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# How long will ballot still trump bullet?

WHEN we look at what's been happening in South Africa and elsewhere in recent times, it's becoming increasingly clear that the nexus between strong, vibrant democratic institutions and the achievement and entrenchment of a culture of sustainable peace is now more critical than ever before.

Democracy is, however, becoming an endangered norm, which is slowly but surely being eroded, despite valiant and commendable attempts to promote a more inclusive democratic governance architecture.

Most notably on the African continent the African Union (AU) has adopted a "zero tolerance of all unconstitutional changes of government", a practice which frequently has sparked conflicts and instability in African states. A critically important component in support of this African-driven democratic revolution was the

adoption in 2007 of the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance.

The charter, in particular, seeks to promote adherence by each state party to the universal values and principles of democracy and the respect for human rights based upon the supremacy of each African state's constitution and of constitutional order.

Despite the adoption of the charter (which only came into effect in February 2012) and the AU's non-negotiable posture on any form of unconstitutional change or unconstitutional retention of power, this has not completely eradicated the execution of military coups or the attempts of many African heads of state to prolong their terms in office indefinitely, to the detriment of the democratic project on the continent.



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It should therefore come as no surprise that the 2017 theme for the UN's International Day of Democracy, observed annually on September 15, is "Democracy and Conflict Prevention".

This year's theme focuses on the critical need to strengthen



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democratic institutions to promote peace and stability.

Africa, in particular, needs stable democratic institutions to secure long-lasting peace and prosperity for the people of this continent so often ravaged by conflict.

It is sad that in many



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month's election. The court has called for new elections within 60 days. Given Kenya's past turbulent electoral processes (notably the post-election violence witnessed in 2007), the spectre of renewed violence is all too real.

Closer to home, South Africa, once hailed as one of the "lodestars of democracy" has seen a rapid reversal and erosion of its hard-fought for democratic gains.

Beyond the African continent, the overall status and "health" of democracy is also in decline on several international fronts. From the deeply divisive 2016 US presidential elections, Russian President Vladimir Putin's increasingly authoritarian leadership style and intolerance of political dissent (as well as accusations of alleged Russian "hacking" of the 2016

US elections) to the implosion of Venezuela amid President Nicolás Maduro's controversial Constituent Assembly elections held in July including the silencing of opposition voices in that country, democracy (or rather the lack thereof) appears increasingly to present far more problems than solutions at present.

A lack of viable and effectively functioning democratic channels to express opinions, concerns and in which to exercise proactive citizenship, is likely to produce more potential conflict in international relations, which will render conflict prevention initiatives and efforts to a state of near-permanent paralysis.

Democracy has therefore not necessarily been a panacea for solving persistent political woes, and has not always

yielded the much hoped-for peace dividends in post-conflict societies either. It has, however, seemingly created an entire generation of young citizens (and potential future voters) who are growing increasingly disillusioned and disenchanted with democracy, and increasingly seeking alternatives to effect meaningful political change.

The political leadership of several countries across the globe therefore faces an extremely difficult task of restoring faith and trust in democracy and the democratic process as a whole, let alone in strengthening already deeply-discredited democratic institutions.

This potentially represents a critical juncture to determine if the power of the ballot will continue to prevail over that of the bullet...

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