Interview - Elisabete Azevedo-Harman

Dr Elisabete Azevedo-Harman is a renowned expert on legislative and political institutions and a guest lecturer at several universities, including the Catholic University of Mozambique and the Catholic University of Portugal. She also works as a freelance speechwriter and political advisor and has previously worked for the Chatham House Africa Programme and the United Nations Development Programme covering six African countries. Elisabete's analysis has been published in both peer-reviewed articles and as chapters in books.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

National assemblies in African emerging democracies are not a well-covered topic. The politics in general of new democracies are, but political institutions such as parliaments less so. Most of the states in Africa gained their independence in the 1960s and 1970s and usually did not have experience of having parliaments. This was particularly the case with former Portuguese colonies, as opposed to British or French colonies, because the Portuguese coloniser was itself a one-party state rather than a democracy.

In my field the changes to political institutions in Africa in the 1990s are interesting as they are not well-studied or researched in terms of their impact on governance and accountability. Scholars tend to focus on political parties and presidents rather than parliaments. In the 1970s there was a 'boom' in the number of independent countries and then in the 1990s after the Cold War, suddenly the political institutions which were usually one-party systems had to change in just a few months or sometimes even a few weeks into multi-party systems. There is still a lot of research to be done on how this was carried out and subsequently how they are now operating. They do not easily compare to the Westminster model or other countries with established parliaments. Academics need to be aware of how these institutions developed. It is noteworthy that when I interviewed the first speaker of the South African parliament after the end of the apartheid, it became apparent that in terms of attendance, their parliamentary committees were actually more democratic than in a lot of European countries. Sometimes new institutions can be surprising in terms of their practical development.

I work mainly in the Portuguese-speaking countries in Africa (Angola, Mozambique, São Tomé and Príncipe, Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde) which are very interesting to observe when trying to understand the importance of institutions for democracy and governance in general. These five countries all gained their independence in 1975, following the democratisation of Portugal in 1974. One of the legacies of this Portuguese colonial history is that there were no actual buildings designed for parliamentarians to meet at, so when these countries became stable, the politicians had to decide where to convene. Still today, the parliament in Mozambique is in an old cinema and for several years the Angolan parliament met in a museum. This situation was sometimes different in the case of former French and British colonies. The parliament buildings have gradually been modified, but as is the case in all countries, they pay the price of politics and politicians not being well-perceived by people. When you talk about politics or politicians, especially in democracies, people focus on the negatives. In countries with important issues of governance, if you say to the electorate that a new parliament building is needed, public opinion will be against it. Ironically, the donor which has been helping the most with these buildings in countries like Angola is China rather than a democratic country.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most

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significant shifts in your thinking?

There have been many changes in the region of Africa where I work and live, but the revolution in communications has been amazing, with cell phones and the internet impacting on every aspect of society. Even in rural areas, many people have cell phones now. The access citizens have to communication today has never been seen before and this has a major effect on their understanding of political issues and elections. Looking at the way communities are organised in Africa now, we cannot dismiss the impact of the cell phone.

In terms of people, although individual icons such as Mandela are important, I prefer to look to ordinary citizens and especially African women. In a matter of decades they have made the transition from being colonial subjects, to 'comrades' and then to an electorate. In recent years, they have started the road to full citizenship. More than presidents or other individuals, these normal people are the real heroes. They have experienced civil wars, coup d'états, the Cold War, studying in unfamiliar countries, diseases and inadequate health care. The role of women in expanding higher education has been key and it will be many thousands of people rather than any individual who will move the continent forward.

The last year has witnessed major political change across southern Africa, including the resignation of President Jacob Zuma in South Africa and an end to the longstanding rule of Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe (37 years) and José Eduardo dos Santos in Angola (38 years). How far can these transitions be viewed as part of a region wide trend?

This is again relevant to communication, citizenship and education. The growth in institutions of higher education is often the basis of change. The three countries you listed have been ruled by former liberation movements for a very long time. These liberation movements have become quite alert to how people perceive them and they are obviously concerned about elections. In South Africa, the role of the judiciary was important but President Zuma was actually ousted from the inside by his own political party. This kind of action by a political party is something new we are now observing. This has some similarity to what happened in Zimbabwe and Angola – with the transitions being carried out by the long ruling liberation movements. In the case of Angola, this movement being the MPLA (The People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola), which decided in congress that dos Santos could not run again and he accepted this. The main difference in the case of Zimbabwe was that Mugabe did not accept this change. It is interesting to see how the behaviour within these parties is changing to respond to societies with increasingly independent thought.

This is a general trend across Africa. There is the possibility of a 'snow ball effect' and people do talk a lot about what is happening in countries other than their own. A good example is the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which is paying a lot of attention to other countries in the region. Although we don't know what will happen, in August 2018 President Joseph Kabila announced he would stand down and not stand for re-election in December. Countries are not isolated anymore, with each transition impacting on the region, empowering people who can see changes occurring elsewhere.

President Filipe Nyusi of Mozambique proclaimed that "Mozambique is back" in reference to improved stability in the country. However, unlike his new regional counterparts, Nyusi has already been in office since 2015. How successful do you expect Nyusi will be in addressing the challenges facing Mozambique and does his presidency represent a major break with the past?

I don't think Nyusi's presidency is a break with the past. In 2015, people perceived that the personality of Nyusi was very different from his predecessor Armando Guebuza. However, Mozambique never really had a 'personal' rule – it is really the Frelimo (The Mozambique Liberation Front) party which is in charge. The individual ruler has always had to be accountable and dependent on the party. FRELIMO remains in power and this year the leader of the opposition Renamo (The Mozambican National Resistance) party Afonso Dhlakama died. This changed the political spectrum in Mozambique with a lot of question marks about the future – especially in relation to new leadership in the opposition party. There will be local elections in October 2018 which will be a major test for the three main political parties. The challenges are huge for all of them.

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Frelimo has the 'fatigue' of lengthy governance, facing accusations of corruption, not delivering on development and also being perceived as being dominated by older generations. In the last few local elections, young and urban voters have been very active. Like much of Africa, more than half the population are youths. New voters will count for a lot but we don't know which way they will vote, especially in the cities. In rural areas there is more loyalty to the historical political parties but much less so in urban areas. In the case of Renamo, Afonso Dhlakama had been boycotting local elections, so we do not know if all the support they claimed to have was real – the election will be an important test. The third political party has been facing a lot of internal dissidence. We will need to see how all these factors will play out.

So while President Nyusi does not represent a break from the past, what he faces is a very new context. Dhlakama was leader of Renamo since the 1980s, a charismatic figure and a guerrilla fighter who returned to civil conflict in his final years. The question is whether or not this conflict will continue. But it seems Nyusi will be the Frelimo candidate, which is definitely a continuation. In the ministerial and governor appointments he's made since 2015, there is no sign of a cut with the past at all.

You have argued that Dhlakama stood out as an opposition leader because he led a guerrilla movement then entered party politics for a lengthy period, only to become dissatisfied and return to insurgency in his later years. Did his final period of engaging in insurgency achieve any tangible gains for the Renamo movement which could not have been achieved by peaceful means? Is there a risk of a return to conflict?

Some analysts claim that the steps forward in decentralisation of power to the provinces were only made possible because Renamo had returned to conflict and that it forced the government to negotiate a decentralised model. Renamo always asked for more decentralisation to the provinces, but I think the gains which were achieved could have been made without conflict. There was a correlation between the return to conflict and the Frelimo government ultimately accepting a decentralised model, but we don't know if this wouldn't have happened without the violence. The loss of life and damage to the economy and development has been too great for the outcome to be seen as a gain for anyone. There are two sides to Renamo – the military side and the political side. It seems they will now focus on the political side. There was conflict under Dhlakama and the military component was very important, with the political side never really divorced from the military. But I can't see a return to civil war – they will now play the political game.

What lessons will be taken from Dhlakama's legacy by opposition leaders elsewhere who are frustrated with democratic processes or feelings of exclusion? How can opposition groups throughout the region maintain their appeal to the young and retain relevance?

The most positive feature of Dhlakama's legacy will be his influence on opposition parties in Africa or in any country where there is a dominant ruling party. Dhlakama never perceived himself or his party as a 'loser'. Despite election results, he never understood himself to be on a losing side and instead of giving up retained his self-esteem and hope. He could be criticised for this too – maybe at some point he should have conceded that he'd lost elections – but on balance it is quite positive that opposition parties keep playing their role and resist seeing themselves as 'losers'. They should see themselves as playing an important role and that is the main positive that we can take from the long leadership of Dhlakama. In politics, the opposition party is just as important as the ruling party.

The less positive side to Dhlakama's legacy is in relation to the struggle to democratise his party and how he should have given more space for newcomers to build up the party. Of course, it is easier to say it than to do it, because if you are leading an opposition party in a system with a very dominant ruling party then the challenges are enormous. You have less money and media coverage, but on top of these difficulties people also demand that you build up the party, adhere to democratic values and prepare people to follow them. Dhlakama had newcomers in the party and did build up a new generation, but was always very focused on himself, his personality and charisma. That's a negative lesson which we shouldn't criticise, but we should understand that it means the party is not as strong as it might have been, had it invested more and built itself up as an institution. Because the political party has its origins as a guerrilla group, it has a military discipline which is very understandable in the context of having fought a civil war. If

you transition from a military group to a political party, there will be many influences which carry over from that military history. It would have been very difficult to balance the change from a military force to a political party, but that should be a lesson for countries where there has been conflict and opposition parties have guerrilla fighting origins. How do you move on from being guerrilla fighters to become politicians? If you want play a part in the democratic processes of a country you first need to practice democracy in your own party.

In terms of retaining relevance, I think regardless of how many votes an opposition party receives they are always very important. There is an African proverb which compares sleeping with an elephant in your room to sleeping with a mosquito – it will be easier to sleep with the elephant than with the mosquito. This can apply to opposition parties. In terms of accountability and tackling corruption and poor governance they can be a very important voice. This doesn't mean that ruling parties are 'bad', it is often the system which has flaws, and opposition parties play a role in governance. How they communicate this role to the people is a challenge of course, so they should be careful in terms of leadership, democratisation and the role that they give to younger people. Creating space for greater participation of the young is crucial for the future, especially in Africa which has such a young population.

Opposition parties should avoid being 'prisoners to the past'; in some countries there is a tendency to keep talking about the 1980s, who did what, who the victims were and what the communists or opposing side were responsible for. This happens because the main actors in both the ruling and opposition parties are often still from that period. A lot of the rhetoric used does not have any relevance to young people. One of the challenges is to move forward, discussing issues relevant to the people and also to not just engage in critique but rather come up with actual proposals. Opposition parties should take advantage of decentralisation – since local government is an entry point for opposition parties in these countries. It is difficult to win presidential elections, but at the municipal and provincial levels in South Africa or Mozambique there are a lot of cities and communities ruled by the opposition. This should be seen as both a test and a 'school for governance' for opposition parties. Some oppositions in emerging democracies have no experience of governance, so gaining this experience – and positive results – is useful for their own membership and so that voters perceive them as capable of ruling.

What have been the most significant challenges you have faced in your consultancy work with parliaments and to what extent, if any, have they been shared across different countries?

One of the challenges is caused by democracy – in that every four or five years you have new parliaments with new MPs. Sometimes multilateral institutions such as the UN, which are working to improve governance in these countries, find that their own timelines are inflexible and not consistent with parliamentary calendars. It is challenging for multilateral institutions to understand that they need to have more flexibility to work with parliaments. This includes realising that they need to repeat various projects and programmes – for example it is not enough to have completed a programme two years previously if over 50% of the MPs in a parliament are then replaced.

Although I prefer to work with parliaments, it is easier to work with executives or central banks due to their consistency. Parliaments are stages for politics so they are always more sensitive – you need to be very aware of all kinds of games, avoid getting involved in party politics and be perceived to be independent. This means it is not just enough to *be* independent, you need to be *seen* to be independent. This is a universal challenge, but especially in the countries where I work – where democracy is young – sometimes it is easy for people to state that you're either 'with us' or 'against us'. You need to build up trust and confidence from all parties, because in working with a parliament you will be talking to all of the different actors.

Sometimes I see donors or organisations who announce that they are going to start working with a parliament and I get a bit afraid about how they will do it, because a parliament is such a specific institution. Their lack of awareness is why so many programmes which were intended to assist parliaments have failed in the past. It requires specialist skills and training, underpinned by political science and knowledge of the specific regime, along with having good sense which is not something simply taught in a university.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations or those interested in studying legislative and political institutions?

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In terms of research, I would say that when looking at legislative institutions in emerging democracies (but also in established democracies) scholars should give more consideration to the role of representation and links with communities and citizens. This field of research needs more exploration. In terms of attitude, I would recommend being humble. When researchers work with these institutions, I sometimes see them bring preconceived ideas about how these institutions operate. Instead, in many ways it is better to bring with you a veil of ignorance, then listen and read up without any bias. Sometimes political researchers are not even aware of their own biases, especially when they judge who the 'good sides' and 'bad sides' are or assume they know how a system operates. They should remember that they might not know, that is why they are doing the research! The same principles can be applied to those working in donor partnerships. Blueprints do not work – you need to design solutions to suit the specific institution and remember that they are not all the same. Often people actually know that but don't practice it.