FESPACO TURNS 50

Africa’s largest film festival, the Pan-African Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou (FESPACO), celebrated its 50th anniversary from 24 February-2 March. The 26th edition of the festival brought together nearly 100,000 film-lovers and screened 165 films from 16 African countries. The government deployed about 2,000 security forces to maximize security surveillance and protect the festival. Joel Karekezi, a Rwandan filmmaker, won the prestigious Golden Stallion of Yennenga for his “Mercy of the Jungle,” a film that denounces the absurdity of war. His main actor, Marc Zinga, won the best male performance award. The best actress award went to Samantha Mugotsia who played in “Rafiki,” a love story between two women in Kenya. The 50th anniversary celebration offered a moment of reflection on the theme, “Memory and future of the African cinema.” Created in 1969, the festival has always had a strong track record promoting social change and cultural diversity. This year’s edition was more open to non-French-speaking African films, with feature films in Swahili and Portuguese. It also addressed some unexplored territories, such as autism and violence against women. Rwanda was the guest country of honour during the 26th edition of the festival. President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta of Mali and President Paul Kagame of Rwanda both participated in the celebrations and both received the ‘Grand Croix de l’Etoil’ award from their Burkinabe host, President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré. The president of the African Union Commission, Moussa Faki Mahamat, called for an “intellectual, cultural and pedagogical awakening,” to be able “to profoundly change the way we look at ourselves, at what we have and what we can do”. Women remain underrepresented, with only four women out a total of 16 filmmakers. The Burkinabe Apolline Traoré was one of the favourite candidates going in, but she only won a technical prize for her film “Desrances” about Côte d’Ivoire’s post-election violence. No woman filmmaker has ever won the top prize. The next Fespaco edition will take place in 2021.
BEATING FAMINE IN THE SAHEL

The Beating Famine Sahel Conference, held from 26-28 February in Bamako, Mali, focused on farmer-managed natural regeneration (FMNR) and other successful land restoration initiatives in the Sahel. It is estimated that FMNR has spread to 21-million hectares in the West African Sahel, making the region a world leader of the land restoration movement. The conference participants adopted a declaration to rally support to restore 100-million hectares of degraded land within the African Forest Landscapes Restoration Initiative (AFR100). Thematic sessions covered a large array of topics, including land restoration for food security and nutrition, agroecology in the drylands and strategies for empowering women and youth to engage in land restoration. An assessment of restoration opportunities in the Great Green Wall core intervention area estimated that 10-million hectares per year would need to be restored by 2030. A combination of sustainable management and restoration strategies now exist, including FMNR, agroforestry tree planting and sustainable land and water/soil management practices, to restore the productivity of the production systems (crops, pastoral and forest landscapes). While cost-effective and appropriate interventions are available, they are not yet well known or widely used. The conference provided an opportunity for participants to share successful strategies, create a supportive network of practitioners and mobilise partners. Organised by the World Vision and the World Agroforestry Centre (ICRAF), with the support of many international partners (CILSS, FAO, SOS Sahel), the conference brought together some 400 key stakeholders. Previous editions took place in Kenya (2012) and Malawi (2015).

SENEGAL: MACKY SALL WINS RE-ELECTION

Incumbent President Macky Sall gathered 2.5 million votes (58%) during the first round of Senegal’s presidential election on 24 February, thus avoiding a second round with a stronger, more united opposition. The two main opposition candidates, Idrissa Seck and Ousmane Sonko obtained 21.5% and 15.67% respectively. Khalifa Sall, the former mayor of Dakar, and Karim Wade, the son of former President Abdoulaye Wade, were unable to run because of corruption convictions. Voter turnout was high (66%) compared to 2012 levels (51.6% during the first round). Some 6.7 million Senegalese registered to vote, including people in the diaspora and two out of three cast their ballots. President Sall’s campaign focused on his infrastructure record; the promotion of global health coverage, which increased from 20 to 47% during his first mandate; and the country’s strong economic growth rate, which has reached to more than 6% during the past three years. However, these positive trends have not yet sufficiently translated into improvements of peoples’ living conditions. Youth employment remains the key challenge for Senegal, a youthful country where the median age of the population is 19-years-old. During his new five-year term, President Sall is expected to continue implementing his Emerging Senegal Plan aimed at promoting structural economic transformation, human capital and good governance, and establishing the conditions for the “emergence of a new Senegal,” by 2035. “This renewed trust motivates me to work twice as hard, to do more and better,” President Sall declared. A large number of regional and international observers followed the elections and judged it as, “credible, peaceful and transparent.” The opposition rejected the results, but decided not to appeal. The new swearing-in ceremony is scheduled to take place on 2 April.

NIGERIA: PRESIDENT BUHARI WINS SECOND TERM

Following a last-minute postponement, Nigeria’s general elections were eventually held on 23 February. Incumbent President Muhammadu Buhari was re-elected in the first round for a second four-year mandate with 55.6% of votes (15.2 million people). His closest rival, former Vice-President Atiku Abubakar gained 41.2% of votes (11.3 million people). Abubakar rejected the results released by the Independent National Election Commission (INEC), denouncing the vote as a “sham election” and setting up a legal team to challenge results. Civil society groups reported violent incidents at various polling stations; it is estimated that nearly 40 people were killed on election day. Some 73 registered candidates ran for president. The number of candidates stands in sharp contrast to the low voter turnout, which dropped to a historic low of 34.7%, the lowest since Nigeria returned to democratic rule in 1999. Voter participation was also weak during the last presidential election in 2015 (43.6%). However, the number of registered voters (84 million) increased by 18% compared to the 2015 election. Election results usually reflect a north-south divide. However, this year both top candidates are Muslim and come from northern states. While Buhari was born to a Fulani family in Katsina, one of Nigeria’s most populous states, Abubakar is the former Governor of Adamawa State in the insecure Lake Chad area. The campaign focused on Nigeria’s three top challenges: insecurity, the weak economy and corruption. While Buhari says he intends to take the country to the “next level,” Abukar promised to “to get Nigeria working again.” Nigeria is one of the most youthful countries in the world, but its political landscape is dominated by the older generation. Both top candidates are in their 70s. A new bill was signed in 2018 to reduce the minimum age of presidential candidates to 30-years-old. Nigeria also has one of the lowest rates of female participation in parliament. Women hold only 5.3% of seats in Nigeria’s state assemblies. The low voter turnout illustrates a growing sense of a disconnect between the Nigerian people and its political elite.
The relationship between a country’s armed forces and its government is a crucial indicator of the quality of its democracy and its degree of political stability. The SWAC Secretariat’s most recent West African Paper analyses civil-military relations in six Sahelian countries (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Senegal). Over the last 30 years, these countries have seen a shift toward more civilian oversight in political affairs. However, democratic institutions remain fragile. In Chad and Mauritania, the armed forces remain the pre-eminent political actor. In Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, sections of the armed forces refuse to accept civilian rule. The Sahel as a whole continues to struggle primarily with domestic security threats. The stabilisation of precarious security situations and the promotion of democratic institutions should be seen as two sides of the same coin. Partners should, therefore, continue to provide military assistance to the Sahel while fostering civilian oversight and democratic reform. Accountability and transparency are key to preventing the erosion of civilian oversight in military affairs. “Any Western support for Sahelian armed forces should ensure that money is spent in accordance with verifiable criteria and that those criteria are made public,” the author concludes.
Who’s Who: Aishatu Binani, Senator of Adamawa Central

Aishatu Dahiru Ahmed, popularly named Binani, won the senatorial seat of Adamawa Central in Nigeria’s general elections of 23 February 2019. The 47-year-old politician and business woman is the only female senator from the North to be elected to the upper chamber of parliament. Her election came as a surprise as she ran for the governing All Progressive Congress (APC) Party in the stronghold of President Buhari’s main rival Atiku Abubakar, who won the state in the presidential elections. Binani is the owner of various companies such as Binani Nigeria Ltd., Binwa Press Limited, Triangular Communications Ltd., Golden Crescent Nigeria Ltd., Infinity Telecoms Ltd. and Quest Ventures. According to a report published by Sahara Reporters, she was accused of being involved in a corruption scandal, together with her husband Modibbo Mohammed, the former executive secretary of the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC), who allegedly embezzled over 50 billion nairas from primary and junior secondary schools. Binani is not a newcomer to the Nigerian political landscape. She was previously a member of the 7th National Assembly where she represented Yola North, Yola South and Girei Federal Constituency of Adamawa State from 2011 to 2015. In a video posted on YouTube, Binani highlights some of her social-economic activities to help develop local health care services, ICT facilities for schools, measures for local farmers and the strategies to fight against crime. In her Twitter profile, she describes herself as follows: “Senator-Elect, Adamawa Central. Wife. Mother. Entrepreneur. Dream chaser. Politician. Advocate of good governance.”

Maps & Facts

Voter Turnout in West Africa

Voter turnout is a key indicator of the vitality of a democracy. It helps measure the trust that citizens place in their political institutions and politicians, and shows how citizens participate in the governance of their country. Low turnout is usually associated with voter apathy and a lack of confidence in the government, institutions and political processes. While the global average voter turnout has decreased significantly since the 1990s, registered voter participation in Africa’s still-fragile democracies has varied widely between countries and over time. Nigeria is the most striking example. Since the return of democracy in 1999, voter turnout reached a peak of 69% in 2003 and has then continuously declined to a record-low of 34.8% in 2019. While Nigeria’s population has nearly doubled over the past 20 years and there are about 25 million additional registered voters, the absolute number of Nigerians who are voting has declined (30.2 million in 1999 compared to 28.6 million in 2019). A large number of socio-economic, political and institutional factors influences the decision to vote. For example, the President Jorge Carlos Fonseca of Cabo Verde secured a second term in the 2016 election, winning 73% of the vote in the first round. The election had a record-low voter turnout of 35.5%, mainly because Fonseca’s re-election was widely expected. Moreover, voter intimidation, electoral violence and fraud can also prevent registered voters from casting their ballots. Despite efforts to engage new, young voters, some West African countries show a significant divergence between the number of registered voters and number of people who are eligible to vote.

Source: Voter turnout database, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA)