

## AFRICAN SOLUTIONS FOR AFRICAN PROBLEMS—STILL SEARCHING

By George F. Ward

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Zimbabwean president and chair of the African Union Summit Robert Mugabe, left, stands next to South African president Jacob Zuma at the African Union summit in Johannesburg, on June 14, 2015. (Source: AP Photo/Shirraaz Mohamed.)

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By Dr. Janette Yarwood

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In this Tuesday, May 26, 2015, file photo, an opposition protester throws water to put out flames on a burning barricade set by him and others, when it started to burn overhead electricity cables providing power to the neighborhood, in the Buyenzi district of the capital Bujumbura, Burundi. Demonstrators said they will continue to protest until President Pierre Nkurunziza steps down at the end of his second term. (Source: AP Photo/Berthier Mugiraneza, File.)

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The Institute for Defense Analyses is a non-profit corporation operating in the public interest.

IDA's three federally-funded research and development centers provide objective analyses of national security issues and related national challenges, particularly those requiring scientific and technical expertise.

IDA's Africa team focuses on issues related to political, economic, and social stability and security on the continent.

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## Creating an African Standby Force—A Long, Slow Road

The [framework](#) for the ASF took shape in 2003, soon after the creation of the African Union. Along with other institutions, the ASF formed part of an African Peace and Security Architecture, the overall aim of which was to furnish African countries with the means to provide for their collective security. The original concept of the ASF included five regional brigades, each with 5,000 personnel. In addition to soldiers, the units would include police and civilian experts. The brigades would be formed under the guidance of the regional economic communities (RECs) responsible for north, west, central, east, and southern Africa. A portion of each brigade was to be prepared to serve as part of a Rapid Deployment Capability (RDC) that would be able to intervene with force in emergency situations as authorized by the AU and the United Nations Security Council.

For a number of reasons, the ASF has [not developed](#) according to the ambitious original plan. There have been organizational difficulties, shortages of funding, and, in some cases, political differences and lack of will. Phase I, which involved setting up organizational structures and command arrangements, was to have been completed by 2005, but was delayed until 2008. Phase 2, in which the ASF would become operational, was to have been completed by 2010, but has not yet been realized. In the western and southern regions, where there were both capable RECs—the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC)—and hegemonic states—Nigeria and South Africa—progress on forming the regional brigade structures was relatively rapid. In East Africa, where several countries are members of more than one REC and where both Ethiopia and Kenya have hegemonic aspirations, progress was slower, but the East African Standby Force (ESF) was seen as [ready to deploy](#) by late 2014. The laggards have been the central and northern regions. In the former, there has been little progress, and in the latter, none.

## A New Concept Emerges

In part because of these delays, African countries have continued to lack effective collective security mechanisms, whether through the AU or the RECs. As a result, they have been obliged to rely on Western intervention in crises such as the Islamist insurrection in Mali and the internecine violence in the Central African Republic. In the latter case, the [failure of a REC military force](#) to support a South African contingent during an attack by Séléka rebels in March 2013 was one factor that led to the loss of 13 South African soldiers.

African frustration and embarrassment with this state of affairs peaked in May 2013, when the AU celebrated the [50th anniversary](#) of the pan-African union (the AU and its predecessor, the Organization of African Unity). At the

meeting, South African President Jacob Zuma, under domestic criticism for the tragic loss of South African soldiers in Bangui, tabled [a new idea](#)—the African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crises (ACIRC). Despite its unwieldy title, the ACIRC was designed to be a flexible and speedy instrument that would make up for the failure to field an RDC. Zuma lobbied intensively for his project with the support of the Nkozasana Dlamini Zuma, the chairperson of the AU Commission, former South African foreign minister, and his former wife. The ACIRC was [included](#) in the results of the summit meeting as a transitional capability.

The ACIRC was designed to circumvent the complicated mechanisms of the ASF. It is intended to have 5,000 troops, of which 1,500 might be deployed at any one time. Rather than being formed through the RECs, the ACIRC would be composed of contributions pledged directly by AU member states and would report directly to the AU. Its freedom of action would also be less circumscribed by the requirement for United Nations approval than that of the ASF. In short, it was supposed to be easier to organize, more agile, and more effective than the nonexistent RDC.

Unfortunately, the ACIRC has had its own problems. In November 2013, President Zuma organized a [summit meeting](#) to make progress on the ACIRC and to collect pledges of forces. Only three other heads of government attended. Six additional countries were represented at a lower level. The meeting ended with pledges of limited forces by Chad, South Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda and a decision to leave further organizational details to the chiefs of national defense staffs.

Various reasons have been advanced for the failure of the ACIRC to move forward. Some see the project as taking away whatever momentum might still be behind the ASF concept. Others are opposed or lukewarm because they view the ACIRC as an attempt by South Africa to throw its weight around. Ethiopia and Nigeria are two military heavyweights that both [initially seemed to support the concept](#), but later moved away from it. Ethiopia has been traditionally wary of committing its military forces to joint endeavors, and Nigeria may be too focused on the fight against Boko Haram to consider external responsibilities.

## Is There a Way Forward?

South Africa seems likely to remain the key actor in the continuing effort to create capabilities that will permit African solutions to African problems. Recent developments suggest that the government in Pretoria wants to continue the ACIRC initiative without abandoning the ASF—its rapid deployment capability being an eventual goal. The chief of staff of the South African army [announced](#) that the ACIRC contribution by South Africa, consisting of 1,800 personnel built around one infantry battalion, will be operationally ready by the end of June 2015. Days later, the AU announced that South Africa would be the venue from October 19 to November 7, 2015, for a large multinational military exercise, [Amani Africa II](#), involving regional standby forces from SADC, ECOWAS, and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS). This exercise is billed as part of the way forward for the ASF.

If the South African ACIRC contingent ends up also forming that country's contribution to Amani Africa II, that exercise will be an opportunity to test whether or not the ACIRC and ASF concepts can be made mutually compatible. In the event the exercise proceeds smoothly, we should not be surprised to see the AU declare the ASF to be operationally ready, with the ACIRC force as a stand-in for a REC-based rapid deployment capability that will remain a project for the distant future. Although this arrangement would not be problem free, it would provide the AU with both a limited emergency reaction force and at least the semblance of an outcome of the long effort to create an ASF.

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Across sub-Saharan Africa, threats to repeal or otherwise circumvent term limits for heads of government have led to broader debates about democratic backsliding and challenges to democracy. Recent citizen activism illustrates the powerful role that actors from “below” play as opposition leaders, social activists, and ordinary citizens have responded to such threats with demands for responsive and accountable government.

## Term Limits under Threat

In recent years, a number of African presidents have attempted to modify or reinterpret their countries’ constitutions to extend their terms in office. In Burundi, President Pierre Nkurunziza’s determination to run for a third term in 2015 has led to protests, a failed *coup d’état*, and the opposition of regional leaders and the African Union. In Burkina Faso in 2014, then-president Blaise Compaoré’s attempt to push legislation through the National Assembly to repeal presidential term limits resulted in a popular uprising and ultimately led to his resignation. In Senegal in 2011–12, then-president Abdoulaye Wade’s attempted constitutional changes and a bid for a third term led to a protest movement that dragged the country into a period of unrest marked by riots, repeated arrests, hundreds of injuries, and a number of deaths. Leaders of the Republic of Congo, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Rwanda, all of whom are term limited, appear to be heading in a similar direction.

## Democracy Grows from Below

While leaders’ attempts to manipulate constitutions to stay in power could be interpreted as democratic backsliding, it may also be that popular protests and sustained opposition from civil society are indications that democratic practices and ideals are becoming entrenched and that African populations are attempting to hold leaders accountable. Afrobarometer surveys conducted between 2011 and 2013 [show](#) that it is now the norm for citizens across Africa to support term limits. The survey found that in 34 countries, about three-quarters of citizens favored limiting presidential mandates to two terms. Afrobarometer surveys also revealed that most Africans reject authoritarianism, military rule, and one-party rule.

As noted in the June 11, 2015, issue of [Africa Watch](#), the political climate in the DRC has been tense since January 2015, when ruling president Joseph Kabila attempted to pass an electoral-reform bill that many argue would have extended his term in office. Citizens in DRC [hit the streets en masse](#), facing [violent](#) crackdowns. In response to the protests, the Senate amended the controversial bill. Kabila, who has been in office for 14 years, has given no indication of whether he intends to run for a third term. Activist groups have [vowed](#) to continue to protest if Kabila attempts a power grab.

Pro-democracy activists influence each other, learn from each other, and [work](#) together by coalition building. This became clear in [March 2015](#), when activists from Senegal’s *Y’en a Marre* and Burkina Faso’s *Le Balai Citoyen* were invited to the DRC for a series of workshops geared toward engaging youth in politics. The visiting activists were arrested and declared *personae non gratae* in the DRC. Pro-democracy activists across sub-Saharan Africa are also becoming emboldened as they see successes in places they never thought imaginable. In an interview with the author, one activist from Burkina Faso noted, “No one ever thought Compaoré would be forced out. If it can happen in Burkina, it can happen anywhere.” A *Y’en a Marre* activist interviewed by the author asserted, “We will go wherever we are invited in Africa; they might try to intimidate us but they can’t and they won’t stop us.” The activist also said that members of the group had been invited to Burundi just before the attempted *coup d’état*.



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Social movement theory [argues](#) that protest movements are often more successful when they emerge within longstanding grassroots movements rather than when they emerge spontaneously in response to triggering events. [Spontaneous collective action](#), however, can invigorate a movement or help develop new coalitions. In Senegal, *Y'en a Marre* activists had been organizing for several months before Wade's attempted power grab, and in Burkina Faso, *Le Balai Citoyen* activists began organizing in 2013, a year before the proposed constitutional changes.

[Research](#) also suggests that forging alliances and building coalitions are essential strategies in grassroots social action. The *Y'en a Marre* protest movement had been collaborating with other civil society groups and had developed an effective media campaign that included direct messaging to the broader population and not just its primary youth constituents. In Burkina Faso, *Balai Citoyen* activists had started coordinating protests with other citizen groups and the opposition. Both groups were also successful in their efforts to link the threat to democracy to the deteriorating social conditions (high unemployment rates, power outages, high costs of fuel and food) in each country.

It is unclear whether the current citizen action in the DRC or Burundi will prevent the ruling regimes from hanging onto power. Citizens in the DRC appear to have built a [loose coalition](#) of organizations. The government, however, has not hesitated to use a variety of means to prevent citizens from mobilizing. These measures have included interruption of Internet access, [imprisonment](#), and [violent crackdowns](#). In Burundi, Nkurunziza has maintained his grip on power and is determined to move forward with elections and his third-term bid, despite anti-government mobilization among the population, increasing insecurity, condemnation from the region and international community, and the threat of sanctions.

## Conclusion

Several African leaders have attempted to change their country's constitutions to extend their terms in office, thereby obstructing democratic progress. African populations have responded by mobilizing en masse to voice their opposition and to defend their constitutions—in some cases facing violent crackdowns by the police or military. As the events in Senegal, Burkina Faso, DRC, and Burundi highlight, popular protests illustrate not only people's willingness to go to extreme lengths to protect their constitutions but also their support for term limits and other democratic institutions. While the actions of some African leaders appear to be setbacks for democracy, the responses by civil society illustrate that the democratization process across Africa continues even as term limits come under threat.

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