The Rasputins of the new autocracy

For three days last week, between March 26 and March 28, 2018 Egyptians voted in the country's presidential election, which pitted the incumbent, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, against Moussa Mostafa Moussa of the Ghad party. There was never any real speculation about the outcome, given that Sisi's only opponent was a politician who had helped secure the President's nomination earlier in the year, and who only declared his intention to stand a day before the electoral commission's deadline. In fact, Moussa never seemed interested in winning. His candidacy seemed more about trying to provide a semblance of legitimacy to what otherwise would have been an embarrassingly uncontested presidential election; other potential aspirants had been barred, intimidated or otherwise discouraged from standing. In this regard, there was much speculation about how many Egyptians would turn out to vote with initial reports suggesting that turnout may have only been around 40 percent.

This extreme example reminds us of how the credibility of an election rests on two different assessments: whether the results announced reflect the votes cast; and whether all candidates are free to campaign and to mobilise support, or whether an uneven playing field ultimately tilts the balance unjustly in favour of the incumbent.

In turn, while attention often focuses on the credibility of voting, counting and tallying, elections are often rigged before polling stations even open.

This reminds how the credibility of an election rests on two different assessments: whether the results announced reflect the votes cast; and whether all candidates are free to campaign and to mobilise support, or whether an uneven

For example, incumbents have won recent elections in Ethiopia and Rwanda with apparent ease, not because they have stolen them at the ballot box, but because there was little space for any political opposition to function. Uganda and Tanzania are more open, and Kenya more open still despite recent backsliding, but their political playing fields remain far from even.

The benefits of incumbency in all these countries rest on two inter-related factors: the resources and coercive powers under state control; and the deployment of the (in)security argument to delegitimise political opposition and protest.

To take the Kenyan example. The Supreme Court's nullification of President Kenyatta's re-election in August means that we do not know what the final results of that election were, whether or not Kenyatta stole the vote, and to what extent he may have done so. However, this focus on what happened during the polls has distracted from a prior question; namely, the evenness of the playing field.

Incumbents have won recent elections in Ethiopia and Rwanda with apparent ease, not because they have stolen them at the ballot box, but because there was little space for any political opposition to function. Uganda and Tanzania are more open, and Kenya more open still despite recent backsliding, but their political playing fields remain far from even

At one level, the failure of Raila Odinga and the National Super Alliance (NASA) to secure a political tsunami in 2017 is in part a product of their own shortcomings. The Alliance was formed late and to some appeared opportunistic, NASA candidates often competed against each other at the local

level, and some of their messaging, for example, that Maasai should not sell land to 'outsiders', was off-putting to many potential supporters.

At the same time, NASA clearly faced an uneven playing field as Jubilee used the resources and coercive powers under its control to mobilise support for Kenyatta and against Odinga. Amongst other things, Jubilee benefited from the use of state resources to advertise the government's achievements as the President's. They also interfered with the editorial freedom of the media and sought to undermine critical civil society voices and hired expensive international companies — such as the now infamous Cambridge Analytica — to help cast Odinga as a dangerous threat to Kenya's peace and stability.

> *The failure of Raila Odinga and the National Super Alliance (NASA) to secure a political tsunami in 2017 is in part a product of their own shortcomings. The Alliance was formed late and to some appeared opportunistic, NASA candidates often competed against each other at the local level, and some of their messaging, for example, that Maasai should not sell land to 'outsiders', was off-putting to many potential supporters*

The latter is critical as it feeds into a narrative used across the region in which incumbents are cast as having brought peace and stability to a country, and political change is cast as a threat to the same. This feeds into a new form of 'guided democracy' — to use a term coined by social scientist Richard Sklar in the early 1980s — in which (in a multi-party rather than one-party system) citizens are called upon to unite behind their governments in the interests of stability and development, and to refrain from rhetoric and action that could foster division and disunity. In this context, opposition becomes framed as not only anti-government, but as dangerous and unpatriotic.

This use of a politics of fear, together with the other benefits of incumbency, ensures that the opposition faced an uphill battle from the outset.

Given that it is widely accepted that political campaigns in Kenya never end — with campaigns for 2022 starting well before voting had begun in 2017 — it is critical that more attention be given to the evenness of the playing field.

> *Wylie (formerly of Cambridge Analytica) further alleges that that his predecessor, Dan Muresan was killed in Nairobi over a deal gone sour in the aftermath of the 2013 Kenyan election. These claims, together with endemic corruption and increasingly expensive campaigns, raise important questions about the transparency of governance, the increasingly globalised nature of domestic corruption, the extent to which people will go to protect themselves, and the extent to which resources accumulated are fed back into 'war chests' for the next electoral cycle*

However, the effort that goes into winning elections also raises a secondary question about what power is then used for. In turn, one of the most disturbing allegations made against Cambridge Analytica by former employee-turned-whistleblower, Chris Wylie, reveals the nexus between big-data manipulation and influence-peddling: that such companies do not necessarily make their money for their work during election campaigns, but afterwards. By securing access to the governments for whom they have secured an election win, they can now do deals with 'their guy' in power. Wylie further alleges that his predecessor, Dan Muresan was killed in Nairobi over a deal gone sour in the aftermath of the 2013 Kenyan election. These claims, together with endemic corruption and increasingly expensive campaigns, raise important questions about the transparency of governance, the increasingly globalised nature of domestic corruption, the extent to which people will go to protect themselves, and the extent to which resources

accumulated are fed back into 'war chests' for the next electoral cycle.

In short, while democracy consists of more than free and fair elections, such processes are a central component of a modern democracy. In turn, problematic elections undermine democracy, while a lack of democracy on a day-to-day basis — from a respect for media freedom to corrupt contracting — undermines the possibility of ever holding free and fair elections.