

BACKGROUND

AFRICA'S POLITICAL SITUATION

The African continent continues to attract international attention for humanitarian reasons and because of the major armed conflicts and numerous civil disturbances that have rocked the majority of authoritarian regimes over the past two years. However, for the first time in almost a decade, international agencies such as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) are seeing positive, though still precarious, development in three areas: progress in implementing reform and economic growth; the first steps toward ending civil war; and the growing interest of African countries in political pluralism.

In the past two years, Africa has mainly been characterized by growing political change and the rise of democratic regimes. This development is marked by the introduction or, in many cases, renewal of a multi-party system in nearly 25 African countries and neighbouring islands. These political changes are closely followed by still-hesitant reform of civil and government institutions, such as the judiciary and the press. A very large number of opposition newspapers have appeared in countries moving toward democratic reform. Africa's electronic media nevertheless remain largely under direct government control.

Although several countries are still criticized by international agencies for their violations of human rights and their restrictions on civil liberties and political freedom, remarkable progress has been made in freeing political prisoners, introducing judicial structures, and democratizing the political process. More than 35 countries have amended or introduced constitutions or basic laws affording every opportunity to establish democratic governments guaranteeing respect for civil liberties and political and individual freedoms. Africans are becoming aware of the importance of protecting human rights. Initial progress has also been made in protecting children and in recognizing the role of women in development.

In spite of the modest progress that has been made and the end of ideological rivalry between the superpowers in Africa, political reform in several countries continues to be heralded and accompanied by violence and civil disturbances. Recent events in a dozen countries that have initiated democratic reforms are a reminder that military intervention remains a real danger. Furthermore, the impact of civil war and armed insurrection still dictates the rules of the game in more than a dozen countries. Finally, opposition to democratization by a number of authoritarian regimes is still a concern.