**The Year of Elections: How will democracy fare?**

*By Dr Heather A Thuynsma, Senior Lecturer in the Department of Political Sciences at the University of Pretoria*

From New York’s bustling streets to the dusty roads of the rural community of Mankosi in the Eastern Cape, nearly half of the world’s population will go to the polls in 2024. The so-called ‘year of elections’ will see some 330 million people in seventy countries cast their votes with South Africa’s 60 million citizens among them.

Successful democracies are built on elections that are free, inclusive and transparent and despite the somewhat gloomy headlines, democracies – especially those across the African continent – have had some remarkable successes. Take the voting system used in Gambia as an example. With speculation swirling around the integrity of the elections, this country’s unique voting system stands out. Instead of using paper ballots, Gambians vote by placing marbles into drums that represent each candidate and they know their vote has been counted when they hear a loud ring. The system’s simplicity makes it easy for illiterate and first-time voters to understand, but the technology is also tamper proof – besides the chime, marbles are also counted in large trays with small hollows making the process faster and more accurate.

Then there is the surprising success of Senegal’s new President Bassirou Diomaye Faye, previously an opposition leader who was released from prison 10 days before the election. His emphatic first-round majority of 54 per cent could have triggered a round of rigging and voter fraud allegations. But to their credit, both outgoing president Macky Sall and his preferred successor, Amadou Ba, conceded defeat and ushered in a peaceful transition of power.

Further to the East, Indonesia is the world’s largest direct presidential election with 193 million voters located on 17,508 islands all voting on one day. The 14 February 2024 poll is easily the most complicated election to manage with 810,000 polling stations staffed by some 6 million election workers. The election will see presidential, parliamentary and local legislative representatives elected - some 20,000 seats - and voters will have a choice of 245,000 candidates. Interestingly, in Indonesia the word for voting, ‘coblos’, literally means ‘to punch’ and voters use a nail to punch a hole in their ballot paper. To counter allegations of fraud, these ballots are counted in public with officials holding each one up to see the light shine through the hole. Acknowledging the country’s history of military rule, another measure adopted to preserve electoral integrity was to ban all members of the military and police from voting.

South Africa’s IEC will have its own logistical challenges with over 300 political parties and independent candidates contesting this cycle in addition to managing the latest court orders to establish more polling stations abroad and to allow former President Jacob Zuma on the ballot. The country’s 29 May 2024 poll is set to be the most contested (in both senses of the word) election on record and may well force a shift towards coalition partnerships at both the National and Provincial levels.

**But who cares?**

Elections are rather expensive occasions to manage and contest – in Sub-Saharan Africa alone they have cost around USD 50 billion since 2000. Given these sums, they should be more than procedural events and voters should take their responsibility seriously since their actions (or inactions) ultimately determine the destiny of their nation. But widespread allegations of voter suppression, electoral fraud, as well as disinformation and misinformation campaigns have forced voters to question the legitimacy and integrity of their political systems. In Indonesia for example, one third of voters reported being bribed by candidates in previous elections. Senegal’s poll was delayed because of disputed candidate lists and alleged corruption within the approving body and South Africa’s IEC is litigating its own criteria for candidate admissibility.

What will be interesting is how voters respond to these pre-election shenanigans. There is already a trust deficit that is spurring high levels of voter apathy – especially amongst the youth – and, if governments are not careful, may encourage further political instability.

By the time the US elections roll around in November, election fatigue will most certainly have set in, but the key question is how did our democracies fare?