

James Kellman writes: For the first time in the history of Africa's largest country, a challenger defeated a sitting Nigerian president via the ballot box. The losing incumbent in the March 28 election, Goodluck Jonathan, graciously conceded defeat to Muhammadu Buhari, offered his best wishes, and urged supporters to follow due process. Nigeria's accomplishment is all the more remarkable in the face of terrorist threats from Boko Haram.

Yet in much of Africa, democracy remains an empty word. The phrase that U.S. diplomat Edward Djerejian coined in 1992 -- "one person, one vote, one time" - is the more established rule. Leaders, once elected, to contrive to stick around for decades, defying term limits, and rigging elections. For example, the president of Burundi, Pierre Nkurunziza, is standing for election to a third term on July 15, in defiance of constitutional limits. The European Union has withheld funds to conduct the election, and, already, violence has broken out at polling stations.

In Togo recently, President Faure Gnassingbe won a third term. He and his late father have been running the country now for 48 years. Indeed, nine African countries have a leader who has been in power for 21 years or more.

Only one African country, Mauritius, qualifies as a "full democracy." Some 27 sub-Saharan nations are "ruled by an authoritarian regime or nominal democracy," and 13 countries have no presidential term limits.

Freedom House, in its 2015 Freedom in the World report (written before the Nigerian election), concluded that 21 of Africa's 49 countries are "not free," while 18 are partly free. Only 10 nations, representing a mere 12 percent of the continent's total population, are judged "free." Even more disturbing is the trend. In a section on "notable gains or declines," Freedom House cited only one country, Guinea-Bissau, where political rights or civil liberties were improving. In 11 other countries, ratings fell.

Still, there's no doubt that most Africans aspire to freedom, and in fits and starts, the continent has been struggling toward democracy for the past 20 years. But it needs help. At a time when the China Model of authoritarian rule is gaining traction in Africa, the U.S. government

should be more aggressively pushing for free elections and institutions - and backing up democratic advocacy with real funding.

The next year and a half will be critical. Parliamentary or presidential elections are scheduled in nearly half of all sub-Saharan African countries, including the second-largest, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, with a population of 78 million; Tanzania, with 46 million; Cote d'Ivoire, with 20 million; and Burkina Faso, with 17 million.

Resource-rich Congo, Africa's largest copper producer and the source of most of the world's cobalt, provides a good example. Secretary of State John Kerry in May pledged \$30 million in assistance for free and fair Congolese election in 2016, with the condition that President Joseph Kabila respect Congo's constitution, which forbids him a third term. Kabila took power in 2001 at age 29, after his father was assassinated. He won his first election in 2006, but there were accusations by the Carter Center and others that his victory in 2011 was the result of a manipulated vote.

So far, Kabila, like Burundi's Nkurunziza, won't commit to stepping down. In fact, he's been busy trying to silence his potential opponents through legal action - another time-honored technique of African leaders who want to preserve their power. Kabila last week brought fraud and corruption charges against a likely foe, Moise Katumbi, the popular governor of Katanga province and, according to the publication *Les Afriques*, a "formidable competitor" if he chooses to run.

Even in the unlikely event that Kabila declines to run, the \$30 million being offered by the United States is nowhere near enough to ensure a fair election. The total cost of putting on the last election in Congo was \$900 million, according to a detailed report by the Carter Center, which monitored the vote under a U.S. government contract.

Elections aren't cheap - especially in a country with four times the area of France - but they are absolutely vital. Free countries tend not to make war on their neighbors, or harbor terrorists, or countenance corruption.

The good news is that over the past five years Africa has been improving, if only modestly. Scores on the Ibrahim Index of African

Governance have increased for 39 of the 52 nations rated in four categories: safety and rule of law, participation and human rights, sustainable economic opportunity, and human development.

It's clear, however, that Africa won't gain democracy on its own - especially with China pushing the continent in the opposite direction and with the abundant opportunities offered by corruption on a continent flush with natural resources. But Americans understand the continent's importance. Taxpayers have spent billions of dollars to save millions of Africans from dying of AIDS; U.S. businesses have made significant capital investments; and Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama have given moral encouragement to practitioners of good government, rather than cynically backing strongmen.

A free, stable, and economically robust Africa is essential, not just to the wellbeing of Africans themselves, but also to the national security of the United States. That's why all Americans have a stake in substantial U.S. support of democracy in countries like Congo.