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Gracious Losers Are a Win for Democracy

Last year was a watershed one for incumbent leaders on the African continent conceding elections graciously. Supporters can draw lessons to support future peaceful transitions.

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Myriad headlines and significant nuanced research point to a democratic crisis on the African continent. Yet 2024 was also marked by a different—and less discussed—trend: incumbents on the continent losing elections, conceding graciously, and overseeing smooth transitions of power. While such gracious concessions were not wholly unprecedented, 2024's multiple opposition victories set a new high-water mark for a single year. Good news doesn't always drive coverage—but Africa's gracious losers are a win for democracy. Consider the following cases:

- In Botswana's election last October, the Botswana Democratic Party (dominant since independence fifty-eight years earlier) won only four parliamentary seats out of the sixty-five in the National Assembly, with incumbent president Mokgweetsi Masisi losing his post to opposition coalition leader Duma Boko. The outcome was a dramatic fall for a long-ascendant liberation party, but the aftermath was also notable—in this case, for its lack of drama. Masisi graciously conceded defeat even before the results were officially confirmed: "The evidence is overwhelming. We lost this election massively . . . and we need to come to terms with it and make space and give opportunity to the newly elected leaders."

- In November, Mauritius's opposition won a landslide victory in that country's election, with the incumbent coalition **failing** to win any of the sixty-two directly-elected parliament seats.¹ Incumbent prime minister Pravind Jugnauth conceded defeat the day after the election, **declaring**, "L'Alliance Lepep is heading towards a huge defeat. . . . The population has decided to choose another team." After the official results were announced, Jugnauth promptly **resigned**, clearing the path for his successor to be sworn in the following day.
- In Ghana's December 2024 presidential election, the incumbent candidate—in this case the sitting vice president, Mahamudu Bawumia, as the president was term-limited—was handily beaten by opposition candidate (and former president) John Mahama. The day after the election, and also before the electoral commission officially announced the results, Bawumia conceded in a **public speech**, saying, "The people of Ghana have spoken. The people have voted for change at this time and we respect that decision with all humility." He further pledged to provide Mahama with full support in the transition process.
- There were other versions of this theme, too, such as in Senegal. In April, the fraught election period ended with incumbent party candidate Amadou Ba **conceding** before vote counts were finalized, paving the way for the opposition to take power.²

In a year marked by noteworthy concessions, continental giant South Africa's election, which took place last May, was a particularly remarkable variant. In that vote, the African National Congress (ANC)—the dominant political party since the country's transition to multiethnic democracy thirty years prior—lost its majority in parliament for the first time in history. Tumbling to only **about 40 percent of the vote**, the ANC lost its ability to select the country's president, and instead was forced to form a coalition government—which has **subsequently proven** difficult to manage.

Although it was the **"seismic" electoral result** that garnered massive attention, the aftermath was also noteworthy. Immediately after the announcement of the results, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, speaking both in his presidential capacity and as leader of the ANC, **publicly celebrated** the "successful election that has been free, fair, credible, and peaceful." He

continued, “Whether we like it or not, [our people] have spoken. . . . As the leaders of political parties, as all those who occupy positions of responsibility in society, we have heard the voices of our people, and we must respect their choices.”

Gracious concessions are not a panacea for a country’s overall democratic health—which, even with smooth alternations of power, still depends upon democratic institutions functioning well beyond the election season and upon ensuring democracy is materially delivering for the populace. A gracious concession does not absolve a politician’s record of all previous democratic shortcomings, or render them universally beloved.³

But the trend is no small thing—especially in light of prominent democracies like the United States in 2020 and Brazil in 2022 failing to meet this bar, and given the long shadow of events on the continent, such as Ivoirian president Laurent Gbagbo’s refusal to concede in 2011, which triggered a civil war. Gracious concessions enable democratic renewal and build faith within the electorate that change can come from working within the system. They also disprove fearmongering claims that elections are inevitably destabilizing or violent.

For supporters of democracy everywhere, it’s worth pausing to reflect on this recent spate of concessions. And as the African continent heads into another busy election slate later this year, it’s also worth gleaning lessons on how domestic and external actors can encourage gracious handovers.

From a Few Concessions to a Trend

Last year was an especially notable one for gracious incumbent concessions on the continent, but several earlier years featured important precedents. A non-exhaustive list would include 1991, when long-ruling incumbent authoritarian presidents conceded in the first elections after the return to multi-party democracy in Benin and Zambia. In Senegal’s 2000 election, Abdou Diouf conceded defeat, leading to the first change in government in the country’s democratic history. A decade later, Zambian president Rupiah Banda’s teary-eyed concession in 2011 starkly contrasted with the widespread electoral violence in Côte d’Ivoire and Nigeria earlier that year. Then in 2015, as the first

sitting president of Nigeria to concede defeat, Goodluck Jonathan asserted, “Nobody’s ambition . . . is worth the blood of any Nigerian.” Mahama became the first sitting president of Ghana to accept defeat when in 2016 he quickly conceded to dispel the threat of electoral violence.

Openings for gracious concessions have been increasing on the African continent and beyond. Tiziana Corda notes that, despite all the coverage of coups across the African continent between 2019 and 2024, there have been more democratic alternations during that period than coups. In another recent analysis, Andrew T. Little and Anne Meng catalog all presidential concessions from 1980 to 2024. Differentiating between clear “strong concessions,” ambiguous or inconsistent “weak concessions,” and a failure to concede, Little and Meng show that globally, over the past two decades, the rate of “strong concessions” appears to have increased, reaching over 60 percent from 2020 to 2024. Of course—as the authors note—a concession alone is not an indicator of a healthy democracy if the election itself was not free and fair.

Lifting Up Gracious Losers

Even though gracious concessions are not panaceas, admitting electoral loss and enabling a smooth handover is a powerful democratic norm worth supporting. That said, a politician’s desire to be gracious in the face of defeat inevitably coexists with other considerations: physical safety, safety from prosecution (spurious or otherwise), personal prestige, and prospects for a desirable post-leadership career. So how can concessions be encouraged?

In recent years, democracy’s supporters—both within the continent and beyond—have launched several types of efforts to encourage gracious incumbent concessions.

Engagement by Regional Elder Statesmen. Often, the best interlocutor for a politician considering their options is another leader who has faced a similar situation. Existing initiatives, like the Club de Madrid and the African Union’s Panel of the Wise, already work to connect former leaders and platform their expertise. But an explicit focus on encouraging concessions when appropriate would be useful. The model of former presidents engaging with losing incumbents to urge concession has worked in the past, as when Rupiah Banda

of Zambia and Ernest Bai Koroma of Sierra Leone encouraged Edgar Lungu to concede in Zambia's 2021 election.⁴ One initiative that expands a related approach is the West African Elders Forum, formed by Goodluck Jonathan to take former leaders of African countries to address electoral and democratic conflict in West Africa, including by meeting with incumbent and opposition candidates during election season.

High-Level Outreach to Losers. Personal phone calls from high-profile international leaders to conceding incumbent candidates—not just winning ones—can be a meaningful affirmation. After Jonathan's defeat, U.S. president Barack Obama placed a call to Jonathan to commend him for “putting Nigeria and its people before politics by conceding the election and calling on his supporters to accept the outcome peacefully.” Obama's public statement, as well as that of British prime minister David Cameron, lauded the commitment to democratic norms of both the winning candidate, Muhammadu Buhari, and Jonathan. Given the pressures of the calendar, calls from the most prominent international leaders to losing candidates are a rare occurrence. But doing so more often would be an opportunity to positively reinforce an incumbent loser's choice to be a statesman rather than a spoiler.

High-Level International and Regional Appointments. Another potentially impactful approach is to expand the number of norm-abiding “formers” who are designated to high-profile international and regional organization posts. This has already happened to some degree. For example, in the years after Mozambique's Joaquim Chissano, Nigeria's Olusegun Obasanjo, South Africa's Thabo Mbeki and Tanzania's Jakaya Kikwete adhered to their nations' respective two-term limits (albeit after Obasanjo tried and failed to overturn the limit in Nigeria), the United Nations named each as a special envoy or a member of a high-level advisory group. Shortly after John Kufuor honored Ghana's term limit and accepted the electoral defeat of his chosen successor in 2008, the World Bank named him to a high-level commission focused on modernization. After Liberian president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf respected the country's two-term limit in 2018, the World Health Organization appointed her to multiple high-profile positions.

Regional institutions can also leverage and spotlight former leaders' expertise. The Southern African Development Community appointed Chissano as a

mediator for the political crisis in Madagascar in 2009. The African Union (AU) named Kikwete the High Representative for Libya in 2016, and Jonathan was named a special envoy of the Economic Community of West African States in 2020 to lead mediation talks in Mali. Mbeki served as a high-level mediator on behalf of the AU, most notably in Sudan as a special envoy of the Peace and Security Council.

Visiting Fellowships. For a former leader looking to reflect upon their time in office while having their immediate needs met, the prospect of a fellowship at a research institute overseas can be an appealing one. Such fellowships also help disseminate insights from that leader's career and expand knowledge of African democracy, a benefit to the host institution and beyond. An earlier initiative, the African President-in-Residence Program at Boston University, brought eight respected former leaders to the United States between 2002 and 2012, funding them as visiting fellows in exchange for sharing their perspective through speeches at several universities. The program, which aimed to "create an opportunity for a democratically elected leader to transition to civilian status," evidently ended as a result of lack of funding. The Africa House at New York University inaugurated a similar program with Kikwete in 2018, but the program does not appear to have continued in the following years. Other universities, think tanks, or civil society organizations would do well to consider creating similar initiatives.

High-Profile Prizes. The Ibrahim Prize for Achievement in African Leadership, a multimillion-dollar cash award, aims to reward African heads of state who respect term limits and guide their countries through challenges with respect for human rights and rule of law. The prize has only been awarded six times since its creation in 2007, in addition to an honorary award to Nelson Mandela. Most recently, Mahamadou Issoufou won the 2020 Ibrahim Prize (selected in 2021) after stepping down from two terms as president of Niger. No winner was selected for 2024.

Critiques of the Ibrahim Prize abound—including those that equate the prize to a bribe for elected officials to do their jobs, allege that the Ibrahim Prize misdiagnoses the problems facing Africa by overly focusing on individual leaders over democratic systems, or criticize the prize for having too limited a focus because it excludes change-makers from civil society or the private

sector. (Further, for leaders ready to raid their national treasuries, the monetary prize is not a meaningful disincentive—a point Uganda's perennial president Yoweri Museveni implied when he proclaimed he was not poor enough to be moved by such a prize.) While the prize will not address all democratic challenges, supporters rightly maintain it's one worthwhile tool to highlight progress and to recognize leaders who step down.

Establishment of Expectations Before the Election. Democracy-supporting groups and diplomatic actors can encourage candidates to make public, mutual commitments to appropriate concession ahead of the election, as is often done with declarations against political violence. In Liberia, the Farmington River Declaration, first signed by political candidates in 2017, pledges a nonviolent electoral process. The revised 2023 declaration, signed by a majority of Liberia's political parties, requires candidates to disavow violence, "accept and respect the outcome of the election results," and handle any disputes through judicial processes. Similar peace pacts against political violence have been signed in Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Zambia. With only slight tweaks, pacts like these could reaffirm a public expectation for concession as part of respecting election results.

Ongoing Engagement Bolstering the Broader Democratic Ecosystem. Gracious concessions and handovers don't happen in a vacuum: They come in the overall context of a country's democratic norms and practices—before, during, and after an election. International and regional technical assistance often helps to nurture this broader ecosystem. Recent AU reports underscore this point: The African Union Commission chairperson's report on elections in Africa for the latter half of 2024 claims that early concessions in Botswana, Ghana, and Mauritius (before the release of formal results) signaled success for electoral observation and technical assistance. It also notes that the AU's electoral observer missions helped build trust in elections through pre-election assessments in Ghana and Botswana and support for electoral management bodies to ensure smooth elections. (Such engagements aren't without critics—observers have pointed out that the AU's engagements can legitimize flawed elections by failing to call out democratic shortfalls—but still represent an important piece of the puzzle.)

International partners from outside of the African continent, including from Europe and the United States, have also historically engaged in a suite of assistance in election periods to support these goals. With many of these donors now cutting their aid budgets, these efforts likely could benefit from other actors stepping up.

Conclusion: Leaving When the Applause Is Loudest

In 2017, then former president Mahama of Ghana [gave a resounding speech](#) calling for African leaders to “leave when the applause is loudest.” He reflected upon his loss in his reelection bid the year prior and how he had publicly emphasized respect for the results—and added that when he attended the inauguration of his successor, the applause for him was very loud indeed.⁵

Mahama’s additional defeat in 2020, and subsequent comeback to win the 2024 election, underscore another point that he made in that same speech: Democracy is a team sport in which “when the ball is in your possession, you do your best to move it forward, but then you must inevitably pass that ball to the next player and wish him or her the best.” It’s an analogy that may have particularly resonated with an actual professional football player—George Weah—who conceded graciously in 2023 after losing his bid for a second term as president of Liberia. Earlier in Weah’s presidency, he [reflected](#) that “when you are on the pitch playing you should know there are others on the substitutes’ bench ready to replace you at any time.”

Democracy will always be a game of multiple rounds. Applauding loudly for those who do cede the stage after they’ve lost is one way to ensure that the game will continue to be played to make progress, however halting it may be. After all, any incumbent who is considering whether to concede after losing at the ballot box will inevitably look to the experiences of other former leaders, and weigh whether compelling precedents for a post-leadership career exist.

In a challenging global democratic landscape, the positive examples from Botswana, Mauritius, Ghana, and beyond last year are all worthy of spotlighting. As Joseph Siegle [reflects](#), “The culture of impunity is contagious.

So too can be the momentum for higher standards.” For supporters of democracy, both inside the continent and beyond, building momentum for loud applause for those who make gracious exits and “pass the ball” is an effort worth encouraging.

Notes

¹ The coalition was, however, allocated two seats through Mauritius’s Best Loser System.

² In addition, in the self-declared breakaway region of Somaliland, incumbent president Muse Bihi Abdi conceded defeat to opposition leader Abdirahman Mohamed Abdullahi, setting the stage for transition.

³ Indeed, after leaving office, Bawumia, Jugnauth, and Masisi have each faced pushback for their actions in office or in the election.

⁴ Banda conceded graciously after his defeat in the 2011 election. Koroma respected Sierra Leone’s term limit, stepping back in 2018 after ten years in power.

⁵ In subsequent years, Mahama showed dubious commitment to taking his own advice—he rejected his loss in the 2020 election as “fictionalized.” However, Mahama made the democratic choice to challenge the result in the courts (where the Supreme Court dismissed the case as being without merit), rather than the streets.

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