Despite the spread of multiparty democracy to many parts of the continent two decades ago, stability has not always followed. Focus on Africa magazine asks:

“Are elections in Africa always worth the risk?”

**Yes**

Fred Oladeinde has worked as a development economist in Africa for the past 25 years and is the president of the Foundation for Democracy in Africa, based in the United States.

Elections in Africa are always worth the risk. There has to be a minimal strength to a country’s institutions that can hold to account the process itself and the subsequent winners.

These include a strong electoral commission, efficient public services free of corruption, an independent judiciary that closes cases and makes decisions, a disciplined and professional police and military organisations that deliver basic standards of transport, schools and health care.

With these in place, the risk of failure is reduced as governments and voters look to avoid the dire consequences of the election. Given the risks of opening tribal, ethnic and regional divisions that lead to corruption and violence, which in turn fuels poverty, disease and war.

**No**

Humphrey Hawksley is a foreign correspondent for the BBC. His new book Democracy Kills: What’s so Good about Having the Vote? is published by Macmillan.

Elections in the bedroom of a democratic system, so a good starting point for this debate would be former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill’s 1947 statement. Democracy, he said is “the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time immemorial.”

More than 60 years later, millions in Africa and other regions of the developing world argue that democracy has failed them so badly the risks of using the election process to advance democracy are always worth the risk.

In 20 years since the end of the Cold War – with communism and fascists defeated – the West has had a largely unprecedented canvas on which to make democracy work. But the scorecard has been mixed. Europe has expanded and become richer. It was rich anyway and its institutions reasonably strong. Russia tried free market democracy and quickly abandoned it in favour of more dictatorial systems. China opted for authoritarianism and forged ahead. Africa, whose countries held elections after election, slid backwards.

When Churchill made his parliamentary proclamation, most Chinese thought it was too soon, the US stated that democracy was not good enough. Indeed, other systems are beginning to prove themselves, particularly in poor societies with weak institutions. Electoral democracy is being called to account.

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