

LETTER OF THE DAY

There's more to democracy than elections

In the recent years, social scientists as well as democracy practitioners and aid agencies have sought to develop means of framing and assessing the quality of democracy.

Democracies share at least one broad, essential requirement: the principal positions of political power are filled through regular, free and fair elections among competing parties or candidates and it is possible for an incumbent government to be turned out of office in those elections.

The standard for electoral democracy is more ambiguous than is often appreciated. However, elections are only one dimension of democracy. The quality of a democracy also depends on its level of freedom, pluralism, justice and accountability.

Elections must be conducted within the matrix of civil liberties. In practice civil liberties guarantee that politics will be genuinely competitive.

Before elections, all potential candidates must have the opportunity to offer themselves for office, to express their political views openly, and to garner support in the bid for power. In the same time, citizens must be



equally free to obtain political information to move without hindrance to political meetings, and to opt for political associations of their choice.

Elections alone are not a sufficient condition of democracy.

We do not wish to commit to the misleading notion of "election" by ignoring that the consolidation of democracy in the long run involves the permanent establishment of many other valued institutions, such as control over military, independent legislature and courts, viable opposition parties'

voluntary associations and a free press. But no other democratic institution precedes elections, either in timing or importance. Elections are the principal and are a necessary condition of democracy.

Furthermore we apply the term "democratic" only to the immediate outcome of regime transitions, that is, to signify whether a new regime is installed by electoral means.

**Isabella Bwiire,
Foundation for
Human Rights Initiative**