (\$93.2 billion in 2012) and Chinese trade (\$163.9 billion in just the first 10 months of 2012). Russia's bilateral trade relationship with Africa is the smallest of the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa). The Russian-African trade relationship is relatively modest for straightforward reasons—Russia does not enjoy comparative advantage in the manufactured consumer and industrial goods that Africa needs, and Russia itself does not need the oil and gas exports that Africa offers.
- **Russian investment is significant.** According to a [study](#) by the African Development Bank (ADB) published in 2011, Russian investment flows to Africa peaked at \$20 billion in 2008. Even recognizing that annual investment numbers are volatile, Russian investments in Africa compare favorably to those of China. For example, *The Economist* reported that [Chinese direct investment](#) in Africa in 2012 amounted to only \$2.5 billion. Russian investments in Africa have been heavily focused in the mining and oil and gas sectors. According to the ADB study, these investments are motivated by the depletion of resource bases for key minerals in Russia itself. The ADB cites zinc, diamonds, gold, uranium, copper, nickel, manganese, bauxite, oil, and coal among the resources that are close to exhaustion in Russia. Russian investments, which have been heavily concentrated in northern, southern, and western Africa, are focused on production of these materials.
- **Arms sales—Strictly Business.** During the Cold War, the Soviet Union generously supplied its African clients with military hardware. Like other elements of the Russia-Africa relationship, arms sales fell precipitously

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during the 1990s. By 2003, Russia decided to [revive its military cooperation](#) with Africa. In fact, Russian exports of major weapons have [increased worldwide](#), from 22 percent of the total in the 2005–2009 period to 27 percent in the 2010–2014 period. Russia is now the world's second largest exporter of major weapons, after the United States. As a region, Africa accounted for 12 percent of Russian arms exports in the 2010–2014 period. The motivations for Russia's arms sales seem to be mainly commercial rather than political. Some Russian arms sales have gone to former Soviet client states, but other sales have been to countries with close ties to the West. Thus, Moscow has sold over \$100 million worth of jet fighter aircraft to both [Sudan](#) and [Uganda](#), states that are military rivals.

- **Soft power is still soft.** If investment through private and state-controlled companies is the leading edge of Russian engagement in Africa, Russian government efforts appear to be trailing. During the 1990s, Russia [closed](#) nine embassies, most of its trade missions, and 13 of 20 cultural centers in Africa. Most if not all of those embassies appear to [remain closed](#). Apart from a reported [\\$20 billion in debt relief](#), Russia has not provided significant development assistance to the countries of Africa. Even Russian Federation [participation in United Nations peacekeeping missions](#) in Africa has declined. In May 2007, 202 Russian personnel were serving in those UN missions. Eight years later, that number has been reduced to 60. The limited nature of official Russian representation in Africa and the lack of resources for assistance would appear to be a factor restricting Russia's ability to exert influence.

Where Will Re-engagement Lead?

As the above review demonstrates, Russian re-engagement with Africa has been up to now relatively modest. This does not mean that the revival of relationships is without significance. Growing Russian investment in Africa's mining and energy sectors may produce needed raw materials for Russian industries while also providing a source of capital for African industry. In geopolitical terms, the rekindling of military relationships with former client states such as Angola and Sudan and the development of new relationships with countries like Uganda may help Russia counter perceived U.S. military dominance. Although trading relationships will probably remain modest for some time, they could increase in a meaningful way as Russian investments in the African mining sector mature. Finally, the revived commercial and financial relationships with African countries may become more important to Russia as counterweights to Western economic sanctions. For all of these reasons, we can expect Russia to continue to strive to expand its presence on the African continent.

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