

# THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA

**VOICES FROM  
AFRICA'S LEADING  
THINK TANKS**



**Edited by ibrahim Bàbátúndé Anóba**

**Foreword by Kamissa Camara**

Former Chief of Staff to the President of Mali, Former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Mali



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Prestige 

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## Foreword

Democracy has, unfortunately, become a buzzword—frequently invoked to describe prolonged and multifaceted socio-political processes involving dialogue, contestation, protest, and, paradoxically, even military coups, or what is often termed in academic discourse as “unconstitutional changes of government.” Nowhere is this complexity more evident than in Africa, where democracy takes on a distinctly unique meaning. It is often employed to describe ostensibly stable countries and leaders whose conduct is the exception rather than the rule. Can a system truly be deemed democratic if its legitimacy relies on isolated successes and the goodwill of individuals, rather than on the strength and resilience of its institutions?

Attempting to predict a country’s democratic trajectory, whether in Africa or elsewhere, is ultimately a futile exercise. Political development does not follow a linear path; it is shaped by an ongoing interplay of contradictions, crises, reforms, regressions, and unpredictable shifts. This inherent dynamism sits at the heart of the eleven chapters that comprise this volume.

Since 2020, Africa has witnessed a resurgence of military coups. Countries such as Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, Sudan, and Gabon have experienced one or two coups each. Meanwhile, Guinea-Bissau, Sierra Leone, Sudan, and Niger

have seen failed coup attempts. In the aftermath, broad segments of the population, particularly the youth, have taken to the streets, voicing support for the military rulers. This trend prompts a fundamental question: Is democracy in Africa in retreat? Was it ever truly established? Or has it always been a fragile *façade*?

At the core of these reflections lies a sobering truth: political leaders, entrusted by their people through consultative processes, have often failed to understand their citizens' grievances or to communicate in ways that resonate beyond elite circles. Once a government loses the trust of its people, restoring legitimacy becomes an arduous endeavour. At that juncture, the stage is set for any actor to seize power by unconstitutional means.

It is only fair to acknowledge that Africa's democratic experience is far from monolithic. Across the continent, democracy assumes diverse forms, shaped by local histories, political cultures, and external influences, as well as by the conscious rejection of those influences. As General Moussa Traoré, Mali's second president who took power via a military coup in 1968 and ruled for 23 years, once famously said: "Democracy is not a straitjacket." Yet it remains the most inclusive system of governance humanity has devised—one that, at its best, responds to the aspirations of the most vulnerable and holds leaders to account.

This book does not set out to determine whether democracy has failed in Africa. Rather, it engages with a deeper inquiry: Does democracy have a future on the continent? If so, what shape might it take, and how can it be made more responsive and rewarding? If not, what viable alternatives might emerge? These are the critical questions that the contributors explore in this



volume, offering perspectives as rich and varied as the continent itself.

## **Why Military Coups Find Popular Support**

One of the most perplexing phenomena in Africa's contemporary political landscape is the widespread support for military coups. The commonly held belief that democracy is inherently superior and universally desired is challenged by the reality that, in many African countries, military officers, convinced of their unique capacity and legitimacy to lead, have contested the authority of sitting governments. This dynamic has sown confusion among young people who are earnestly searching for role models and sources of inspiration.

Regrettably, democracy is often perceived by citizens as a system synonymous with elite domination, corruption, and economic stagnation. In contrast, the military positions itself as a corrective force—promising order, discipline, and the restoration of national sovereignty. In countries such as Mali and Burkina Faso, for example, military rulers have tapped into widespread anti-elite sentiment and frustration with foreign interference, particularly regarding security matters. This helps explain why military leaders are frequently welcomed by cheering crowds, despite the undemocratic nature of their ascension and governance. Their popularity appears not to stem from an ideological commitment to military rule, but rather from a rejection of a status quo that has consistently failed the average African citizen.

Does this mean democracy is doomed in Africa? Not necessarily. However, if democracy is to have a meaningful

future on the continent, it must transcend the notion of ballot-box legitimacy. It must evolve into a system that demands robust accountability from its leaders, ensuring they remain attuned and responsive to the aspirations and needs, both large and small, of their people.

## **Regional and Global Influences on Democracy's Future**

The future of democracy in Africa will also be shaped by institutional actors such as the African Union (AU) and ECOWAS, both of which play pivotal roles in either upholding or challenging the Western democratic model on the continent. As democracy increasingly competes with alternative political systems emerging from China, Russia, and the Middle East, Africa's regional bodies must reconsider how they engage with rogue member states. The notion that there is a single viable governance model for the continent is no longer tenable.

One key takeaway from this volume is that the metrics by which democracy in Africa is assessed must be redefined and made contextually relevant. Conventional indicators such as elections, political parties, and institutional checks and balances may no longer be sufficient for measuring genuine democratic governance. Depending on context, alternative criteria such as social cohesion, livelihood security, and the strength of the social contract may offer more accurate reflections of democratic vitality.

## **A Call for Reflection**

This book does not offer definitive answers about the future of democracy in Africa—because such answers do not yet exist. Rather, it invites readers to engage with competing viewpoints, question entrenched assumptions, and reflect on alternative pathways forward.

Having observed African politics through multiple lenses—as a policymaker, scholar, government official, and citizen—I believe the continent's most urgent task is not simply to defend democracy but to reimagine governance altogether. The failures of previous models should not breed cynicism; instead, they should inspire deeper reflection on how national actors have evolved, how the youth interpret the world anew, and how globalisation has exposed Africa to a multitude of alternative governance frameworks. We now inhabit a world where contradictions abound, yet within those contradictions lie the seeds of new possibilities.

The chapters that follow offer incisive responses to these pressing debates, contributed by some of Africa's most insightful thinkers, each deeply invested in the continent's political trajectory. Their analyses are diverse, sometimes conflicting, but always illuminating. One thing is certain: the future of democracy in Africa is not fixed. It will be determined by those bold enough to imagine and work towards something better.

### **Ambassador Kamissa Camara.**

Former Chief of Staff to the President of Mali; Former Foreign Minister of Mali; Professor of Practice, International Diplomacy, University of Michigan.



# Introduction

*ibrahim Bàbátúndé Anóba, Editor-in-chief,  
African Liberty, Kenya/Virginia*

Democracy, regardless of how we choose to define it, remains a faltering experiment in post-independence Africa. To highlight a handful of countries with successive periodic elections or notable separation of powers as evidence of democracy's success is to miss the forest for the trees. Democracy is not the mere presence of one or two institutions or principles in isolation. Rather, it functions as an ecosystem—a complex network of interconnected organs working in unison. The effectiveness of one institution or principle depends on the success of others. When one or more components collapse, the entire ecosystem effectively disintegrates.

As Ambassador Kamissa Camara notes in her foreword, “democracy” in Africa has become a corrupted term, often used as a catch-all for virtually any political arrangement. For instance, in what world does it seem appropriate to characterise Yoweri Museveni’s 39-year rule in Uganda as democratic simply because elections are periodically held? Similarly, can Paul Kagame’s 25-year tenure in Rwanda be labelled democratic in the same breath as South Africa’s post-1994 governance experience? Democracy

in Africa has become a muddled and overextended designation. It prompts serious reflection on how such distortion may impact the future of liberal democratic principles across the continent. The contributors to this volume explore these possibilities, offering practical and pre-emptive strategies, often in the form of public policy reforms.

One of the most consequential moments for democracy since World War II was the United Nations Commission on Human Rights' 2002 declaration of the ten essential elements (or institutions and principles) of democracy. That declaration significantly redefined democracy as both a political term and a condition. For African countries, striving to meet this idealised model of liberal democracy presents enormous challenges. According to the declaration, a democracy must demonstrate the following elements concurrently: respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms; freedom of association; freedom of expression and opinion; access to and exercise of power in accordance with the rule of law; the holding of periodic free and fair elections by universal suffrage and secret ballot; a pluralistic system of political parties and organisations; separation of powers; judicial independence; transparency and accountability in public administration; and a free, independent, and pluralistic media.

Evaluating these elements in any African country invariably produces subjective results. Yet it is clear that very few, if any, African countries have ever consistently fulfilled all ten elements at any single point since 1950. It is a stark indictment, but one that reflects the reality. Consequently, many scholars and public policy experts argue for an urgent re-evaluation of what

democracy should mean in the African context. What features of African political life render these ten benchmarks so elusive? Is it self-deception to hail countries like South Africa, Ghana, and Kenya as models of democracy simply because they are politically stable? These questions have been widely debated since the early 2000s, but what remains scarce are forward-looking assessments, particularly from policy practitioners and think-tank analysts.

*The Future of Democracy in Africa* responds to this gap. It is a collection of essays that attempts to reframe how democratic success in Africa should be assessed in the near future. By convening a group of seasoned practitioners, this volume offers insights into how those on the front lines of political activism and policy advocacy are navigating Africa's evolving democratic discourse. Accordingly, these essays are not entangled in academic theories or overwhelmed by extensive literature reviews. Instead, they are policy-oriented, opinionated, instructive, and speculative.

Since 2020, coups have re-emerged as dominant features in discussions about Africa's democratic trajectory. According to political scientists Jonathan Powell and Clayton Thyne, of the estimated 492 attempted and successful coups globally between 1950 and 2023, Africa accounted for 220—the highest number of any continent. Of these, 109 were successful, comprising 49% of the total. Between 2020 and 2024 alone, Africa experienced approximately 16 coups. The most recent occurred in Nigeria in April 2024 (attempted by Yorùbá separatists in the southwest) and in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in May 2024 (led by the New Zaire Movement attempting to unseat President Félix Tshisekedi). Both attempts failed.

It is easy to focus solely on coups and lose sight of the broader issues when considering democracy in Africa. The continent's dismal record of unfree and unfair elections, the frequent erosion of judicial independence, and the widespread absence of the rule of law and separation of powers all compound the crisis. The obstacles to Africa's democratic advancement appear not only numerous but deeply entrenched. The chapters in this volume address these challenges from various angles, often taking a country-specific or regional lens to examine the issues with necessary granularity.

In Chapter 1, Primus Tazanu argues that any hope of advancing democracy in Central Africa hinges on the willingness and capacity of the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) to hold member states accountable to democratic principles. He urges ECCAS to broaden its traditional focus beyond economic and security concerns. Tazanu also highlights the problematic ties between entrenched political power structures and the media in certain member states, underscoring the urgent need for greater scrutiny of democracy's condition in the region.

Chapter 2 sees Kouakou Donatien reflect on the recent democratic backsliding in West Africa, concluding with a call for think tanks to play a more influential role in reversing the trend. He argues that democracy's advancement in the region requires greater involvement from civil society organisations (CSOs), particularly think tanks that advocate for open societies. These organisations, he suggests, should prioritise pushing for policy reforms that reinforce individual freedoms and uphold the rule of law.



In Chapter 3, I contend that protests represent the new path toward a more fulfilling democracy in Africa. I challenge the negative perception of protests on the continent, often fuelled by the paternalistic attitudes of political elites and self-styled elder statesmen. I argue that protests are a form of “positive problem” because they reveal the most pressurised areas of democracy that require immediate attention. Without this kind of regular pressure release, democratic systems risk implosion from within.

Dengiyefa Angalapu, in Chapter 4, examines the role of technological interventions in elections and urges that they be seen as more than just “voting tools.” He advocates for strengthening the broader systems that support these technologies, including people, institutions, and infrastructure. Angalapu explores how innovations like blockchain could enhance transparency, inclusivity, and human rights in Nigeria’s democracy. However, he also warns of how social media has eroded public trust in institutions like the Independent National Electoral Commission and the judiciary, while amplifying online violence and reducing voter turnout.

Focusing on Uganda’s electoral history in Chapter 5, Gilbert Sendugwa addresses the challenge of access to information. He calls for urgent improvements in transparency and information liberalisation to reinforce democratic norms. To mitigate electoral violence, Sendugwa urges public and private actors to tackle misinformation both online and offline. He appeals to the Electoral Commission of Uganda, the Uganda Human Rights Commission, CSOs, and the media to promote political education and fact-checking during election periods.

Chapter 6 features Evans Exaud, who argues that Tanzania's democratic progress is linked to economic growth, climate resilience, digital development, and inclusive governance. These, he insists, must be pursued alongside transparency and policies that empower citizens. He also calls for reforms in the education and labour sectors, which are often sidelined in democratic discourse but are vital to sustainable progress.

In Chapter 7, Linda Kavuka focuses on Kenya, asserting that deliberate efforts to fortify democratic principles must become a priority for both the current government and its successors. She stresses that reforms must be top-down, with ruling elites demonstrating constitutional fidelity over political convenience. Kavuka cites the #RejectFinanceBill2024 protests as emblematic of widespread public dissatisfaction with Kenya's socio-political direction.

In Chapter 8, Selorm Branttie uses Ghana as a case study to explore the inefficiencies and strengths of CSOs within African democracies. He focuses on Ghana's 2024 elections, examining how CSOs shaped conversations around accountability. Branttie notes a shift in voter priorities, moving toward good governance and economic development and away from political sentimentality. For CSOs to be more impactful, he advocates collective action to address human rights violations, administrative injustice, and corruption, which he identifies as core impediments to Ghana's democratic growth.

Chapter 9 sees Thabile Samboma highlight gender inequality in Botswana's political representation. Despite comprising half the population and participating significantly in the workforce, women remain starkly underrepresented in political institutions,

especially in the national parliament. Samboma calls for comprehensive reforms to campaign financing rules, intra-party processes, and discriminatory cultural norms that marginalise women.

In Chapter 10, Ngo Tong expresses cautious optimism about democracy's future in Africa. Despite current instability, she believes the continent can still craft inclusive and effective democratic models. Though difficult to design, she argues, these models must integrate Indigenous African socio-cultural traditions and explore novel, even untested, governance formulas.

Chapter 11, by Jonah Kiberu, revisits Uganda and echoes a recurring theme throughout the book: the survival of democracy across Africa depends on radical reforms. These include safeguarding elections, ensuring judicial independence, and protecting civic space. Without such changes, democratic aspirations will remain elusive.

## **About the Volume**

The chapters in this volume are deliberately concise, averaging 3,500 words, to enhance accessibility for the general reader. This structure diverges from the traditional academic model of lengthy, jargon-heavy chapters. The language throughout is clear and direct. Recommendations are presented without recourse to dense theoretical frameworks. This book is intended for a broad audience: African citizens, policymakers, activists, and civil society practitioners.

The views expressed in each chapter are those of the individual contributors and do not represent the official positions of their respective organisations. The featured institutions include:

- **African Liberty** (Kenya/Virginia)
- **Africa Freedom of Information Centre** (Uganda)
- **Audace Institut Afrique** (Côte d'Ivoire)
- **Botswana Institute for Development Policy Analysis** (Botswana)
- **Centre for Democracy and Development** (Nigeria)
- **Foundation for Consumer Freedom Advancement** (Kenya)
- **Gateway Research Centre** (Uganda)
- **Imani Centre for Policy and Education** (Ghana)
- **Liberty Sparks** (Tanzania)
- **Nkafu Policy Institute** (Cameroon)

## CHAPTER 1

# **Free Media and the Future of Democracy in the Economic Community of Central African States**

*Primus M. Tazanu, Senior lecturer, University of Buea, Cameroon  
and Senior fellow, Nkafu Policy Institute, Cameroon*

### **Introduction**

This chapter argues that for democracy to improve in the Central African region, there must be a more integrated and proactive Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), one that takes a keener interest in the functioning of democratic institutions and the freedom of the media. Established in 1983, ECCAS comprises eleven member states: Angola, Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, Rwanda, the Republic of the Congo, and São Tomé and Príncipe. Its headquarters is located in Libreville, Gabon.

Between 1992 and 1997, ECCAS became largely inactive due to financial neglect, as members failed to pay their dues. This period of dysfunction influenced the trajectory of the Great

Lakes conflict, where Rwanda and Angola found themselves on opposing sides. The bloc was revived following the 1998 Libreville Conference, and its original economic mandate—promoting trade and market integration, economic cooperation, and the free movement of people—was expanded to include peace and security within the region.<sup>1</sup>

However, ECCAS remains largely disengaged from issues of democracy in Central Africa. One analyst has described the organisation as “largely ineffective in preventing constitutional changes, ensuring fair elections, or resolving crises.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, as Martin Ronceray and Okechukwu Nneka observe, ECCAS has yet to articulate any concrete democratic objectives.<sup>3</sup> With regard to media freedom, numerous reports, including those from Reporters Without Borders, highlight the unfree and repressive media environments in many ECCAS member states.<sup>4</sup>

Theoretically, this chapter draws on widely accepted ideas about democracy. Here, democracy is defined as a system of governance in which power resides with the people—either directly or through elected representatives. A democratic system seeks to reflect the collective will of its citizens while safeguarding their rights and freedoms, often within the framework of liberal democracy as outlined by thinkers like John Locke.<sup>5</sup> Though susceptible to elite capture, liberal democracy upholds core principles such as human rights, protection of minorities, separation of powers, rule of law, and constitutionalism. It also presumes free, fair, and regular elections alongside mechanisms for checks and balances.

Within this democratic framework, the media plays a crucial role. It enlivens the deliberative aspects of democracy

by informing, monitoring, and mobilising the public.<sup>6</sup> Media institutions and professionals empower citizens to make informed decisions and hold their leaders accountable, effectively functioning as the “fourth estate.” This chapter highlights how entrenched power structures in certain ECCAS states maintain strained or antagonistic relationships with the media, raising urgent questions about the state of democracy in the region. Independent, critical media are essential to expanding democratic space, particularly where avenues to challenge entrenched rulers are limited.<sup>7</sup> The media must be free to report on shifts in power dynamics, violations of the rule of law by state officials, and abuses of human rights. Wherever they occur, such violations reveal an authoritarian tendency among elites and a deliberate shrinking of democratic space.<sup>8</sup>

In the two sections that follow, I argue that ECCAS’s stance on democratic governance and media freedom has significant implications, whether positive or negative, for transparency, accountability, and governance in Central Africa. But first, what is ECCAS’s actual position on the state of democracy in its member countries?

## **ECCAS and Democracy: Between Laxity and Commitment**

Commitment among member states is the driving force behind the effectiveness of any international organisation. Julia Grey observes that the level of members’ dedication, or lack thereof, can determine whether an organisation thrives, stagnates, or becomes moribund. In the case of ECCAS, minimal activity

has become its defining characteristic, largely due to members' reluctance to cooperate meaningfully.

Analysts note that international organisations which begin with a focus on trade often evolve to include other dimensions of cooperation, such as democratic governance, conflict resolution, human rights, and transparent elections.<sup>9</sup> Trade agreements can serve as the entry point for engaging with non-economic issues that are essential to sustainable development. A prime example is the European Union (EU), which began in the 1950s as a purely economic bloc but has since developed into a political entity. Today, the EU addresses issues ranging from peace and security to digital rights and environmental protection. It is also the world's largest single market.<sup>10</sup> In successful regional blocs, deepened integration often follows successful economic collaboration. The question, then, is how ECCAS fits into this theoretical model. What non-trade democratic strides has ECCAS made in its forty-year existence?

To evaluate democracy within ECCAS, we must examine its non-economic engagements, particularly the democratic commitments of its member states. Although founded as an economic bloc, ECCAS depends on political will from member countries to function effectively. Ronceray and Nneka have observed that ECCAS's political governance is "significantly lower" than that of other African regional economic communities. This is largely because ECCAS has not articulated any democratic objectives.<sup>11</sup> It lacks a vision statement or regional governance framework to prevent unconstitutional changes in government or ensure impartial elections.<sup>12</sup> In short, ECCAS has demonstrated



little interest in promoting democracy and is, therefore, ill-equipped to address democratic backsliding within its ranks.

The 2019 revision of its Constitutive Treaty did establish the Peace and Security Council of Central Africa. However, this initiative focuses primarily on state-centric threats such as cross-border crime, piracy, and armed groups, rather than on democratic governance.<sup>13</sup> Compared to more active regional communities like ECOWAS and SADC, ECCAS appears lacklustre. Both ECOWAS and SADC have evolved beyond economic cooperation to embrace political, peace, and security matters. Their effectiveness is bolstered by clear regional leadership, with Nigeria in ECOWAS and South Africa in SADC. ECCAS, by contrast, lacks a unifying leadership figure and suffers from internal rivalries, particularly among the six members of the Central African Economic and Monetary Community (Cameroon, Chad, Central African Republic, Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea and Gabon), who often prioritise that bloc over ECCAS.<sup>14</sup>

This broader institutional weakness is compounded by deep-rooted undemocratic tendencies in ECCAS member states, as outlined by the Institute for Security Studies.<sup>15</sup> Most ECCAS countries operate a presidential system characterised by excessive executive power and minimal accountability. Constitutions are often disregarded, and political power tends to change hands not through elections, but through military coups or dynastic succession. This is facilitated by “parallel networks” that report directly to the president,<sup>16</sup> effectively bypassing other institutions. Recent transitions in Chad and Gabon are telling examples.

In countries like Angola, Burundi, and Rwanda, where military or liberation movements brought ruling parties to power, governance remains tightly controlled, with little room for political pluralism or transparent transitions.<sup>17</sup> Another widespread anti-democratic pattern is the manipulation of constitutions to extend presidential term limits, alongside efforts to weaken judicial and legislative branches. This erosion of checks and balances has allowed the region to produce some of Africa's longest-serving leaders: Obiang Nguema of Equatorial Guinea (45 years), Paul Biya of Cameroon (42 years), and Denis Sassou Nguesso of the Republic of Congo (40 years).

These democratic failings call for firm, pragmatic interventions by ECCAS. The organisation must clearly articulate its democratic expectations for member states, starting with firm commitments to free and fair elections and respect for presidential term limits. Moreover, ECCAS should establish mechanisms to sanction member states that flout these principles. Without such measures, and the political will to enforce them, ECCAS risks further irrelevance in the struggle for democratic governance in Central Africa.

## **New Media and the Prospects of Democracy in ECCAS**

In a democracy, the media plays a critical role in monitoring, mobilising, and informing the public. It provides platforms for debate, public opinion, and deliberation.<sup>18</sup> By reporting on matters of public interest and facilitating communication between politicians and citizens, the media serves a dual function: it allows the public to express their views to political leaders and

enables leaders to convey messages to the public. For the media to fulfil this democratic role, it must be independent, free, and committed to impartiality.

Media freedom entails the right of individuals, media organisations, and journalists to operate without censorship. In the digital era, this also includes the public's right to access, use, create, and share digital content via electronic devices, as affirmed by the United Nations Human Rights Council's 2012 Resolution, which recognises that the rights enjoyed offline must also be protected online.

An independent media is fundamental to promoting transparency and accountability, and to nurturing an informed citizenry. Public engagement with critical social and political issues often hinges on the information they receive, which is largely shaped and disseminated by the media.

Due to its influence on discourse and representation, the media is a contested space, particularly in today's digital age. Politicians and their allies in traditional media often feel threatened by the disruptive force of new media, which has repositioned them as just one among many actors in an increasingly pluralistic information environment. Social media, in particular, enables virtually anyone or any organisation to become a source of news and opinion, which is an unsettling reality for many governments in the ECCAS region. This has led to state-led internet shutdowns, especially during elections, as a tool for suppressing public expression and dissent<sup>19</sup>.

Traditionally, ECCAS states have maintained tight control over "legacy media"—radio and television—and their symbolic power. For instance, between 1960 and 1990, the Cameroonian

government exercised strong control over the country's media. It was only after the enactment of the Freedom and Mass Communication Law in 1990 that some degree of media liberalisation was achieved.<sup>20</sup> Today, the internet and social media have further opened up the media landscape in Cameroon.

However, across Central Africa, the relationship between the state and the media remains fraught. Governments frequently enact Draconian press laws and censorship to suppress independent media. In Cameroon, internet legislation began emerging around 2010, spurred by fears that the internet served as an organising tool for protests. As journalist Kathleen Ndongmo notes, Cameroon's cyber laws aim to suppress free expression by imposing fines and potential jail terms on individuals unable to verify shared information.<sup>21</sup> In the Central African Republic, a 2022 bill, criticised by Reporters Without Borders, criminalises so-called "press offences" and gives the government control over the media regulator, all amidst a context of frequent attacks on journalists.<sup>22</sup>

Beyond these examples, every Francophone ECCAS country has, according to the French Development Agency, tampered with internet access in the past seven years. These acts—whether total shutdowns (e.g. Annobón province in Equatorial Guinea, 2024; Anglophone Cameroon, 2017; Gabon, 2023), targeted application bans (e.g. Chad in 2018–2020), or throttling (e.g. DRC in 2017)—are typically politically motivated and timed to coincide with elections or mass protests. Except for São Tomé and Príncipe, all ECCAS countries have either disrupted internet access or criminalised dissenting online voices.

These repressive tendencies run counter to the optimistic view that digital media can empower citizens and bolster democracy. While ECCAS states cannot fully control how people use the internet, they must begin to see social media as a democratic asset. Digital platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for public engagement and for leaders to connect with citizens. Through digital identities such as email, mobile numbers, and social media accounts, people can share opinions, disseminate news, and build audiences. Marginalised communities, in particular, have found a voice in digital spaces, gaining entry into political discourse they might otherwise be excluded from.

Digital media plays an especially vital role in exposing systemic injustices that marginalise large segments of society. As Nick Couldry argues, digital storytelling enables people to represent themselves within the political domain, creating a corrective space for those historically excluded.<sup>23</sup> In countries like the DRC and Cameroon, social media can serve as a bridge between leaders and the region's more than 250 ethnic groups, facilitating meaningful political dialogue.

Furthermore, social media is an effective tool for political mobilisation. It enables people to organise, collaborate, and express themselves in the public sphere from the privacy of their homes.<sup>24</sup> Hashtags such as #BringBackOurInternet (Cameroon), #CongoIsBleeding (DRC), and #KeepItOn (global campaign against internet shutdowns) illustrate how citizens now use digital platforms to participate in civic activism. The town square has gone virtual, and social media now functions as the new town hall, a space that political elites in ECCAS should actively embrace for better public engagement.

Beyond encouraging democratic use of social media, ECCAS member states must invest in the digitalisation of state institutions. According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, mobile internet users in the Central African region numbered 46 million in 2019, out of a population of 199 million, which represents a significant lag behind other regions. Enhancing digital infrastructure would improve public participation in governance and reinforce democratic processes.

## **Conclusion**

Cooperation among ECCAS member states holds significant potential to reinforce the regional framework for addressing shared democratic challenges. To achieve this, the bloc must adopt a clear vision statement and develop a framework that explicitly promotes good governance, the rule of law, human rights, and media freedom. Upholding media freedom is particularly vital for ensuring the accountability of state institutions, enhancing political participation, and gauging public opinion.

This chapter contends that ECCAS must move beyond its traditional focus on economic and security concerns. It should boldly articulate a vision for building a more democratic region. A key part of this vision must be the recognition of the media as an indispensable pillar of the democratic process.

At present, most ECCAS member states continue to resort to internet shutdowns. Such actions undermine, rather than enhance, democracy. They curtail citizens' rights to free expression and public engagement. Contrary to state assumptions, digital platforms can, in fact, serve as valuable tools for advancing democracy and human rights. These platforms enable dialogue

between state actors and citizens and create spaces where marginalised voices can be heard.

Ultimately, expanding internet infrastructure and protecting digital freedoms across ECCAS countries will significantly strengthen democratic practice in Central Africa. ECCAS must seize this opportunity to lead a regional transformation—one where democracy is not just stated, but substantiated through action.

## Endnotes

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## CHAPTER 2

# **Reversing the Backsliding Democracies in West Africa: The Challenge for Think Tanks**

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### **Introduction**

The pursuit of democracy in West Africa is deeply intertwined with broader struggles for individual freedoms, human rights, and the rule of law. Since the wave of independence in the mid-twentieth century, countries in the region have aspired to build societies grounded in these foundational principles. The “transition paradigm,” a dominant framework for understanding democratisation, suggests that countries moving away from authoritarianism are likely to evolve into stable democratic regimes.<sup>1</sup> This assumption has fuelled optimism that the widespread embrace of democratic governance in the 1990s would naturally lead to robust democratic institutions across West Africa.

Indeed, countries like Ghana and Senegal have made notable strides and are now seen as models of democratic resilience within the region. However, for others, including Guinea, Niger, and Côte d'Ivoire, the journey toward democratic consolidation has been anything but linear. In these contexts, democratic institutions continue to falter, substantiating the scepticism of scholars such as Thomas Carothers. Carothers famously critiqued the transition paradigm, warning of a persistent “grey zone” where political systems are neither fully authoritarian nor genuinely democratic.<sup>2</sup>

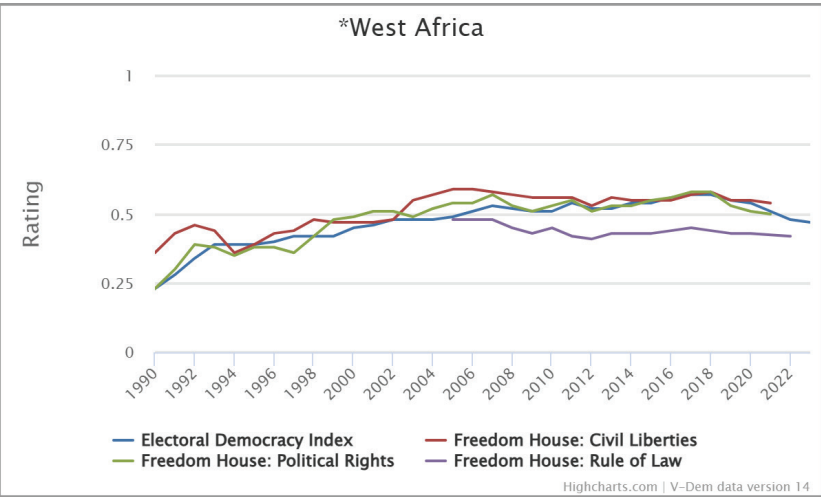
Despite the initial promise, democracy in West Africa has yet to live up to the high expectations of its citizens. Nonetheless, Afrobarometer surveys consistently reveal that a majority of Africans still consider democracy the most desirable form of governance.<sup>3</sup> That said, there is a rising sense of disillusionment, driven by enduring economic hardship, the erosion of human rights, and the weakening of legal and institutional frameworks. This growing frustration has led some citizens to become less willing to defend democracy and increasingly tolerant of authoritarian alternatives, including military rule.

This chapter argues that the future of democracy in West Africa rests significantly with civil society organisations (CSOs), particularly think tanks that champion open economic systems and democratic norms. These institutions must intensify efforts to promote civil liberties and the rule of law in order to strengthen democratic governance across the region. By analysing both the opportunities for democratic renewal and the threats that imperil progress, this chapter underscores the centrality of freedom and

legal integrity in charting a sustainable democratic path for West Africa.

### The Quality of Democracy in West Africa

West Africa has made notable progress in democratic governance since the 1990s. Measures such as the “Electoral Democracy Index” and related indicators point to significant advances across the region. **Figure 1** illustrates steady improvement in key metrics, including political rights and civil liberties, particularly in the two decades following the initial wave of democratisation. This upward trend reflected a growing acceptance of democratic governance, an expansion of political freedoms, and increasing adherence to the rule of law during a period of substantial transformation.



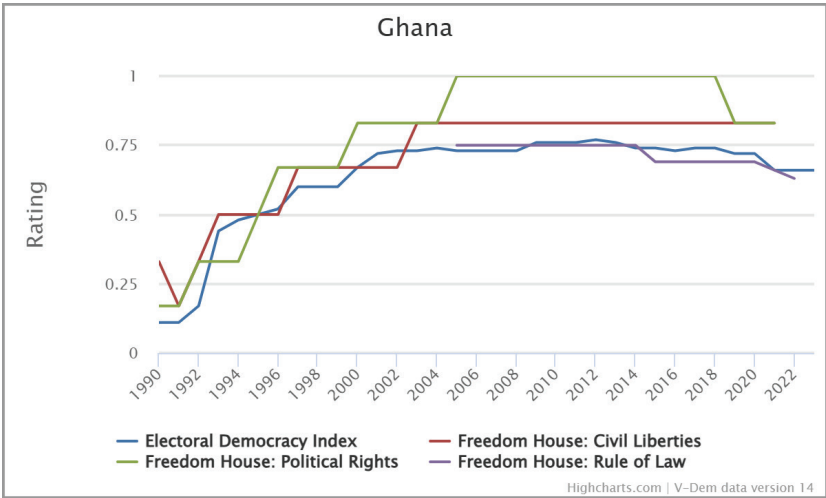
**Figure 1:** *Growth of democratic indices in West Africa between 1990 and 2022.*

Source: V-Dem Institute.<sup>4</sup>

However, this progress has been uneven and, in recent years, limited. As shown in **Figure 1**, many of the indices plateaued or experienced slight declines after 2010, revealing the challenges in maintaining the momentum achieved in earlier years. This stagnation coincides with the waning influence of the “transition paradigm,” which had assumed a linear progression from authoritarianism to consolidated democracy. Today, many West African countries continue to struggle with fragile institutions, resurgent authoritarian tendencies, and socio-economic instability—conditions that threaten the gains of earlier democratic transitions.

Countries such as Côte d’Ivoire, Guinea, Mali, and Niger, which once offered hope for democratic consolidation, have experienced democratic reversals. Côte d’Ivoire under President Alassane Ouattara and Guinea under President Alpha Condé witnessed extra-constitutional extensions of presidential terms, while others, namely Guinea, Mali, and Niger, have succumbed to military takeovers.

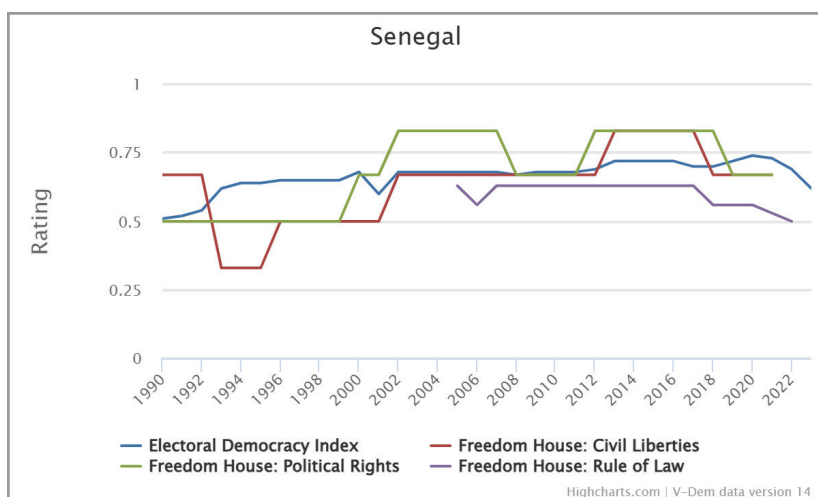
Amidst this discouraging backdrop, a few countries remain exceptions. Ghana, in particular, stands out as a model of democratic consolidation. As shown in **Figure 2**, Ghana has demonstrated consistent progress in political rights and civil liberties since the 1990s, especially between 1992 and 2004. The country’s ability to conduct regular, peaceful elections and manage political transitions has reinforced its status as a beacon of democratic resilience in West Africa. Most recently, the 2024 presidential election, in which ruling party candidate Mahamudu Bawumia conceded defeat to opposition candidate John Dramani Mahama, further cemented Ghana’s democratic credentials.



**Figure 2:** *Growth of democratic indices in Ghana between 1990 and 2022.*

*Source: V-Dem Institute.<sup>5</sup>*

Senegal is another encouraging example of democratic stability in West Africa. As illustrated in **Figure 3**, the country has maintained a relatively high performance on the Electoral Democracy Index. Senegal’s democratic strength stems from its history of transparent elections and peaceful power transitions, notably in 2000 and 2012. Although there have been some fluctuations in indicators such as the rule of law and political rights, Senegal has consistently outperformed most of its regional counterparts and remains a vital stabilising force in the region.



**Figure 3:** *Selected Democracy and Freedom Indices for Senegal.*

*Source: V-Dem Institute.<sup>6</sup>*

Despite these outliers, a recent Afrobarometer report underscores a critical contradiction in African democracies: while 66% of Africans express support for democracy, dissatisfaction with its actual implementation continues to grow.<sup>7</sup> The report highlights a widening gap between public expectations and the democratic order delivered by governments. Since 2010, satisfaction with democracy has declined, driven by persistent failures in governance, poor service delivery, and weakened legal systems. Although citizens remain committed to democratic ideals, enthusiasm for periodic elections is waning, and tolerance for alternatives such as military rule is increasing.

One of the primary reasons for this erosion of public confidence, according to Afrobarometer, is the persistent disregard for the rule of law by state officials. This finding is



supported by data in **Figure 1**, which shows stagnation in the rule of law across West Africa since the mid-2000s. The lack of significant progress in this area underscores enduring problems such as judicial weakness, corruption, and inconsistent law enforcement. While other democratic indicators have improved over time, the failure to advance the rule of law represents a significant barrier to achieving genuine democratic consolidation in the region.

### **Threats to the Future of Democracy in West Africa**

Democracy in West Africa faces unique and significant challenges that distinguish the region from others. Longstanding political instability, coupled with the rise of terrorism in the Sahel, has created a complex context in which democratic governance is increasingly difficult to sustain. These threats are deeply rooted in the region's historical and political landscape, where the manipulation of democratic norms, repeated military interventions, and elite power struggles intersect. Addressing these challenges requires tailored, context-sensitive solutions that reflect the region's fragile institutions, socio-economic pressures, and evolving security threats. Without such nuanced approaches, attempts to safeguard democracy risk failure, leaving the region vulnerable to further instability and democratic regression.

One of the most pressing threats is the manipulation of constitutional term limits. This practice, often accompanied by violence and erosion of judicial independence, has become worryingly common. In recent years, countries like Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea have provided striking examples. In Guinea, President Alpha Condé altered the constitution to allow himself

a third term, despite having completed two. The move triggered political unrest and violent crackdowns on protests, culminating in a military coup that interrupted what was becoming a fragile tradition of electoral power transitions.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, in Côte d'Ivoire, President Alassane Ouattara's decision to pursue a controversial third term after a constitutional amendment sparked electoral violence in 2020, leaving over 80 people dead and 600 displaced.<sup>9</sup> In Togo, constitutional revisions now allow President Faure Gnassingbé to remain in power indefinitely.

Such constitutional manipulations not only undermine democratic norms but also set a dangerous precedent, encouraging support for undemocratic power transitions, including military coups. These actions erode public confidence in democratic institutions and contribute to the normalisation of unlawful, non-peaceful transfers of power. This growing trend must be actively monitored and challenged through civic advocacy, legal reform, and informed public discourse.

Closely tied to this threat is the fierce competition for power among political elites. In West Africa, elite power struggles frequently exclude the broader population from meaningful participation in governance. These rivalries often focus on controlling state resources and personal proximity to power, rather than addressing public needs. This exclusionary political culture fosters a lack of accountability, allowing leaders to operate with impunity. As a result, governance becomes ineffective and riddled with corruption, eroding public trust. Increasingly, citizens disillusioned by failed leadership and broken promises have turned away from democratic institutions, creating opportunities for authoritarianism or military interventions to

take hold. The popularity of military regimes in parts of the Sahel reflects this dissatisfaction with civilian governance.

Military coups remain a persistent feature of West African politics and have become increasingly common in recent years, representing a direct threat to democratic consolidation. Data shows that West Africa has experienced the highest number of coups on the continent since the end of colonial rule, making them the leading cause of democratic backsliding in the region. Countries such as Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger are currently governed by military juntas, reversing decades of democratic progress. These coups are often driven by economic grievances and disillusionment with the ruling elite, but are also linked to rising insecurity and terrorism.

The surge in terrorism has added a new dimension to the region's democratic challenges. Security threats have made military rule more appealing to populations desperate for stability and protection. Unlike earlier coups, recent military takeovers in the Sahel have been largely bloodless and popular, with many viewing the incoming regimes as preferable to the weak and corrupt civilian governments they replaced. Consequently, these military leaders often enjoy considerable legitimacy, enabling them to resist calls for a return to democratic rule.

The creation of the Alliance of Sahel States in 2023 by Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso, following their withdrawal from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), reflects this trend. The new alliance underscores the widening rift between military regimes and regional democratic frameworks. Analysts often argue that the reluctance of these regimes to

reintroduce democratic governance was a key reason behind their ECOWAS exit.

To counter this growing threat, there is an urgent need for targeted civic education that underscores the value of democracy, the protection of individual liberties, and the necessity of the rule of law. While military regimes may offer short-term security, they ultimately risk undermining the institutional foundations necessary for long-term peace, prosperity, and democratic resilience in West Africa.

## **Strengthening Democracy in West Africa: The Role of CSOs and Think Tanks**

Democracy is facing credible criticism, particularly in Francophone West Africa. Observers have pointed to the behaviour of major Western powers in the region, whose actions often seem to prioritise strategic interests over the promotion of liberal democracy. By supporting illiberal civilian leaders, these powers inadvertently undermine the democratic values they claim to uphold. Yet, despite its flaws, liberal democracy remains the most effective system for protecting individual rights and freedoms. At its core, democracy empowers citizens through participation and the rule of law. It establishes a structure that prevents the concentration of power and safeguards human dignity. For these reasons, democracy must be actively defended. Civil society organisations (CSOs), especially think tanks that support open market systems, are vital to preserving democratic principles across West Africa.

CSOs have long played a pivotal role in strengthening democracy in the region. Since the early 1900s, organisations

such as the Centre for Democratic Development in Ghana and Tostan in Senegal have been instrumental in promoting civic education and encouraging citizen participation. These groups, particularly those that operate as proper think tanks, have also mobilised against anti-democratic actions by civilian elites. By educating the public, monitoring elections, and holding governments accountable, CSOs have become key pillars of democratic resilience. At a time when democratic backsliding is evident in several countries, the role of these institutions is more critical than ever.

Think tanks, in particular, are well positioned to counter the rise of authoritarianism by advancing counter-narratives that champion liberal democratic ideals. Authoritarian regimes increasingly rely on populist rhetoric, justifying their rule as necessary for stability and national security. In response, think tanks can expose the long-term dangers that such regimes pose to civil liberties and democratic governance. Through publications, public forums, and discourse, they can educate citizens about the fundamental components of liberal democracy, such as judicial independence, inclusive representation, and the protection of civil liberties. For instance, think tanks can highlight how democratic systems are better equipped to deliver lasting peace and prosperity, whereas authoritarian regimes often fail to deliver on development promises. By restoring faith in democratic values, think tanks serve as critical counterweights to autocratic tendencies.

A central task for think tanks is to clarify the difference between a genuine liberal democracy and its illiberal imitation. Many West Africans have become disillusioned by leaders who

use democratic institutions as a façade while consolidating personal power. Think tanks must help citizens recognise that these shortcomings do not stem from democracy itself, but from those who distort its principles. By consistently emphasising transparency, accountability, and individual rights, they can reshape public understanding of democracy as a system built on principled leadership and fair governance.

In today's international and regional context, where traditional institutions like ECOWAS have diminishing leverage, the role of citizens in defending democracy becomes even more essential. Think tanks can empower citizens to fulfil this role by equipping them with the knowledge and tools to understand and assert their constitutional rights. Through grassroots education, workshops, and accessible publications, they can help citizens hold their leaders accountable. This citizen-led approach is especially important given the waning influence of Western democratic actors and the rising scepticism toward foreign intervention. Without a well-informed and engaged public, democratic backsliding will continue, leaving fewer checks on executive power and further undermining democratic accountability.

How, then, can think tanks concretely fulfil these responsibilities?

One of the most effective strategies is through public education. An informed population is vital to the health of any democracy.<sup>10</sup> Think tanks should develop and distribute educational materials—across print, digital, and social media platforms—that clearly explain democratic principles. These materials should be translated into local African languages to ensure accessibility. By simplifying complex concepts and linking

them to current events, think tanks can make democracy more relatable and relevant. This approach not only deepens public understanding but also helps identify the risks posed by military rule and illiberal regimes.

In addition to public education, promoting intellectual debate is crucial. Conferences, seminars, and panel discussions on democracy and governance can bring together academics, activists, policy experts, and community leaders to explore and celebrate democratic values. These forums foster the exchange of ideas and inspire collective solutions to regional challenges. By encouraging cross-sectoral dialogue, think tanks can adapt global democratic principles to local contexts, thereby reinforcing a culture of accountability and respect for the rule of law.

Think tanks also play a unique role in bridging the gap between academia and civil society. Academic institutions often produce high-quality research on democratic governance, but that research rarely reaches grassroots communities. CSOs, meanwhile, are effective in advocacy and mobilisation. By creating partnerships between scholars and local organisations, think tanks ensure that academic insights inform real-world practices. This collaboration allows democratic values to be disseminated more broadly and more effectively, empowering citizens at all levels to participate meaningfully in governance and to defend democracy from erosion.

## **Opportunities for Democracy in Youth and Technology**

West African youth represent the backbone of the region's democratic future. Their active participation in political processes

is essential to the defence of freedoms and human rights. With over 60% of the population under the age of 25, young people are not only the most affected by political repression, but they are also among the most vocal and influential advocates for change. Youth-led movements across the region have consistently demonstrated resilience and a steadfast commitment to democratic ideals. The recent mobilisation of Senegalese youth in response to efforts to undermine electoral processes and suppress opposition voices ahead of the 2024 elections is a prime example. Such resistance is crucial in challenging entrenched political systems that limit inclusive governance, particularly by marginalising already vulnerable communities.

However, despite their immense potential, many young West Africans are becoming increasingly disillusioned with politics. Years of political mismanagement, electoral violence, and systematic restrictions on basic rights such as freedom of speech and assembly have left many young people cynical about democracy. This disillusionment has created a vacuum that authoritarian actors have been quick to exploit, offering narratives that appeal to youth discontent. In this context, think tanks must prioritise youth engagement in their broader mission to promote liberal democracy. They are uniquely positioned to reshape how the region's youth understand governance, civic responsibility, and the promise of democratic institutions.

Importantly, these efforts should not be limited to older youth or young adults. High school students also need to be engaged. By introducing liberal democratic principles to teenagers, think tanks can begin to foster a culture of civic participation from



an early age and nurture a generation that understands the importance of democracy and is prepared to defend it.

At the same time, digital technology offers both risks and opportunities. While the internet has contributed to an epidemic of misinformation that threatens democratic discourse, it also presents powerful tools for democratic advancement. One of the most urgent areas for digital intervention is electoral transparency. In many West African countries, electoral violence and perceived manipulation have eroded public trust in the democratic process.<sup>11</sup> Côte d'Ivoire, for instance, has experienced repeated electoral tensions, including a civil war in 2010 triggered by disputes within the electoral commission. With tensions already mounting ahead of the October 2025 elections, restoring trust is more critical than ever.

Here, technology can be transformative. By advocating for automated vote-counting systems, which have already been successfully implemented in various countries, think tanks can support efforts to ensure transparency and reduce the risks of human interference in elections. Digital solutions can help restore credibility to the electoral process and strengthen public confidence in democratic institutions.

Beyond elections, e-governance platforms can reinforce the rule of law by making government processes more transparent and accessible.<sup>12</sup> Digitising systems for administrative documentation, tax payments, and other bureaucratic services can foster greater accountability and reduce opportunities for corruption. These platforms empower citizens to access legal protections and vital services, while also providing tools to hold governments financially and ethically accountable. In doing so,

digital governance supports not only transparency but also the broader protection of human rights.

## **Conclusion**

The future of democracy in West Africa depends on an unwavering commitment to the core principles of freedom, human rights, and the rule of law. The region currently faces serious democratic challenges, including constitutional manipulations, elite-driven power struggles, and a resurgence of military coups. These threats have the potential to unravel decades of democratic progress and further weaken institutions that protect human dignity.

Yet, amid these challenges lie meaningful opportunities for democratic renewal. Civil society organisations, especially think tanks, can play a pivotal role in deepening public understanding of liberal democracy. Through public education, intellectual discourse, and partnerships with grassroots organisations, they can help demystify democratic governance and rebuild public trust.

Youth mobilisation and digital engagement offer particularly promising avenues. By engaging young people and promoting the use of technology in governance and elections, think tanks can foster a more informed and active citizenry. In a political landscape marked by volatility and uncertainty, these efforts are critical to protecting and advancing democratic ideals across West Africa.

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## CHAPTER 3

# Paradox of Protest and the Future of Democracy in Africa

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### Introduction

Protests serve as both guardrails and slippery slopes in the life of a democracy. Protests prevent democracies from collapsing and could also precipitate democracies' downfall. The paradox of protest is a recurring theme in Africa's recent political history and it will continue to shape the continent's democratic future. The nationalist movements that led to indigenous rule across much of Africa in the mid-twentieth century were built on protest. Similarly, the recent Arab Uprisings of 2010 and 2011 in North Africa demonstrated the power of protest to dismantle governments. Yet, in the years that followed, Egypt, Libya, Sudan, and Tunisia all witnessed the emergence of repressive regimes. Whether through cabinet resignations or violent uprisings, protest has emerged as a force that builds and breaks democracies.

Since 2020, protests have erupted in several of Africa's more stable democracies, including Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, and South Africa, in response to grievances that relate directly to the fundamental promises of democratic rule. In 2024, millions of Ghanaians took to the streets over irregularities in the voter register (elections-related). That same year, Kenyan President William Ruto's attempt to introduce a new tax regime sparked widespread protests (legislature-related). In 2020, Nigerians launched the #EndSARS protests against police brutality (human rights-related). Senegal saw major protests in 2021 over the detention of opposition candidates, and more protests in 2024, when presidential elections were postponed (elections-related). In 2021 in South Africa, protests erupted in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng in response to the imprisonment of former President Jacob Zuma for contempt of court (judiciary-related). These protests disrupted the respective countries, led to loss of life and property, and caused widespread instability. Yet, before they became anything else, they were expressions of public dissatisfaction with state agencies. They were necessary correctives; responses to conditions that had weakened democratic systems. While the unintended consequences of such protests cannot be ignored, they will continue to serve this corrective role in African democracies.

For the sake of clarity, throughout this chapter, I use the term "democracy" to refer to both liberal and illiberal forms. As Africa looks to the future, preserving liberal democracies and reforming illiberal democracies towards the former requires the "protest gauge" on the continent to remain balanced. To do so means that both protesters (usually the people) and those whose actions or

inactions spark protest (usually the government or state agencies) must see protest not as a threat, but as a democratic necessity.

In this chapter, I argue that more frequent and meaningful protests are essential to making democracies in Africa more responsive and rewarding. At the same time, I suggest that over the coming decades, protests may also pose an unprecedented threat to the survival of some democracies on the continent. This is because protests will amplify pressure on pre-existing “stress points.” These stress points are Janus-faced issues within a country that can be either existential threats or opportunities for radical transformation. Stress points include unresolved ethnic tensions, prolonged economic hardships, secessionist movements, culture wars, xenophobic tendencies, etc.

Protests will reignite these stress points, sometimes with constructive outcomes, and other times with destructive consequences, depending on how much pressure is applied (e.g., violent state responses, rioting, inflammatory rhetoric, or interference by foreign actors). In other words, the point of this chapter is to iterate that the future of democracy in Africa lies in accepting and understanding the paradox of protest as an apparent factor.

## **The “Stress Point” Spectrum**

A stress point refers to a preexisting societal problem that is not the initial cause of a protest but is awakened during the course of it and rapidly becomes a pivotal factor in determining the protest’s ultimate impact. Stress points are activated under the pressure of public mobilisation, simultaneously bearing the

potential to either strengthen or collapse a democracy. These are the two poles of the protest spectrum.

On the one hand, if protest pressure pushes towards the positive end of the spectrum, several constructive outcomes may emerge: reinforcement of the rule of law, closure of institutional loopholes that enable abuse of power, empowerment of citizens, and the recognition and expansion of individual freedoms under the law. On the other hand, if the pressure tips towards the negative end, it results in a democratic breakdown. The signs include the rise of a civilian or military tyrant, or the Balkanisation of the state into zones controlled by authoritarian actors.

The recent protests in Nigeria and Kenya lean towards the positive end of this spectrum. Nigeria's 2020 #EndSARS movement, while initially focused on police brutality, quickly revealed a deeper, long-standing stress point: the entrenched culture of impunity among the political elite, which had for decades left ordinary citizens feeling marginalised and disposable. Similarly, during Kenya's 2024 #RejectFinanceBill2024 protests, which were sparked by unpopular tax reforms, the emerging stress point was a familiar one: widespread public frustration with elite disregard for citizens' economic well-being. In both cases, the protests evolved beyond their immediate triggers, bringing pre-existing stress points into sharp focus. Crucially, these protests resulted in tangible democratic gains. Nigeria saw the introduction of reforms aimed at addressing police abuse, while Kenya's government ultimately scrapped the proposed tax hikes. Although these outcomes did not resolve the deeper stress points entirely, they signalled the potential of protest to push democracies towards reform and renewal.



Sudan, however, offers a cautionary tale from the opposite end of the spectrum. By the time long-time ruler Omar al-Bashir was ousted in 2019, he had allegedly won four rigged elections and held power for 30 years. The protests that erupted in December 2018 were initially driven by soaring living costs and economic decline. Yet the underlying stress point that surfaced, and ultimately precipitated al-Bashir's fall, was a widespread public reckoning with decades of political failure and repression. While the removal of al-Bashir was a monumental event, it did not lead to democratic consolidation. Instead, it triggered further instability and Sudan fragmented into competing factions governed by rival military juntas. In this case, the protest reignited a stress point that tripped the nation into a deeper political crisis.

These examples make one thing clear: when protests erupt, they will invariably expose pre-existing stress points. The outcome, whether a country moves towards democratic strengthening or collapse, depends on how those stress points are managed, both by the protesters and by those in power.

### **Three Stress Points of the Future**

Africa's population is projected to reach 2.4 billion by 2050 and 4.2 billion by 2100.<sup>1</sup> This demographic boom is unfolding against a backdrop of immense economic stress. Several oil-exporting African countries are already grappling with financial instability due to falling oil prices, which is likely to worsen as the global economy pivots away from fossil fuels. Meanwhile, mineral-rich countries continue to be hamstrung by corruption and mounting debt obligations, preventing them from realising fair returns on export earnings. Development assistance in the form of loans

has significantly declined from Western lenders, while China, Africa's dominant Eastern creditor, faces economic headwinds that may challenge its lending capacity in the coming years.<sup>2</sup>

If these trends are harbingers of Africa's economic future, then it is almost certain that many governments will struggle to generate sufficient revenue to sustain their economies. Prolonged economic hardship tends to destabilise democracies, making them more susceptible to widespread protests. When these protests ensue, dormant stress points are reawakened, and depending on how pressure builds, the consequences could be either reformative or catastrophic. My projection is that Africa will see more protests in the coming decades and these protests will pressurise three primary stress points: crippling economic realities, sectarian divisions, and foreign meddling.

These three stress points already represent fault lines of volatility, and in any future protest where they surface, the stakes will be even higher. Take Cameroon, for instance. In the event of major future protests, the unresolved Ambazonia crisis, a separatist tension, will almost certainly resurface. Mishandling this stress point could either push the country towards genuine democratic reform or towards disintegration. In Equatorial Guinea, where 75% of the population lives in poverty and the economy contracted by an average of 4.1% annually between 2013 and 2023, the dominant stress point is economic. A protest could quickly centre on the decades of mismanagement and the elite's failure to distribute the country's oil wealth equitably.<sup>3</sup> In former French colonies such as Djibouti and Gabon, rising anti-French sentiment (a foreign meddling stress point) may explode into national unrest, echoing the political transformations seen

recently in Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali. These scenarios foreshadow the uncertain futures awaiting countries that remain economically fragile, politically unstable, and democratically illiberal.

### *Crippling Economic Realities*

Economic dissatisfaction is the most prominent stress point in African protests since 2015, and it is poised to remain the most recurring over the next decade. It is especially true for resource-dependent countries already showing signs of volatility and weak economic growth. For example, Angola, Chad, and Nigeria, all of which have experienced frequent protests in recent years, are expected to continue struggling economically.<sup>4</sup> Should economic performance deteriorate further, even protests unrelated to economics could ignite other stress points. Another angle to consider is the intersection of poverty and population growth. Countries with persistently high poverty rates (50% or more) and rapidly growing populations, such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Ethiopia, and Nigeria, are particularly vulnerable. Unless they achieve dramatic economic transformation on par with China's feat of lifting 800 million people out of poverty in four decades, these countries may be unable to keep pace with rising demands.<sup>5</sup> In such contexts, any protest, whatever its immediate cause, could activate the economic stress point with potentially destabilising consequences.<sup>6</sup>

### *Sectarian Divisions*

Over the last twenty years, sectarian tensions, often ethnic or religious in nature, have intensified across Africa.<sup>7</sup> Interethnic

violence has returned even to places where it previously led to catastrophic outcomes, including Chad, the DRC, Madagascar, Nigeria, Rwanda, and South Sudan. During protests, these sectarian divisions become highly volatile stress points. They can quickly transform peaceful demonstrations into existential threats to national unity and human security.

While national reconciliation is often cited as the remedy, it is not easily realised. The experiences of Rwanda and Nigeria show that even when there are efforts at reconciliation, deep-seated mistrust can remain dormant, ready to rupture under political pressure. A single disproportionate crackdown, especially one that affects a particular ethnic group, could revive these tensions. In Rwanda, for instance, one poorly-handled protest by Paul Kagame's Tutsi-dominated government that aggravates Hutu grievances could risk sparking a civil war. In Nigeria, if a president from outside the southeast or south-south were to mismanage protests in those regions, it could rapidly escalate into a national crisis. These scenarios highlight the need for more deliberate, ethnically sensitive approaches to protest management. Responses from security forces and public officials must be free from ethnic bias and tailored to de-escalate rather than inflame tensions.

Frustration among African youth, especially over economic exclusion and political marginalisation, is equally a serious issue in this conversation. While the current young generation of Africans may not be as ideologically committed to separatism as their elders, the former's lived experiences of exclusion make them vulnerable to similar sentiments. In Sudan (2019), Nigeria (2020, 2024), and Kenya (2024), youth-led protests have been

galvanised by a shared sense of sidelining by gerontocratic political systems. While youth do not constitute a “sect” in the traditional sense, the intergenerational marginalisation they face places them in a similarly precarious social position.

### *Foreign Meddling*

Over the last decade, there has been a surge in anti-imperialist sentiment across Africa, particularly in relation to Euro-American influence. Nowhere has this been more visible than in former French colonies, where widespread resentment culminated in the expulsion of French diplomats and the toppling of perceived pro-French regimes by military juntas in Burkina Faso (2022), Guinea (2021), Mali (2020, 2021), and Niger (2023). In each of these cases, protests that began over domestic political or economic issues gradually activated the foreign meddling stress point, fuelled by longstanding perceptions of French suzerainty. The resulting wave of military coups found justification in the anti-imperialist sentiment unearthed during the unrest.

However, this stress point is not limited to Francophone Africa. In Nigeria, for example, accusations of foreign interference emerged in response to the 2024 #EndBadGovernance protests. Nigerian politicians claimed that Russian operatives had infiltrated demonstrations in the northern Nigerian states, citing video evidence of pro-Russian chants and flags. Dozens were arrested, including Polish nationals.<sup>8</sup> These developments reignited debates over the cultural difference and political orientation of northern Nigeria, with some questioning whether the region's identity is more closely tied to its Sahelian neighbours than to the rest of Nigeria southward. Here, the foreign meddling

stress point overlapped with long-standing sectarian stress points, suggesting how easily several stress points can combine and pose a formidable threat to a democracy.

Looking ahead, Africa's geopolitical relevance is only increasing. Since 2020, the United States and its European allies have intensified efforts to counter Chinese and Russian influence globally. Africa has emerged as a key theatre in this renewed great power rivalry. Military competition is intensifying, with foreign powers seeking to establish a dominant presence across the continent. In countries like Equatorial Guinea, Gabon (both linked to China), and the Central African Republic and Sudan (both linked to Russia), the next wave of protests may very well activate the foreign meddling stress point, especially if public anger targets the perceived complicity of foreign governments or corporations.

The scramble for Africa's natural resources, particularly crude oil and strategic minerals like cobalt, further compounds the issue. Nowhere is this clearer than in the DRC where the cobalt rush has fuelled a humanitarian crisis. Countries with vested interests, more so China, have largely ignored the devastation.<sup>9</sup> In doing so, they have inadvertently created a volatile stress point, one that may explode the next time mass protests erupt in the DRC.

## **Bottom Line**

The trajectory of protests across Africa since 2015 highlights the grave danger that deep economic hardship, sectarian divisions, and widespread suspicions over foreign meddling pose to the survival of democracy on the continent. These stress points

are not just theoretical; they are real, recurring triggers that, if mishandled, can unravel political stability. It is imperative that governments in countries where any of these three stress points exist, approach future protests with utmost caution, even when the initial triggers of such protests appear unrelated. A protest might not directly collapse a state, but governments often either lose power or, if they manage to hold on, are left haunted by the looming threat of a larger, more destabilising protest on the horizon.

Protests are almost always underpinned by feelings of marginalisation, oppression, and exclusion. They typically emerge when people believe their voices are being ignored. When the economy worsens, the public assumes the political class remains unaffected. When unpopular laws are passed, citizens demand to be heard. The implication is clear: it is in the interest of African governments to create systems where citizens feel seen, valued, and heard. Failure to foster this sense of belonging is a recipe for recurring unrest.

In a democracy, power is not a birthright. This principle should apply equally in Africa. Sometimes, the simplest way to defuse a major protest is through the resignation of an underperforming state official. Yet, in many post-colonial African countries, resignation remains culturally alien. This entrenched resistance only reinforces the public's perception of a detached elite and pushes people towards protest as the only viable outlet for demanding change. Unless this unsavory dynamic shifts, more disruptive and consequential protests lie ahead, especially if those in power continue to believe that they are irremovable and that a country will not fall no matter the scale of public outrage.

At the same time, responsibility also lies with Africans. Future protests must aim for meaningful and democratic outcomes, not brazen violence.

The recent scenes of jubilation across parts of the Sahel in response to military coups are troubling. While they reflect legitimate frustrations with civilian rulers who exacerbated several stress points, celebrating military takeovers as a solution is a dangerous illusion. There is no democratic future in the suppression of the constitution. Governance by decree belongs in the past. History confirms that military regimes in Africa, like their corrupt civilian counterparts, often serve narrow interests rather than the public's interest. The military is not a political friend, and it cannot be trusted with power.

Protests are a necessary force—perhaps a necessary evil—in Africa's democratic journey. They are essential for holding power to account and for pushing governments to respond to citizens' needs. However, the paradox of protest, the fact that it can both preserve and imperil a democracy, demands extraordinary caution. The way African leaders and citizens choose to navigate this paradox will determine the future of democracy on the continent.



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## CHAPTER 4

# **Rebooting Democracy in Nigeria: Prospects and Challenges of Technology in Elections**

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### **Introduction**

Elections are a cornerstone of liberal democracy. They offer a vital mechanism through which performing individuals can be rewarded with political office, while those who have failed to deliver may be removed. Ideally, elections help to establish a credible social contract, forming the bedrock of governmental legitimacy. In practice, however, there are increasing doubts about whether periodic elections consistently result in the election of capable leaders, or whether those elected remain truly accountable to their constituents.<sup>1</sup>

Concerns around flawed electoral processes—manipulation, irregularities, and abuse—have become especially pronounced in countries like Nigeria, where elections are widely perceived as zero-sum contests marked by violence and rampant misuse

of power. Such dysfunction not only jeopardises citizens' rights and undermines the rule of law but also erodes one of the most fundamental democratic principles: the right to vote and be voted for.<sup>2</sup> A growing body of experts has linked these systemic failures to the weakening of democracy and the recent resurgence of military coups in Sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>3</sup> These issues have prompted electoral management bodies to turn to technology as a means of protecting electoral integrity and enhancing democratic participation.

Nigeria's political landscape is shaped by a complex interplay of historical legacies, socio-economic challenges, and deep ethno-regional fragmentation. In this environment, flawed elections carry consequences that extend beyond disenfranchisement or rights violations—they threaten national cohesion and even raise the spectre of secessionist agitation.<sup>4</sup> Since the country's return to civilian rule in 1999, all seven general elections have been marred by heightened tensions and mutual accusations of fraud. Public trust in the electoral process has been repeatedly called into question, as both the electorate and political actors continue to doubt the impartiality of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC).<sup>5</sup>

In response, INEC has increasingly embraced technological innovations aimed at improving the quality and credibility of the electoral process.<sup>6</sup> From early attempts at digitising the voter register in the 2000s to the introduction of biometric authentication systems and, more recently, the deployment of an online results portal to enhance transparency, Nigeria has made considerable strides in the use of election technology.<sup>7</sup> Yet, paradoxically, these advancements have coincided with a steady

decline in public confidence. This is reflected in voter turnout figures, which dropped from approximately 57% in 2007 to just 27% in the 2023 general elections—the lowest in over four decades.<sup>8</sup>

Against this backdrop, it becomes imperative to critically examine Nigeria's evolving relationship with election technology, especially in the aftermath of the 2023 elections. This chapter reflects on the implementation and limitations of key innovations such as the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and the INEC Results Viewing Portal (IReV). It explores how future technological developments might be harnessed not only to restore trust but also to deepen democratic practice in Nigeria by promoting inclusivity, transparency, and the protection of human rights.

## **Reflections on Technology and the 2023 General Elections**

The 2023 general election marked a watershed in Nigeria's electoral history, primarily due to the unprecedented scale of technological deployment by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). For the first time, the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IReV) were widely implemented, following earlier pilots in the Isoko South Constituency 1 by-election in Delta State (September 2021) and off-cycle gubernatorial elections in Anambra, Ekiti, and Osun.<sup>9</sup> Unlike in previous elections, the 2022 Electoral Act provided formal legislative backing for the use of BVAS, mandating its deployment for the 2023 polls.

BVAS is a sophisticated tool that uses biometric features, such as fingerprint and facial recognition, to authenticate and accredit voters. It also captures images of polling unit result sheets (Form EC8A) and uploads them to an online platform. Its main advantage lies in eliminating manual verification, which has historically enabled multiple accreditations and voting fraud. IReV complements BVAS by offering real-time public access to polling unit results. Designed as a transparency mechanism, IReV was intended to democratise election monitoring, allowing individuals to verify official results as INEC uploaded them.

INEC reported that over 93 million Nigerians were registered for the 2023 general election.<sup>10</sup> However, BVAS encountered significant operational hurdles on election day. Reports from across the country highlighted technical failures, such as difficulties in capturing biometric data, particularly for elderly voters,<sup>11</sup> and challenges posed by poor internet connectivity in remote areas.<sup>12</sup> In many polling units, delays caused by BVAS malfunctions led officials to revert to manual verification,<sup>13</sup> fuelling public frustration and casting doubt on the system's reliability. It is worth noting that many of these issues stemmed from the inadequate training of electoral officials rather than fundamental flaws in the BVAS device itself. This underscores the importance of broader systemic factors—digital literacy, training quality, electricity supply, and internet infrastructure—in determining the efficacy of election technologies.

The IReV platform also faced its own share of complications. During the collation of presidential election results, the portal allegedly suffered server outages, causing INEC to delay uploading key data.<sup>14</sup> This accessibility failure provoked widespread

suspicion and accusations of result manipulation. While INEC cited technical difficulties, the delay significantly undermined public trust and became a focal point of legal challenges, which eventually reached the Nigerian Supreme Court.

This chapter argues that election technology must be understood not merely as physical tools for registration, accreditation, voting, or result collation. Rather, it encompasses a wider ecosystem of supporting infrastructure—people, processes, and systems—that determines whether technology enhances or hinders democratic practice. Social media is one such component. In 2023, platforms like X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and WhatsApp played a prominent role in voter engagement and election monitoring. Users provided real-time updates from polling stations, reported irregularities, and held election officials accountable. Hashtags such as #NigeriaDecides2023 and #ProtectYourVote reflected widespread civic participation and the increasing influence of digital platforms on political discourse. Post-election, as legal battles ensued, hashtags like #EyesOnTheJudiciary emerged to symbolise public vigilance and the demand for judicial transparency.

However, social media also became a double-edged sword. It facilitated the spread of disinformation, including AI-generated voice and video content that blurred the line between truth and fabrication. Fake news about cloned voter cards and preloaded BVAS results circulated rapidly, sometimes inciting panic.<sup>15</sup> Unverified reports of ballot box theft and vote rigging sowed further distrust.<sup>16</sup> More troublingly, social media became a vehicle for delegitimising democratic institutions, especially INEC and the judiciary, and fomented online abuse that

occasionally spilled into physical violence. These dynamics, in turn, contributed to low voter turnout, suggesting that even when election technologies perform well, their broader credibility can be eroded by the ecosystem in which they operate.

A critical lesson from the 2023 experience is that technology, on its own, is no silver bullet. Its effectiveness depends on a supportive environment, which includes well-trained, ethical personnel, a resilient infrastructure, and a culture of respect for due process among both citizens and political actors. As technologies evolve, so are the methods of subverting them. For example, while BVAS has curbed over-voting, it is not a voting machine and cannot verify the actual vote cast by an individual. This loophole leaves room for post-accreditation manipulation, such as falsified results being uploaded to IReV under the pretext of technical issues at the polling unit. This scenario played out notably in Rivers State during the 2023 presidential election.<sup>17</sup>

In Lagos, technology was expected to perform optimally. However, voter suppression tactics, including misinformation and physical intimidation in opposition strongholds, ensured that the technology was either not used or rendered ineffective. In some instances, opposition party members were accredited but ultimately prevented from voting. Meanwhile, vote trading has become more prominent as politicians shift tactics in response to new technology, relying less on ballot snatching and more on exploiting economic desperation.

In conclusion, while technology holds promise for improving Nigeria's electoral integrity, its success will ultimately hinge on how it is embedded within broader democratic systems.



Trust, transparency, competence, and accountability remain indispensable.

## **Future Technological Moves to Safeguard Nigeria's Democracy**

While the 2023 general elections marked significant progress in technological deployment, further innovations hold the potential to reshape Nigeria's political landscape. To strengthen its electoral system, Nigeria must actively research global best practices and adopt technologies that enhance accessibility, transparency, and accountability. This section presents practical recommendations for stakeholders to consider for future elections.

### *Technology and the Voter Registration Process*

Nigeria must better leverage technology to enhance and democratise the voter registration process. Although described as a “Continuous Voter Registration” system, in reality, registration opens and closes around election periods due to post-registration procedures such as voter roll updates, identity verification, and voter card printing. While INEC has introduced a self-registration portal, applicants are still required to complete the process in person, which often discourages participation and disenfranchises citizens.

A particularly problematic consequence is the automatic exclusion of young voters who turn 18 within three months of an election—they are forced to wait another four years before they can vote, barring cases where there is an off-cycle election. The justification for this cut-off, based on the need to print voter cards, is increasingly outdated, especially as BVAS does not

require a physical card for voter accreditation. The 2022 Electoral Act only mandates visual confirmation of the card. Eliminating this requirement could reduce unnecessary costs and allow funds to be redirected toward other technological improvements.

Rural access to registration is also a long-standing issue. With over two-thirds of Nigeria's population living in rural areas, many citizens struggle to reach registration centres due to infrastructural challenges.<sup>18</sup> Mobile-enabled biometric registration presents a promising solution by allowing individuals to register remotely via their mobile phones. Adding biometric authentication to this system could improve data accuracy and reduce logistical burdens.

India's Aadhaar biometric ID system, which has enrolled over 1.3 billion residents, including rural populations, serves as a valuable model.<sup>19</sup> A similar approach in Nigeria could expand voter access and political participation among historically marginalised communities.

### *Blockchain and the Possibilities of Electronic Voting*

While electronic voting has garnered growing interest, its practical implementation in Nigeria remains limited. Blockchain technology, familiar to Nigerian youth through cryptocurrency platforms, holds potential for electoral reform. Known for its security and transparency, blockchain creates an immutable ledger of votes that can be verified by voters and authorised entities.<sup>20</sup>

Estonia provides a compelling example. Citizens can vote online using blockchain-secured systems, boosting trust and facilitating remote participation, particularly for citizens living

abroad.<sup>21</sup> Switzerland has also piloted blockchain voting in local referenda. Given that over 17 million Nigerians live in the diaspora, blockchain-enabled e-voting could increase turnout by making participation more accessible. Moreover, INEC staff, election observers, journalists, and security personnel, who are often unable to vote due to deployment, could also benefit.

Electronic voting also reduces the need for printed ballots, lowering costs and mitigating physical violence or voter suppression tactics. Blockchain's smart contract functionality offers an additional innovation: by linking campaign promises to verifiable outcomes, elected officials can be held accountable in real time. Taiwan's use of blockchain to monitor government performance demonstrates its potential.<sup>22</sup> Nigeria could replicate this model to establish a transparent ledger of public transactions, enabling real-time scrutiny of fund allocation and contract execution, thereby reinforcing political accountability and reducing corruption.

### *Election Results Transmission and Management in Nigeria*

There is an urgent need to enhance the efficiency and transparency of Nigeria's election result transmission and management system. Central to this reform is the optimisation of the BVAS and the IReV. Currently, BVAS is primarily used to capture images of result sheets (Form EC8A) at polling units. However, its utility could be significantly expanded to include the direct entry of disaggregated vote totals for each political party. This enhancement would necessitate the redesign of the IReV portal into a more interactive, spreadsheet-like interface that allows

real-time tabulation and verification by the public, even those with minimal technological literacy.

While the INEC may express concerns that such transparency could undermine the role of its officials in the formal announcement of results or challenge the Commission's constitutional mandate, this paper contends otherwise. Enabling the public to follow results transparently, especially when margins are clear, will not erode INEC's legitimacy. On the contrary, it represents a critical step toward restoring public trust in the electoral process.

Already, various civic technology initiatives, situation rooms, and independent data analysis centres attempt to parallel the result collation process. A systematic upgrade of BVAS and IReV would support these efforts and institutionalise a participatory and credible result management ecosystem, aligning with global best practices in electoral integrity and digital democracy.

### *The Role of Artificial Intelligence*

Artificial intelligence (AI) offers promising tools for electoral administration, from fraud detection to logistical forecasting. AI can analyse historical voting data and demographics to predict risks of voter suppression or identify underserved regions. It can also be employed to monitor social media for disinformation trends and voter manipulation efforts.

AI-driven fact-checking is crucial during elections, when false narratives can undermine democratic processes. Countries like France and Japan have used AI to detect and debunk misinformation during election cycles.<sup>23</sup> Nigeria could adopt similar tools to promote informed participation. The growing

popularity of fact-checking in Nigeria, led by groups such as the Nigerian Fact-Checkers Coalition and the Centre for Journalism Innovation and Development's Dubawa ChatBot, demonstrates the feasibility of integrating AI into voter education and media accountability.

Moreover, AI could help clean Nigeria's voter register, which remains plagued by inconsistencies. It could also simplify complex political manifestos, making them more accessible to the electorate. For voters with disabilities, AI-powered tools such as text-to-speech and speech-to-text can promote inclusivity in the electoral process.

### *Challenges to Integrating Technology*

Despite the potential of election technology, it is no panacea. Technology is a tool—neutral in itself—and only as ethical as those who design and use it. A dangerous over-reliance on technology risks replacing civic engagement with automation. Physical voting fosters a sense of civic responsibility that cannot be fully replicated online.

Moreover, elections are just one component of democracy. A functional democracy demands active participation, institutional trust, and adherence to due process. Technology cannot replace these core values. Nor is any system immune to manipulation, especially by those who control it. Programmers, technicians, and vendors could be coerced, bribed, or threatened, and in a tech-driven election, their influence could become disproportionately powerful.

Even in best-case scenarios, technological failure remains a possibility. Nigeria's experience with the IReV portal during the

2023 presidential election serves as a cautionary tale. Without analogue backups, such failures could spark chaos. Hybrid systems remain essential.

While technology might streamline elections, it could complicate post-election adjudication.<sup>24</sup> Tech-related disputes may require specialised courts or judges with technical knowledge. Legal systems must evolve accordingly.

There is also the issue of technological sovereignty. Nigeria imports most of its election technology. As such, foreign developers and hosting entities become unwitting stakeholders in its electoral process, raising fears of digital neocolonialism. This is particularly dangerous for countries with weak cybersecurity frameworks and inadequate data protection laws.

Additionally, infrastructural limitations, such as erratic electricity, poor internet connectivity, and a shortage of skilled personnel, continue to undermine the effective deployment of electoral technology.

INEC's own institutional shortcomings and logistical difficulties further compound the problem. Public trust is further eroded by the absence of independent audits of election technology like BVAS and IReV, with INEC serving as both operator and sole assessor.

Ultimately, no amount of technology can compensate for the absence of political will, civic responsibility, and institutional integrity. Technology must be complemented by strong institutions and principled individuals. If politicians and citizens continue to exploit loopholes or undermine systems, no technological solution will suffice.

While INEC has received much criticism for the 2023 elections, the local government elections conducted in 2024 by State Independent Electoral Commissions were arguably worse, often resulting in sweeping, unchallenged victories for ruling parties. Likewise, political party primaries remain plagued by disputes and litigation, highlighting that the root of electoral dysfunction lies deeper than technology alone.<sup>25</sup>

Despite being one of the most technologically advanced electoral systems in Africa, Nigeria continues to grapple with calls for further innovation. But democracy cannot be automated. Integrity, accountability, and participation must be cultivated. Technology can support these values, but it cannot replace them.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter does not suggest that an ideal democracy must become “robotic.” Rather, it explores the potential of a more thoughtful integration between technology and human agency in strengthening Nigeria’s democratic institutions. The 2023 general elections demonstrated the promise of digital technologies, but they also revealed the infrastructural and administrative shortcomings that currently hinder Nigeria’s digital transformation.

To achieve a sustainable model of digital democracy, Nigeria must make substantial investments in digital infrastructure, particularly in underserved and rural areas. Strengthening data protection laws and equipping election facilitators with robust cybersecurity skills are equally essential to safeguarding electoral systems from internal vulnerabilities and external threats.

Moreover, the Nigerian judiciary must evolve to meet the demands of digital jurisprudence. As technology becomes more embedded in electoral processes, legal practitioners and judges will increasingly face complex questions related to digital evidence, systems integrity, and algorithmic accountability. An informed and adaptive judiciary will be crucial in resolving emerging disputes credibly.

It is important to underscore that technology alone cannot resolve Nigeria's democratic challenges. However, when effectively harnessed within a broader framework that emphasises accountability, respect for human rights, and the rule of law, technology can become a powerful catalyst for democratic renewal. The key lies in adopting a deliberate and balanced approach.

A democracy overly reliant on technology risks becoming detached and rigid, while one reliant solely on human judgement remains vulnerable to manipulation and inconsistency. A mature democracy requires both technology to curb human excesses and humans to provide context, ethical oversight, and interpretive flexibility. Each must complement the other. Neither should be treated as optional, and neither should be allowed to dominate.

By striking this balance, Nigeria can cultivate a resilient, inclusive democratic culture—one that not only meets the aspirations of its people but also sets a meaningful precedent for the rest of Africa.



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## CHAPTER 5

# **Information Pollution During Elections: A Threat to Uganda's Democracy**

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Timely access to accurate and reliable information is essential for voters to participate meaningfully in elections and to foster public trust in the electoral process. In Uganda, limited access to information, coupled with the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation during elections, poses significant challenges to the country's democratic development. This chapter examines the importance of information access, its grounding in regional and national legal frameworks, Uganda's historical experience with electoral information dissemination, and offers recommendations to strengthen democratic governance through enhanced public access to information.

## **The Importance of Access to Information in Elections**

Informed public participation is fundamental to a robust democracy. The African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance underscores this by promoting conditions that facilitate public engagement, transparency, access to information, press freedom, and accountability among state officials. Specifically, Article 19(2) mandates that each state party ensure security, free access to information, non-interference, freedom of movement, and full cooperation with electoral observer missions.<sup>1</sup>

Access to information is crucial throughout the electoral cycle for several reasons:

- It enables voters to make informed decisions by providing timely, accurate, and comprehensive information about candidates and the implications of their votes.
- It promotes transparency, allowing voters to scrutinize the actions of candidates, political parties, and election officials, ensuring the process is conducted fairly and openly.
- It facilitates accountability, empowering voters to hold elected officials and political candidates responsible for their actions and promises.
- It builds trust and encourages participation in the electoral process.
- It helps prevent electoral malpractices and fraud by ensuring that information on candidates, voters, and

participation procedures is widely available, particularly to marginalised groups such as persons with disabilities.

- It strengthens democracy by empowering citizens to make decisions that reflect their interests.

The right to access information in the context of elections is also enshrined in Article 13 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, which affirms every citizen's right to participate freely in the government of their country.<sup>2</sup> In 2017, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights issued guidelines for electoral stakeholders, including election management bodies, political parties, law enforcement agencies, election observers and monitors, traditional and online media platforms, media regulatory bodies, and civil society organisations, to enhance public access to information and build trust and accountability in elections.<sup>3</sup>

## **Uganda's Legal Framework and Practice on Access to Information**

Uganda has made constitutional provisions to guarantee citizens' access to information and participation in democratic processes, notably through Articles 41 and 38.<sup>4</sup> Access to information allows citizens to understand electoral processes, political candidates, and their agendas. Under Article 9(5), Ugandans have the right to access reports of assets and liabilities and audited accounts of candidates during elections, upon payment of a prescribed fee to the Electoral Commission of Uganda (ECU). However, this requirement is inconsistent with the Access to Information Act,

which stipulates in Section 47(2) that fees should represent only the actual cost of retrieval and reproduction of information.<sup>5</sup> The imposition of fees has largely hindered public access. Therefore, harmonising the Political Parties and Organisations Act with the Access to Information Act is essential to facilitate easier access, which could positively influence public voting behaviour.

Access to information is also vital for the public to assess the compliance of various electoral stakeholders with election-related laws. During the 2021 general elections, the ECU endeavoured to display the voter register and information about candidates contesting various positions. However, there were complaints about unequal treatment concerning the amount of information disclosed about candidates and the fees charged.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, reports indicated that staff members of the Uganda Printing and Publishing Corporation, the sole government agency authorised to gazette official records, received approximately \$660,000 in commission from the \$4.2 million paid by the ECU to print electoral materials.<sup>7</sup> These issues highlight lapses in the provision of information, as guaranteed by the Ugandan Constitution, and underscore the need for stringent oversight of government agencies.

## **Enhancing Transparency and Accountability in Electoral Processes**

Stakeholders must intensify efforts to promote access to information in future elections. The ECU should proactively disclose all information that can bolster public trust in its operations and enable voters to make informed choices. This includes details about all funding received during the election

period and how those funds were utilised, as well as information on procurements made, including quantities and purposes. Other essential information that should be readily available to the public encompasses the names and locations of polling stations, the number of registered voters, incidents related to elections, and procedures for the secure handling and transmission of results.

Under the Political Parties and Organisations Act, the ECU is mandated to allocate state funds to political parties represented in the Ugandan Parliament and, in return, receive critical information from these parties.<sup>8</sup> As of December 2024, only seven out of the 26 registered political parties had parliamentary representation. These were the National Resistance Movement, National Unity Platform, Forum for Democratic Change, Democratic Party, Uganda Peoples' Congress, Justice Forum, and People's Progressive Party. However, none of these parties have publicised their income and expenditure on their websites, social media platforms, press releases, or conferences. This lack of transparency has led to allegations of political parties and their candidates receiving funds from illegal or suspicious sources. For instance, internal conflicts within the Forum for Democratic Change arose over accusations that some leaders secretly accepted funding from President Yoweri Museveni ahead of the 2021 elections to undermine the National Unity Platform, a new party gaining popularity among young voters.<sup>9</sup> These disputes culminated in legal battles and the formation of a new political party, the People's Front for Freedom (PPF).<sup>10</sup> When political parties fail to disclose information about their operations and funding, it fosters speculation, misinformation,

and disinformation. Therefore, it is imperative for all political parties to utilise online, print, broadcast, and other media channels to proactively disclose information on their policies, funding, and activities, thereby building trust and openness that benefit democracy in the long term.

For upcoming elections, the ECU should report to the public on how it has fulfilled its dual mandates of funding political parties and obtaining necessary information from them. Such reports should detail each political party's level of compliance and, more importantly, how these parties have utilised the allocated state funds.

It is crucial for the advancement of democracy that Ugandans are informed about every political party's policies, programmes, and funding activities. Currently, it is uncommon for political parties to disclose this information, and the public often learns only what parties choose to reveal, which typically focuses on opponents' shortcomings or appeals for votes, lacking critical information that demonstrates accountability to the public.

The Democratic Party (DP), for example, is presently experiencing internal divisions over a secret memorandum of understanding allegedly agreed upon between its leader, Nobert Mao, and President Museveni, which resulted in Mao's appointment as Minister of Justice in the National Resistance Movement government. Some DP members claimed that the memorandum entailed collaboration to facilitate a peaceful transition of power from President Museveni, who has been in power for nearly four decades, with DP receiving two cabinet positions and appointments to head various government agencies



and commissions.<sup>11</sup> A section of the DP leadership denied the existence of such a memorandum, asserting that it was never discussed within the party's leadership.<sup>12</sup> President Museveni also refuted parts of the alleged agreement, particularly the claim regarding the transfer of power.<sup>13</sup>

These allegations and revelations have cast doubt on the credibility of opposition political parties among Ugandans. For a long time, Uganda's electoral and political processes have been characterised by a lack of access to information, which fuels electoral fraud, manipulation, bribery, and violence. This opacity enables unscrupulous officials and individuals to intimidate voters and manipulate electoral processes, thereby undermining public trust in the electoral system.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, voter turnout has declined from 70.3% in the 2001 presidential elections to 69.1% in 2006, 63% in 2016, and 57% in 2021.<sup>15</sup>

In future general elections, both ruling and opposition political parties in Uganda must actively implement the Guidelines on Access to Information and Elections adopted by the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights in 2017 to rebuild public confidence and trust. Political parties should consult their members on potential collaborations with opponents and publish any cooperation agreements to ensure citizens have complete information about such arrangements.

Information is a vital component for conducting seamless elections, while its absence can lead to negative consequences, including violence. For instance, during the 2021 presidential and parliamentary election campaigns, widespread violence was reported. The police, military, and paramilitary groups were frequently cited as the main perpetrators, with victims including

voters, candidates, journalists, security officials, and ECU personnel.<sup>16</sup> A lack of information undermines accountability and fosters a culture of impunity, especially when perpetrators are rewarded with promotions and lucrative appointments after elections.

## **Disinformation, Misinformation, and Elections in Uganda**

Information pollution, commonly referred to as disinformation and misinformation, has emerged as a formidable threat to Uganda's democratic process. It involves the deliberate or inadvertent spread of false or misleading information and has become increasingly potent as digital platforms play a growing role in political campaigns, news dissemination, and public discourse.

During the 2021 general elections, misinformation and disinformation significantly contributed to the incitement and escalation of violence, much of it circulated via social media. A stark example occurred in November 2020, when presidential candidate Robert Kyagulanyi, popularly known as Bobi Wine, was arrested while campaigning in the Luuka District. False reports quickly spread on social media platforms claiming he had been killed.<sup>17</sup> These rumours triggered nationwide riots within hours, resulting in the deaths of over 54 individuals.

In another incident in Rushenyi County, Ntungamo District, former Minister of State for Labour, Mwesigwa Rukutana, and his supporters clashed violently with opponents, leaving a man named Dan Rwiburingi seriously injured. Social media posts erroneously reporting Rwiburingi's death fanned further unrest.

The Africa Freedom of Information Centre reported that, during the campaign period, Uganda recorded 118,503 incidents of electoral violence across 63 districts, including at least 261 deaths and 580 reported kidnappings.<sup>18</sup> Misinformation and disinformation played critical roles in many of these episodes.

Social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter) have become pivotal in political communication. While they facilitate the rapid spread of information, they also enable the dissemination of manipulated images, fake news, and distorted facts. Such disinformation can mislead voters, influence electoral behaviour, and cast doubt on the legitimacy of election outcomes.

This pollution of the information space undermines voters' capacity to make informed choices. When exposed to false claims about candidates, parties, or electoral procedures, citizens may be manipulated into supporting individuals based on fabrications or conspiracy theories. In response to this growing problem, the Ugandan government has adopted harsh countermeasures, including internet shutdowns and restrictions on social media during elections—actions that have been widely criticised for curtailing freedom of expression and impeding access to essential information.

There are persistent allegations that the state itself engages in disinformation to justify its censorship measures. The continued suspension of Facebook in Uganda, more than four years after the 2021 elections, lends weight to such concerns. Navigating the tension between curbing falsehoods and protecting civil liberties remains a difficult challenge for the Ugandan government.

Both state and non-state actors have been implicated in spreading false information. Political operatives may disseminate disinformation to discredit opponents, while foreign actors may meddle in domestic affairs through digital manipulation. Some media outlets, particularly those aligned with specific political interests, also contribute by promoting biased or false narratives. The erosion of public trust in elections and democratic institutions is a direct consequence. When citizens struggle to discern truth from fiction, scepticism grows, voter apathy deepens, and violence may ensue. Free and fair voting alone cannot sustain democracy—an informed electorate is equally essential.

## **Charting a Way Forward**

Uganda, like many African nations, should fully implement the Guidelines on Access to Information and Elections in Africa, as adopted by the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights. Doing so would promote transparency in the appointment of Electoral Commission of Uganda (ECU) officials and guarantee citizens ready access to critical electoral information. ECU staff should receive specialised training on the guidelines to apply them effectively during election periods.

Election observer missions such as those from the East African Community, Southern African Development Community, ECOWAS, the African Union, and the European Union should update their assessment checklists to incorporate access to information and include metrics on the prevalence of disinformation and misinformation.

The ECU, the Uganda Human Rights Commission, civil society organisations, and national media houses should

integrate public education and fact-checking into their election and civic engagement programmes. Independent fact-checking organisations, too, can play a critical role in debunking false claims during elections. While internet shutdowns and blanket censorship are excessive and counterproductive, Uganda could consider more targeted and balanced regulatory approaches. For example, narrowly tailored laws that address deliberate disinformation, without infringing on legitimate free expression, could be developed.

Social media platforms must also play a more active role. Real-time flagging and removal of misleading content, greater transparency in content moderation policies, and improved collaboration with local fact-checkers could help curb digital disinformation during elections.

## **Conclusion**

Access to accurate, reliable information is a cornerstone of democratic participation. It enables citizens to make informed electoral decisions and hold leaders accountable. In Uganda, however, access to election-related information remains limited, contributing to a significant gap between policy and practice and eroding public trust in democratic processes.

The rise of misinformation and disinformation, particularly through digital channels, poses a serious challenge to Uganda's democratic future. Addressing it requires a multifaceted strategy grounded in digital literacy, proactive fact-checking, proportionate regulation, and collaboration among stakeholders. Governments at all levels, civil society groups, and technology

companies must coordinate their efforts to ensure a well-informed electorate.

As Uganda looks ahead, the integrity of its elections will depend not only on secure and transparent processes but also on the nation's ability to confront and contain the spread of false information.

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## CHAPTER 6

# **The Future of Democracy in Tanzania: Political Restructuring, Economic Reforms, and Digital Governance**

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### **Introduction**

Tanzania is endowed with abundant natural resources and a youthful, dynamic population. The country also occupies a strategic geographical location in East Africa. With an economy projected to expand by over 5% annually in the coming years, Tanzania is poised to emerge as a regional powerhouse.<sup>1</sup> However, challenges such as government inefficiencies, climate change vulnerabilities, and technological gaps pose considerable barriers to this promise, necessitating an urgent need for bold and transformative reforms.

As Tanzania concludes its Vision 2025 agenda, significant strides have been made towards economic growth, improved infrastructure, and better governance. Vision 2025 laid a roadmap for transforming Tanzania into a middle-income, semi-

industrialised economy. In 2020, the country achieved lower-middle-income status ahead of schedule, a testament to the nation's progress.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, gaps remain in realising some of the vision's goals, particularly in ensuring a higher standard of living for its burgeoning population, more efficient governance, and a more competitive economy.

Tanzania's aspirations are even more ambitious when looking towards 2050. Based on current World Bank classifications, the country seeks to eradicate poverty and achieve high-income status, targeting a per capita income exceeding \$12,535.<sup>3</sup> Projections estimate that by 2050, Tanzania's population will exceed 140 million, with over 60% of its citizens under 25 years.<sup>4</sup> This demographic dividend offers great opportunities for innovation, entrepreneurship, and a robust labour force. However, substantial investments in education, healthcare, and technology are essential to seize this potential. To sustain growth, Tanzania must achieve double-digit gross domestic product (GDP) growth, which requires focused trade, industrialisation, and digital transformation reforms.

To realise these goals and secure the country's future, Tanzania must strengthen its political institutions and institute new economic reforms. One critical area of reform is the transition to digital governance. This reform opportunity holds the promise of revolutionising public service delivery, enhancing transparency, and empowering citizens through improved participation. Bridging the digital divide in Tanzania is essential, especially considering that only 20% of the country's rural population currently has access to the internet.<sup>5</sup> Addressing this

divide is crucial to promoting a more connected and participatory democracy where citizens can engage meaningfully in politics.

Additionally, climate change poses a significant threat to Tanzania's agriculture-dependent economy, which contributes approximately 25% to the GDP and employs 65% of the workforce. Developing climate-resilient policies is crucial for environmental sustainability, ensuring long-term economic stability, and alleviating poverty. Potential financial losses from climate-related disruptions could reach up to 2% of GDP annually by 2030, underscoring the urgency of addressing climate change as a central element of Tanzania's development agenda.

Economic growth, climate resilience, digital transformation, and inclusive governance are interwoven with Tanzania's democratic future. Economic progress must be paired with transparent governance and policies that empower citizens, ensuring equitable participation in democratic processes. By addressing climate challenges and bridging the digital gap, Tanzania will improve citizens' livelihoods and strengthen democratic engagement, vital for building a stable and prosperous society. Failure to integrate these factors could jeopardise Tanzania's efforts to create a democracy that truly serves its people and ensures long-term prosperity.

Envisioning Tanzania's future by 2050 involves a vision of a poverty-free nation thriving on double-digit GDP growth and offering equal opportunities for all. Tanzania's journey from Vision 2025 to Vision 2050 must reflect an ambitious, resilient, and transformative narrative that highlights the nation's potential for both economic and democratic growth.

## **Restructuring the Government**

Post-colonial Tanzania has long grappled with inefficient and overly centralised governance structures, contributing to regional disparities and undermining effective public service delivery. Research indicates that entrenched attitudes within the central government continue to curtail the administrative discretion of local councils. For instance, directives from the central authority limit local leadership's ability to manage human resources, oversee finances, and deliver services effectively. This lack of administrative autonomy calls for a comprehensive review of power allocation—making decentralisation a vital strategy.

Decentralisation is key to empowering local governments by granting them financial autonomy and decision-making authority to address regional inequalities effectively. With greater control over local revenue, whether from transfers, internally generated funds, or donor support, local governments can better allocate resources to meet the specific needs of their communities. To make this possible, the Tanzanian government must enable local authorities to manage their finances and priorities more independently. Aligning decentralisation with financial autonomy can help bridge the gap between national development goals and grassroots realities, ultimately improving governance outcomes. Nevertheless, decentralisation efforts often encounter resistance due to the central government's fears of losing control and legitimacy.

Tanzania was ranked 87th out of 180 countries in Transparency International's 2021 Corruption Perception Index, with a score of 40/100—highlighting the urgent need for stronger anti-corruption mechanisms.<sup>6</sup> Agencies like the Prevention

and Combating of Corruption Bureau should be given more independence, increased resources, and improved collaboration with Zanzibar's equivalent agencies to facilitate comprehensive investigations and successful prosecutions. Strengthening these institutions is crucial for decentralisation and equitable resource allocation.

Encouraging whistleblower protections and offering incentives for reporting corruption are also essential to fostering accountability. Prioritising digital tracking systems for public expenditure would further support this effort. For example, publicly accessible online dashboards showing how funds are allocated and spent could increase public trust in government institutions. These digital tools empower citizens, bolster decentralisation, and help combat corruption through transparency.

Tanzania's low scores on government integrity and judicial effectiveness reflect its weak rule of law, a significant barrier to reform. The lack of judicial independence erodes the legal system's credibility and public confidence in governance. A robust, impartial judiciary is vital for enforcing laws fairly and supporting reforms in decentralisation and anti-corruption. Addressing executive influence over the judiciary, reducing case backlogs, and promoting merit-based appointments and training are essential for strengthening the rule of law.<sup>7</sup>

These reforms should serve as the foundation of a more responsive governance system—one that meets the needs of local communities and lays the groundwork for a more democratic Tanzania. Decentralisation, increased transparency, strong anti-corruption measures, and judicial independence are interlinked

components critical for restoring public confidence in the political system.

## **Economic Policy Reforms**

Tanzania's prospects for sustainable economic growth depend on fostering a business-friendly environment, enhancing trade (including cross-border commerce), and aligning education and labour policies with market demands. Achieving this vision requires tax reform to create a more efficient and equitable system. According to the Heritage Foundation's 2024 audit, Tanzania scores 80.6 on tax burden, 90.7 on government spending, and 79.9 on fiscal health.<sup>8</sup> The top individual and corporate tax rates are 30%, with the overall tax burden equalling 11.7% of GDP. However, a 9.7% trade-weighted average tariff and burdensome non-tariff barriers hamper investment and economic dynamism.

Tanzania's tax system remains complex and burdensome, particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which face overlapping tax jurisdictions, frequent audits, and a multitude of fees and licenses from both central and local government authorities. According to the World Bank's Doing Business Report (2020), Tanzanian businesses spend an average of 180 hours per year preparing, filing, and paying taxes, higher than many of their regional peers. Introducing tax incentives for green technologies would also encourage sustainable business practices, drive innovation, and contribute to long-term growth. Broadening the tax base eases the burden on current taxpayers by spreading it across more contributors. In Tanzania, a narrow tax net places disproportionate pressure on a few, limiting public revenue. Expanding coverage—especially in the informal sector—

can increase collections without raising rates. This enables greater investment in health, education, and infrastructure, improving public services and strengthening democratic trust.

Tanzania is progressing towards implementing the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) agreement, offering an opportunity to expand its trade network and attract foreign investment. To fully benefit from AfCFTA, the government must eliminate tariff and non-tariff barriers, modernise customs processes, and improve transport and logistics infrastructure. Diversifying exports—particularly in manufacturing—will enhance Tanzania's economic resilience and support democratic ideals such as equality, social cohesion, and inclusive participation.

Moreover, education and labour reforms are crucial for addressing the skills gap and preparing the workforce for future demands. This moment calls for significant investment in upgrading curricula in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) to meet the needs of an industrial and digital economy. Strengthening vocational training in areas like agriculture, manufacturing, and renewable energy will provide practical skills that allow citizens to participate meaningfully in the economy and political life.<sup>9</sup> This will contribute to a more informed and engaged electorate over time.

In conclusion, comprehensive economic reforms are indispensable to consolidating democracy in Tanzania. They help improve livelihoods, ensure fair access to opportunities, and enable broader participation in governance. These efforts will lay the groundwork for a democracy underpinned by a strong, inclusive economy.

## Strengthening Electoral Systems

An effective electoral system is fundamental to any democracy. Tanzania must enhance its electoral processes to ensure free and fair elections, bolster citizen participation, and uphold democratic integrity. Although the country has conducted relatively regular multiparty elections since the early 1990s, the opposition remains weak, with the ruling party, Chama Cha Mapinduzi, maintaining power for over six decades. This dominance has led to significant crackdowns on opposition critics, the press, and civil society, particularly during the current presidency of Samia Suluhu Hassan. With a Freedom House score of 36/100—comprising 24/60 for civil liberties and 12/40 for political rights—Tanzania urgently needs to reassess its electoral processes.<sup>10</sup>

The success of such reforms hinges on comprehensive voter education, especially in rural areas where awareness of voting rights and the significance of elections remains low. Tanzania's voter turnout has consistently remained below 50%, influenced by factors such as local-level election irregularities and public disillusionment with the voting process. The complex nature of political affiliations in Tanzania often results in voter apathy, as supporters of opposition parties may feel their votes are less impactful due to the perceived dominance of the ruling party. These factors create barriers to voter participation and engagement. Nationwide education campaigns are essential to bridge these gaps, utilizing accessible media like radio and mobile platforms to communicate electoral processes and the role of citizens in a democracy. Civil society organizations should amplify these messages, ensuring the inclusion of marginalized groups, including women and youth in rural areas.



Additionally, there is significant potential for modern technologies to improve the efficiency and transparency of electoral processes in Tanzania. Digital voter registration, as implemented in neighboring Kenya, can reduce errors and mitigate fraud. Real-time reporting of election results can also help build public trust in the electoral process.<sup>11</sup>

## **E-Government Services**

The deliberate adoption of e-government services presents a transformative opportunity for Tanzania to enhance public service delivery, drive transparency, and increase citizen engagement. The Tanzania National Bureau of Statistics must intensify efforts in collecting and analyzing data on public programs to identify inefficiencies and tailor interventions to local needs.

Tanzania has been developing the Jamii Namba, a digital identity system designed to enable citizens to access critical government services more efficiently through biometric verification and online payments via digital wallets. However, the rollout of this system faces significant challenges, including high onboarding costs, lack of public awareness, and the absence of policies facilitating seamless integration among government agencies. Marginalized groups, including women, youth, and the elderly, risk being excluded from fully benefiting from this digital platform. Addressing these underlying challenges should be a priority to ensure more equitable access to essential services such as healthcare and social welfare.<sup>12</sup>

Overcoming these barriers will foster greater financial inclusion, especially through improved collaboration between the government and private sector players like banks. Better

integration with financial institutions will not only enhance access to banking services but also improve the efficiency and reach of government services. By addressing cost, awareness, and inclusivity issues, Tanzania can create a more accessible and effective digital identity system that benefits all citizens, promotes social welfare, and enhances overall financial inclusion.<sup>13</sup>

Similar urgency is needed in the rollout and awareness creation for other online platforms, including tax filing, business registration, and service applications, which have yet to effectively eliminate bureaucratic processes and reduce corruption. To support these measures, the government should leverage the existing internet penetration of 31.9% to enhance the utilization of digital platforms. For instance, a more mobile-friendly application for traders to file taxes can improve overall efficiency and encourage wider adoption of digital services.<sup>14</sup>

Tanzania cannot afford to lag in adopting data analytics to monitor service delivery and inform policy decisions. By addressing issues like cost, awareness, and inclusivity, Tanzania can create a more accessible and effective digital identity system that benefits all citizens and enhances the overall delivery of government services.

## **Open Data Initiatives**

Open data initiatives involve efforts by governments to make data related to governance, public services, and other areas of public interest freely accessible to the public. These initiatives promote transparency, accountability, and citizen engagement and are essential to the future of democracy in Tanzania. By providing open access to government data, citizens can hold their leaders

accountable, track the use of public resources, and participate more actively in governance processes.<sup>15</sup>

Research indicates that transparency is a critical pillar in democratic governance, and digital data initiatives play a significant role in achieving this transparency. There is an urgent need for the government to make data on governance publicly accessible to foster trust, empower citizens, and enhance accountability. In Tanzania, the National Bureau of Statistics has made strides with the Integrated Statistical Portal, allowing citizens to generate customized data on cross-sectoral needs by integrating social indicators sourced from systems, administrative agencies, demographic sources, and survey data systems. This centralized data repository is a step in the right direction, but requires enhanced user-friendliness and integration of more data on public expenditure, procurement, and developmental projects to fully improve public accountability.

For example, allowing citizens to track how funds allocated for local infrastructure projects are spent would ensure resources are used effectively and help build trust in government spending.<sup>16</sup> One missing element is the integration of a feedback mechanism, which would allow individuals to highlight and report issues, offer suggestions, and raise concerns about governance and other public processes. Such tools are essential for enhanced responsiveness, accountability, and the promotion of greater public participation in governance. For instance, a mobile application enabling feedback on healthcare or education delivery can help identify and address systemic gaps to create better service delivery.<sup>17</sup>

Given the overlap between open data initiatives and e-government services, these two areas should be viewed together to enhance Tanzania's democratic future. Both play crucial roles in fostering transparency, citizen engagement, and improved public service delivery. By leveraging technology to make government data more accessible and interactive, Tanzania can empower its citizens, enhance accountability, and promote more inclusive and effective governance.

## **Cybersecurity Frameworks**

As Tanzania continues to embrace digital approaches to governance, the security of these systems and data becomes increasingly paramount to the nation's democratic growth. Digital tools can enhance transparency, citizen engagement, and government efficiency, but they also present new challenges, including the risk of cyberattacks, data breaches, and privacy violations. Weak data protection practices can undermine public trust, jeopardize citizens' privacy, and even lead to the manipulation of digital systems, which threatens the integrity of democratic processes. A robust cybersecurity framework is essential to safeguard sensitive information, maintain public trust, and protect critical national infrastructure.

Tanzania's adoption of the Personal Data Protection Act of 2022 marked a crucial advancement in safeguarding the digital rights of its citizens. The Act outlines key regulations on how personal data should be collected, stored, and used, granting individuals more control over their information. Central to the enforcement of this law is the newly established Personal Data Protection Commission (PDPC), tasked with monitoring

compliance, handling complaints, and raising public awareness about data rights. However, the effectiveness of the Commission faces notable challenges. These include institutional capacity constraints, limited public awareness, and concerns about its independence, especially given that certain ministerial powers could potentially override the Commission's decisions. Furthermore, the High Court has already flagged ambiguities in the Act, ruling that parts of the legislation must be amended to protect constitutional rights. For the PDPC to function as a credible guardian of data rights, Tanzania must not only address these legal and structural gaps but also invest in sustained political will, resource allocation, and the development of strong oversight mechanisms. Without these efforts, the promise of the Act risks being undermined by weak implementation and public distrust.

Capacity building for human resources is critical to successfully implementing Tanzania's data protection policies. Government officials, information technology professionals, and law enforcement personnel must receive specialized training in managing and mitigating cybersecurity risks. This training will equip them with the skills to detect and respond to cyber threats, enforce the legal framework, and manage the integrity of digital systems. In addition, investing in cybersecurity education and research at all levels, especially within universities and technical colleges, will prepare the next generation of Tanzanians to meet the challenges of a digitally driven democracy.<sup>18</sup>

Equally important is establishing specialized cybersecurity units within both the public and private sectors. These units will provide expert resources to prevent and respond to cyber

threats while fostering collaboration between organizations to share knowledge, tools, and strategies. Private-sector companies, particularly those in technology and telecommunications, are critical in fortifying cybersecurity. Public-private partnerships with experienced international organizations can give Tanzania access to cutting-edge technology, training resources, and best practices in combating cybercrimes.<sup>19</sup>

Ultimately, the strength of Tanzania's democracy in the digital age will depend on its ability to build secure, transparent, and accountable systems. By prioritizing cybersecurity, the country can protect its citizens from emerging threats, foster an environment of trust and innovation, and ensure that digital technologies contribute to, rather than undermine, democratic values.

## **Bridging the Digital Divide**

The digital divide in Tanzania remains a significant challenge, characterised by a pronounced gap in access to and usage of digital technologies. Factors contributing to this divide include socio-economic disparities, geographical barriers, gender inequalities, and limited digital literacy. According to UNESCO, only 17% of women in Tanzania had access to mobile internet in 2021, compared to 35% of men.<sup>20</sup> This gender gap in digital access is one of the many factors contributing to unequal participation in the digital economy and governance. Additionally, as of 2022, only 26% of the population, out of over 60 million people, had internet access, leaving a 55% gap in usage and a 19% gap in coverage. These disparities further highlight the challenges that

underserved communities, particularly those in rural areas, face in accessing essential digital services.<sup>21</sup>

The consequences of this digital divide are profound, as it limits citizens' ability to engage in economic activities, access education, and participate in democratic processes, such as e-governance and online voting. This gap in digital access is becoming increasingly significant as Tanzania moves toward adopting digital governance initiatives.

## **Conclusion**

The future of democracy in Tanzania is intricately linked to the successful implementation of key policy reforms, including the strengthening of institutions and the advancement of digital governance. By prioritising institutional integrity and accountability, Tanzania can ensure that its democratic processes are transparent, efficient, and responsive to the needs of its citizens. Robust governance systems build trust and empower citizens to hold their leaders accountable, which is fundamental to a thriving democracy.

Advancing digital governance is equally vital, as technology offers new avenues for citizen engagement, transparency, and participation. Harnessing technology enables more inclusive decision-making processes, increases access to information, and ensures that all citizens, regardless of location or socio-economic status, have a voice in shaping the country's future. This digital transformation is not merely a tool for governance; it is a means to deepen democratic values by facilitating a more open, responsive, and participatory government.

The aforementioned policies are integral to Tanzania's democratic future. They address the nation's immediate challenges and lay the groundwork for a society where citizens are actively engaged in the democratic process. As Tanzania moves forward, these reforms will be critical in creating a democratic, transparent, and prosperous future for all its people.



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## CHAPTER 7

# **The Urgent Demands for Democracy to Flourish in Kenya**

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### **Introduction**

In the aftermath of British colonial rule, Kenyans yearned for the freedoms that independence promised. Unresolved colonial policies relating to land ownership, education, and economic prosperity contributed to rising tensions in the immediate post-colonial period. In 1982, under President Daniel arap Moi, Kenya became a de jure one-party state. Opposition leaders, anti-government activists, students, and religious figures faced brutal political repression, with some forced into exile. A multi-party system was later reintroduced in 1991 through the amendment of Section 2A of the Kenyan Constitution.<sup>1</sup>

The 2000s marked a new era of political coalitions in Kenyan politics. Amid this, the National Rainbow Coalition emerged as the super-party that would finally move Kenya towards an era of unprecedented progress, gaining nationwide support and winning

the 2002 elections. Kenyans celebrated across the country, hoping they had seen the end of the ‘Nyayo’ era—a slogan President Moi often used. These celebrations were also expressions of hope that generational grievances, which had pitted political elites against one another, would finally be resolved, paving the way for a stable democracy in Kenya.

Since then, the country has witnessed several moments of democratic progress and setbacks. Notably, the devastating 2007–2008 post-election violence followed the most competitive elections in Kenya’s history. Politicians divided the public along ethnic lines, resulting in over 1,200 deaths and 350,000 displacements. As Kenya looks forward, only the promotion of peaceful coexistence by politicians can guide the country towards complete healing and, by extension, ensure the survival of its democratic experiment.

## **Corruption and Electoral Reforms**

A 2023 survey conducted by the Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission (EACC) revealed that 57% of respondents perceived the levels of corruption in Kenya to be “very high.” As the commission’s CEO, Twalib Mbarak, stated, rampant corruption continues to undermine Kenya’s ambition to achieve its development goals and also threatens its national security. This assessment reflects the reality in Kenya. Political corruption encompasses a range of illegal activities, generally involving the use of public office for illicit private gains. In a low-income country like Kenya, the effects of corruption are particularly pernicious, as it is strongly linked to poverty. For example, a common practice during elections in Kenya is vote-buying, where taxpayer funds

intended for public services are diverted towards campaigns and purchasing votes. Corruption has infiltrated all aspects of life in Kenya, with the gravest consequences on the economy. Non-financial forms of corruption, such as nepotism, have also raised questions about the Kenyan government's integrity and competence. While the EACC has identified corruption scandals and initiated inquiries, there have yet to be meaningful court trials, sentencing of politicians, or recovery of looted resources.

Addressing the situation in Kenya requires urgent and more efficient anti-corruption reforms. A good starting point is to create avenues for better coordination between the EACC and the Kenyan judiciary in identifying and prosecuting corruption cases. When culpable politicians serve jail terms and their assets are liquidated, a sense of deterrence would influence political behaviour and enhance public trust in government. Whistleblowers would also be encouraged to report suspicions of corruption, trusting the system to deliver justice. Another potential reform is to institute a lifetime ban on holding elected or appointed government offices for anyone found guilty of corruptly mismanaging public funds. Denying access to positions of power and national resources should serve as an equally effective deterrent.

Equally important is the need to implement the electoral reforms provided for by the Constitution of Kenya, 2010. Chapter Seven of the Constitution is dedicated to matters of political representation. The chapter is divided into three parts, including provisions for the electoral system and process, the creation of the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC), and the functioning of political parties. The Constitution recognises

the pivotal role that elections play in stabilising Kenya's democracy by outlining a pathway to create an environment that supports free and fair elections. While political parties and politicians are quick to call for greater efficiency and transparency of the IEBC, they also need to pay closer attention to Article 91 of the Constitution, which addresses the operation of parties. Provisions within this article that require strong attention pertain to the registration of parties and the expectations of parties during elections. It is essential for parties to adhere to these provisions if they aspire to foster a stronger democracy in Kenya. Before a party can successfully guide the country based on the Constitution, it must first demonstrate its ability to manage its affairs in accordance with the same Constitution. For political parties in Kenya, democracy, much like charity, must begin at home.

## **Reinventing Civic Education**

In 2022, Kenya's adult literacy rate stood at 83%, a testament to the National Rainbow Coalition government under former President Mwai Kibaki, which made primary education in public schools freely accessible to all Kenyans.<sup>2</sup> However, this high literacy rate does not necessarily equate to a comprehensive public understanding of political processes, particularly the electoral system. This gap influences how citizens vote and perceive the consequences of elections. To bridge this divide, the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) should intensify its investment in election education campaigns. With accurate information, the electorate would be better equipped to select candidates whose visions align with their aspirations for the country's future. Such informed decision-making could help

steer the nation away from the divisive tribal rhetoric that has historically dominated electoral discourse.

The Kenyan electorate often places considerable trust in politicians, many of whom do not uphold the Constitution with the seriousness it warrants. Civil society organisations, such as the Law Society of Kenya (LSK), have an opportunity to spearhead community-based campaigns aimed at educating citizens about the Constitution. Leveraging its network of lawyers, the LSK is well-positioned to develop simplified versions of the Constitution, translating its content into more accessible language for the general populace. These legal professionals can then offer pro bono educational services, visiting communities to elucidate the Constitution's provisions and their implications.

Civic education is undeniably a cornerstone of democratic progress. Its significance was vividly demonstrated during the #RejectFinanceBill2024 protests. The proposed bill aimed to increase taxes as a strategy to raise funds for repaying Kenya's public debt. Through civic education disseminated via social media platforms, especially TikTok and Twitter, the public became informed about the bill's potential impact on their livelihoods, catalysing a protest movement. This movement garnered international attention as it transitioned from online activism to street demonstrations, culminating in weeks of protests in June 2024. The ensuing pressure compelled the country's leadership to retract the bill. The #RejectFinanceBill2024 protests fostered a new culture of civic engagement and political participation among young Kenyans. This episode underscores how the political culture among youth can significantly influence a nation's political trajectory. Many young Kenyans, previously disengaged

from politics, have become acutely aware of governmental operations and their direct effects on the public. A potential long-term outcome of these protests is a transformation of Kenya's political landscape, introducing new leaders who transcend entrenched ethnic divisions. United by shared experiences and a collective goal to eschew violence and ethnically charged political ideologies, the youth are poised to shape the country's democratic future.

Addressing ethnic divisions necessitates deliberate action. One approach is to ensure equitable distribution of development initiatives across all regions, irrespective of the President's ethnic background. Allocating state contracts based on individuals' or groups' affiliations with prominent politicians or proximity to the ruling party exacerbates tribal divisions. Conversely, awarding opportunities based on competence and ethnic equity can bolster public confidence in the government. When citizens are satisfied with service delivery and employment opportunities, the reliance on tribal affiliations diminishes.

Another reform worth considering is the incorporation of measured provisions to curb hate speech within the Penal Code of Kenya. Clearly delineating the boundaries between free speech and hate speech, along with establishing appropriate penalties, would significantly promote tolerance and peaceful coexistence. Politicians' utterances in both social and official settings should be subject to stringent scrutiny, with legal consequences for those found guilty of hate speech. While politicians may use such rhetoric to incite the populace, it is often community members who act on these statements, leading to inter-ethnic clashes that have historically resulted in loss of lives and property.



## **Political Parties Must Operate in a New Dimension**

In Kenya, political parties often revolve around the interests and identities of their leaders, rather than being anchored in cohesive ideological frameworks, as observed in North America, Europe, and several other African nations. Typically, these leaders, predominantly male, serve as patrons wielding significant control over party dynamics. What is conspicuously absent are parties that genuinely represent the interests of civil servants and the broader working class. Establishing a truly democratic, as opposed to patrimonial, party system is essential for empowering young Kenyans to transition from merely resisting state overreach through protests to actively contesting political offices, regardless of their socio-economic or ethnic backgrounds.

The 2022 general elections, the most recent in Kenya, were dominated by two principal coalition parties: the Kenya Kwanza alliance led by President William Ruto and the Azimio coalition headed by Hon. Raila Odinga. Kenya Kwanza's campaign was underpinned by a "bottom-up" manifesto, advocating for increased economic investments to enhance the financial well-being of Kenyans. This approach envisioned a government for the "hustlers," aiming to create a trickle-down economy benefiting the unemployed, local entrepreneurs, farmers, and fishermen. In contrast, the Azimio Alliance sought to liberate Kenyans from the grip of "corrupt cartels," a term frequently employed by politicians to describe influential and affluent individuals alleged to exert significant sway over national decision-making. The Azimio coalition also proposed a social welfare initiative dubbed "Baba-care," designed to provide financial support to struggling Kenyans. Leading up to the elections, there was a palpable

demand among Kenyans for tangible solutions to their economic challenges. This public sentiment compelled political parties to recalibrate aspects of their manifestos to address the electorate's calls for effective economic remedies. One notable outcome of this shift was a departure from the traditionally divisive and ethnically charged electoral rhetoric towards a focus on economic issues. However, this change proved to be superficial, as entrenched problems like corruption and favouritism within political parties persisted. The overarching lesson from the 2022 elections is clear: economic concerns are paramount to the electorate.

Furthermore, for Kenya's democracy to flourish, the nomination process for political party candidates must be entirely merit-based. Candidates should be selected based on demonstrable track records of public service and productivity. Electing candidates solely for their popularity, without considering their competence and experience, is detrimental in the long run. While a popular candidate may secure electoral victory, popularity alone is insufficient for effective governance when confronted with the complexities of public administration.

### **The Economy Cannot Be Sidelined**

Poverty and economic inequality remain enduring barriers to the flourishing of democracy in Kenya. A 2020 report by the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics revealed that 53% of the country's 55 million people were multidimensionally poor. Over the years, politicians have weaponised poverty as a tool to manipulate voters, often making promises of empowerment in exchange

for electoral support. One reason poverty continues to be an exploitable issue is the volatility of Kenya's agricultural sector.

Nearly 80% of Kenya's landmass consists of arid and semi-arid regions, yet agriculture remains a vital pillar of the national economy. It directly contributes 33% to the gross domestic product (GDP) and an additional 27% indirectly, through links with other sectors. Agriculture also provides employment for more than 40% of the population and over 70% of those living in rural areas.<sup>3</sup> Given this centrality, modernising agriculture through greater investment in technology-driven methods should be treated as a national priority. Such reforms would reduce poverty in the long term and weaken the grip of political actors who exploit it, especially in rural communities.

Addressing economic challenges is a prerequisite for democratic consolidation. A stable economy and a financially engaged citizenry generally form the bedrock of political and democratic stability. Unemployment, for instance, is a critical concern affecting millions of Kenyans who face a hostile business environment, exacerbated by a high tax regime that continues to constrict economic growth. To foster a more favourable economic climate, Kenya must simplify business procedures, reduce tax burdens, and streamline regulatory requirements. These measures would attract both local and foreign investors, who, in turn, could create much-needed employment opportunities by hiring local talent.

## **Conclusion**

It has become commonplace for Kenyan politicians to disregard the Constitution. However, for democracy to thrive, the

Constitution must be treated as sacrosanct—the very foundation upon which democratic governance rests. Government powers must be limited by constitutional provisions, and the frequent attempts by parliamentarians to amend clauses that conflict with their interests must cease. The Constitution belongs to the people. No individual or institution should be seen to stand above it. Once political leaders are unable to arbitrarily alter constitutional tenets, justice becomes more accessible and democratic norms more sustainable.

Strengthening democratic principles must be a priority for the current administration and those that follow. The #RejectFinanceBill2024 protests reflected deep public dissatisfaction with Kenya's economic and political direction. The reforms required to solidify democracy must be bold and driven from the top. The ruling elite must lead by example, respecting the Constitution and advancing genuine pro-democracy policies, even when these policies do not serve narrow political interests.

This mission cannot be undertaken by the government alone. The media, corporate sector, and civil society must play active roles as public watchdogs. These groups must hold leaders accountable and amplify citizens' voices. The government has consistently shown it cannot regulate itself effectively. Meanwhile, Kenyans continue to demonstrate their willingness to speak up and defend their democratic rights.

If non-governmental stakeholders unite to pressure politicians and state agencies to deepen democratic values, Kenya could reclaim its status as a beacon of democracy on the African continent.

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## CHAPTER 8

# **Resolving Inefficiencies in African Democracies: The Role of Civil Society Organizations**

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### **Introduction**

According to The Economist's 2024 Democracy Index, only seven of Africa's 54 countries qualify as democracies.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the Varieties of Democracy Project (V-Dem) identifies just 14 African nations as electoral democracies with universal suffrage.<sup>2</sup> These statistics underscore concerns about the growth and resilience of democracy on the continent. While peaceful transitions of power are emblematic of functional democracies, they represent only one facet of the broader framework required to sustain democratic governance. A thriving democracy should be evaluated based on its electoral systems, the protection of civil liberties, and the extent of active civil society participation.

Regrettably, many African citizens perceive a decline in democratic ideals. Afrobarometer's 2023 study across 28 African

countries highlights this erosion, driven by dissatisfaction stemming from fiscal mismanagement, challenges in social welfare, and the failure of democratic systems to provide meaningful economic opportunities, particularly for the youth.<sup>3</sup>

While there is a consensus that democracy is the optimal path for Africa's advancement, its practical implementation often falls short. A pervasive perception of corruption erodes trust in political systems, leaving citizens disillusioned by the lack of accountability among their leaders. This chapter examines the inefficiencies undermining African democracies and explores the pivotal role of civil society organisations (CSOs) in addressing these challenges. It delves into the unique case of Ghana's civil society landscape during the lead-up to the 2024 elections, focusing on accountability issues. Parallels are drawn to youth-led movements such as Nigeria's #EndSARS and Ghana's #StopGalamsey protests, illustrating how CSOs have emerged to challenge governmental deficiencies, often amplified by social media platforms.

## **The Diminishing Power of CSOs**

Ghana's 2024 elections unfolded amidst a climate that tested the nation's democratic credentials. The government's response to youth-led protests suggested an executive overreach, particularly in its perceived manipulation of the judiciary to suppress dissent. Notably, 52 Ghanaians were arrested during the anti-illegal gold mining (#StopGalamsey) protests between July and October 2024. These individuals were denied bail and detained for over three weeks, highlighting governance inefficiencies, including inadequate checks and balances, unresponsive public



institutions, and systemic corruption. Protesters had hoped that Ghana's democratic institutions would ensure governmental accountability.

Various stakeholders, including civil society actors, labour leaders, academics, and clergy, urged the Attorney-General, who also served as the state prosecutor, to drop the charges against the arrested protesters. However, the judiciary consistently denied bail, reinforcing public perceptions of executive interference. Many Ghanaians believed that members of the ruling party were complicit in illegal mining activities, thus explaining the crackdown on protesters.<sup>4</sup>

This scenario mirrors Nigeria's 2020 #EndSARS protests, where civil dissent was suppressed without repercussions for state officials who violated human rights and constitutional provisions. In Ghana, public trust in the judiciary has plummeted, with the institution derisively nicknamed "Unanimous FC" due to its consistent rulings favouring the ruling government. This trend has fuelled assumptions that Ghana's courts lack independence and primarily serve executive interests, a perception exacerbated by the fact that many judges were appointed by former President Nana Akufo-Addo in consultation with the Judicial Council.

The reputational influence that CSOs once wielded to hold democracies like Ghana and Nigeria accountable has waned. Governments increasingly marginalise CSOs, employing tactics such as harassment and arbitrary arrests to stifle civil activism. This raises a critical question: What is the purpose of democracy if citizens cannot express dissatisfaction with governance in a fair and just manner? The erosion of CSO influence undermines efforts to amplify the voices of discontented citizens, especially

as governments in both countries have realised they can suppress dissent with minimal consequences. As democratic inefficiencies become more pronounced, they pose significant threats to the survival of fragile democracies.

In Nigeria, regulatory frameworks governing the establishment and operation of CSOs limit their reach and influence, particularly when their activities challenge governmental authority. Legislation such as the Companies and Allied Matters Act mandates CSOs to register with the government to operate legally, while also imposing restrictions under the guise of national security and political neutrality. Furthermore, the Foreign Contributions (Regulation) Bill curtails CSOs' ability to receive foreign funding—a significant concern given that an estimated 90% of African CSO activities rely on non-African sources.<sup>5</sup> This dependency often compels CSOs to align with foreign donors' thematic priorities, potentially diverting focus from local interests. Such misalignment provides governments with justification to portray CSOs as pursuing ulterior motives, further alienating them from the communities they aim to serve. Additionally, reliance on foreign funding exposes CSOs to financial vulnerabilities, particularly when donor support wanes, compromising their sustainability and effectiveness.

## **The Lesson from Ghana**

Ghana's apparent disregard for civil society organisations (CSOs) has created a compelling case study. A swift post-mortem of the near-landslide victory of Ghana's main opposition party, the National Democratic Congress (NDC), during the 2024 presidential elections, should serve as a cautionary tale for other

incumbent African governments. For the ousted administration, heightened public dissatisfaction with executive overreach, neglect of public interest, and the suppression of CSO voices proved consequential.

CSOs in Ghana, such as the IMANI Centre for Policy and Education and the Centre for Democratic Development, have long been committed to researching and presenting both empirical and inferential data to highlight benchmarks of poor governance. While the Ghanaian government often dismissed these findings as anti-government rhetoric, the electorate engaged with and deliberated on them extensively.

In this context, while one stakeholder, the government, undermined and disregarded CSOs' calls for good governance, another stakeholder, the voters—the ultimate arbiters of democratic tenures—delivered a resounding verdict during the 2024 polls. The margin of the NDC's victory over the ruling New Patriotic Party was significant, delivering a humbling blow to the latter. In the end, CSOs triumphed where it mattered most. Voters had been sensitised to cultivate expectations of good governance. Ghanaians are beginning to understand that their voices should not follow sentimental lines but should instead be channelled towards expectations of good governance and economic development, as well as the rejection of state capture and corruption. These are the major issues that relate to the problem of good governance in Ghana.

This trend presents a cautionary tale for the future of Ghana and Africa. The same tolerance that diminished trust in our democracies can be weaponised to hold governments accountable. To be more effective, CSOs should target the ordinary voter and

tailor their activities, content, and findings for the consumption of everyday men, women, and children.

CSOs should align and combine forces to hold governments accountable, especially concerning human rights issues, administrative justice, and the fight against corruption. For instance, in 2024, collective actions by CSOs in Ghana led to the recovery of GH¢1 billion (approximately \$60 million) from corrupt state officials.<sup>6</sup> Such collaborations not only insulate individual activists and specific CSOs from targeted persecution but also symbolise a united front that compels both state actors and the public to take CSOs seriously. Though challenging, past successes indicate that this collaborative approach can effectively address inefficiencies among state actors and agencies, thereby strengthening Ghana's democracy.

## **How CSOs Can Help Resolve Democratic Inefficiencies**

Democratic inefficiencies in Africa largely stem from executive overreach, where the presidency dominates other branches of government, often amending laws to extend power and erode checks and balances. Weak judicial independence exacerbates this issue, as executives frequently interfere with courts, undermining justice and transparency. Legislatures, intended to represent citizens and provide accountability, are often co-opted, rendering them ineffective. Corruption and mismanagement deepen these inefficiencies, with leaders prioritising personal gain over public service, perpetuating poverty and inequality. This decadence fosters youth disillusionment due to limited economic opportunities and political exclusion, fuelling unrest

and delegitimising governments in the public's eye. Consequently, the existence of CSOs becomes essential to prevent further weakening of democracy.

A holistic approach by CSOs is necessary for democracy to function effectively in Africa. This approach is key to strengthening civil liberties. Developing new benchmarks and indices to accurately measure the performance of African democracies is crucial. These indices would provide tangible metrics to assess the effectiveness of democratic systems, identify weak points, and recommend corrective actions. By focusing on the role of CSOs and creating a robust framework for measuring efficiency, African countries can build more resilient democratic systems.

CSOs should be encouraged to define these indicators at the regional level for West Africa, involving entities like the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to foster a sense of ownership and accountability. This initiative would commence the process of realigning the influence of CSOs on democratic stewardship. Achieving this requires CSOs to develop common platforms for collaboration that transcend national, linguistic, and cultural barriers. Similar to how ECOWAS unites economic and sovereign entities in West Africa, coalitions of CSOs focused on thematic areas should align and concentrate on critical aspects of economic development and governance. Such collaboration would facilitate pooled activities regarding fundraising and establish common grounds that help insulate them from funding challenges and governmental persecution.

Historically, collaborations supported by funding operations like the STAR Ghana Foundation have yielded significant

dividends in strengthening democracy and empowering CSOs in Ghana. A consortium of CSO leaders across the continent could replicate such success, serving as a model for checking governmental excesses and promoting civil oversight of democracies. An efficient democracy extends beyond elections, encompassing fiscal accountability, the rule of law, civil liberties, public participation, press freedom, and inclusive governance. Transparent systems, robust checks and balances, and citizens' access to information all contribute to strengthening democracy. For example, press freedom and open discourse ensure that governments adhere to the rule of law, while inclusivity, especially for marginalised groups, fosters legitimacy, stability, and social cohesion.

Addressing democratic inefficiencies in Africa necessitates strategic reforms across key areas of governance. Strengthening judicial independence is essential to ensuring fairness and accountability. Judicial oversight commissions, involving civil society and international observers, can serve as impartial watchdogs, while constitutions should be fortified to limit executive influence over judicial appointments. For instance, Ghana's bloated judiciary underscores the need for caps on the number of justices, a measure that would help curb executive overreach. CSOs have a vital role to play; they can form alliances like the West African Civil Society Institute to advocate for judicial reform and even lobby for representation in the ECOWAS Parliament.

Reinforcing the legislature as an independent arm of government is equally crucial. Financial autonomy for parliaments can reduce executive manipulation, while participatory budgeting

enhances public accountability. CSOs should encourage public engagement in legislative processes to ensure that lawmakers remain accountable to their constituents.

Combating corruption demands independent anti-corruption bodies with prosecutorial powers, alongside open data initiatives to increase transparency in government contracts and budget allocations. Complemented by citizen oversight, these measures can significantly curb corruption and mismanagement.

Empowering CSOs and safeguarding civil liberties are vital to democratic efficiency. Governments must protect freedoms of speech, assembly, and association, enabling CSOs to function effectively and hold leaders accountable. Disillusionment with democracy indicates that inefficiencies persist because governments are not heeding CSOs. Conversely, CSOs can leverage digital platforms to amplify activism, particularly among youth and marginalised groups, transforming disillusionment into productive action. CSOs should actively and deliberately employ innovative approaches on digital platforms.

Countries like Ghana have made progress in promoting youth and women's participation in the democratic process, exemplified by the implementation of frameworks like the African Youth Charter. However, restrictions on civil liberties in many African countries persist, stifling dissent and weakening the foundations of democracy. Youth engagement is fundamental to sustaining democracy. Youth quotas in governance ensure the representation of young people's interests in decision-making processes. Collaborations between CSOs and young people can transform disillusionment into progressive changes that benefit democracy.

In summary, to track democracy's progress, African countries need to consistently measure the judiciary's independence, the legislature's effectiveness, youth participation, and accountability among state officials. An African Democracy Index could evaluate these criteria, providing objective, transparent, and easily identifiable reform options. CSOs focused on governance can contribute peer-reviewed data to this index, fostering a transparent, collaborative approach to policymaking.

## **Conclusion**

Ghana's experience with democracy offers valuable insights. It demonstrates that democracy can and does work. Making it work begins with acknowledging the need to create a vibrant political ecosystem where CSOs, the public, state organs, and other stakeholders collaborate to strengthen democracy. It also underscores that while democracy is not a perfect system, it can self-regulate and improve if the public is sensitised to recognise the power it possesses. Although the benefits of democracy have remained limited, people should understand that they can effect change by holding leaders accountable, for instance, through the ballot box.

CSOs have a considerable role to play in this regard. They serve as conductors in this ecosystem, acting as voices for accountability, platforms for public policy education and sensitisation, and forums for public action. However, this role also renders CSOs vulnerable to persecution and other threats from state actors. This challenge can be mitigated if platforms for CSO collaboration exist, serving to unify and amplify their role as watchdogs of democracy. Ghanaian CSOs have already



made significant strides in this area, offering models that can be emulated. The work of CSOs in relation to the 2024 elections in Ghana exemplifies how CSOs can still achieve victories for democracy, even when operating in semi-hostile environments.

Public interest should always be the foremost consideration in a democracy. If CSOs maintain focus on this overarching goal, they will influence public opinion more consequentially. As Africa's population rapidly expands, fulfilling democratic aspirations will depend on a clear commitment to transparent governance, the protection of civil liberties, and, significantly, the impact of CSOs.

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## CHAPTER 9

# Botswana's Democratic Future from a Gendered Lens

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### Introduction

Of the 17 elections scheduled across Africa in 2024, 13 proceeded as planned. Notably, power transitioned from ruling parties to opposition groups in Botswana, Ghana, Mauritius, and Senegal. In Botswana, the opposition achieved a historic victory in the general elections, ending nearly six decades of uninterrupted rule by the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP). Meanwhile, neighbouring Namibia elected its first female president, Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah, marking a significant milestone in Southern Africa's political landscape.<sup>1</sup>

These developments underscore the intrinsic link between democracy and gender equality. Research indicates a strong correlation between increased female participation in politics and the effectiveness of democratic institutions.<sup>2</sup> The advancement of democratic principles often coincides with a rise in the number

of women occupying governmental positions. Therefore, promoting gender equality is essential for the maturation of democratic systems in African nations.<sup>3</sup>

Despite constituting over half of the global population, women continue to face substantial barriers to leadership roles across all levels of government. Achieving gender parity in democratic governance necessitates equal representation and the inclusion of female perspectives in policymaking.<sup>4</sup> Evidence suggests that the presence of women in legislative bodies is linked to the enactment of policies that address women's needs and rights.<sup>5</sup>

In 2015, Botswana committed to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which includes the promotion of gender equality. However, as the deadline approaches, the country appears to lag in this area. Enhancing women's involvement in decision-making processes and empowering them in leadership roles are critical for effective policymaking and the future of Botswana's democracy.

## **Institutional Framework for Gender Representation**

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms every individual's right to participate in their country's governance. Yet, in Southern Africa, significant disparities persist in women's political involvement. Nationally, Botswana has initiated several programmes to address gender-related issues. Previously, the Department of Gender operated under the Ministry of Youth, Gender, Sport and Culture. However, this department lacked the legal authority to implement certain policies essential for promoting gender equality. The current administration has

since restructured the ministry, now focusing on Youth and Gender. Nonetheless, the dual focus on youth and gender, both substantial portfolios, may dilute the effectiveness of initiatives aimed at addressing each area comprehensively.

In 1995, Botswana enacted the National Policy on Women in Development to bridge the gender gap and promote equitable access to resources. However, the rise in gender-based violence and violations of women's rights hindered its success. In response, the 2015 National Policy on Gender and Development replaced the earlier policy, aiming to ensure justice and dignity for all citizens by recognising gender-related rights as fundamental human rights. Despite this, the policy's implementation has been inconsistent, partly due to the agency's relocation across various ministries, affecting its stability and efficiency.

Botswana must strengthen legislation to combat violence against women. Female politicians often face cyberbullying, ridicule, and public humiliation, deterring women's participation in politics and undermining democratic principles. The media plays a crucial role in encouraging women's political engagement and combating online abuse. Addressing online violence is imperative, as it can have long-lasting negative impacts on victims and discourage potential female leaders from entering the political arena.

## **Gaps in Gender Representation**

Pre-colonial Tswana societies were predominantly patriarchal, with institutions that entrenched male dominance and female subordination. Within households, marriage functioned as a pivotal gender contract, reinforcing male authority over women.

Although Botswana's post-independence Constitution prohibits discrimination, it does not explicitly reference sex or gender as prohibited grounds. Consequently, policies and legislation enacted shortly after independence tended to favour men over women. While there have been notable legal reforms aimed at advancing women's rights, their practical implementation has often fallen short.

Botswana utilises the first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system, which poses challenges for women's political advancement. Under this system, the candidate with the highest number of votes wins, regardless of whether they achieve an absolute majority. The competitive nature of FPTP, combined with entrenched patriarchal norms and marginalisation within political parties, hinders women's candidacy and success. Even when gender quotas are introduced, their effectiveness is frequently undermined by a lack of political will and commitment.<sup>6</sup>

Women's underrepresentation in Botswana's political institutions remains a pressing issue. Despite constituting approximately 52% of the population and being well-represented in the workforce, women hold a disproportionately low number of positions in national parliament and cabinet. For instance, in the 2024 general elections, women secured only 6 out of 69 seats in the National Assembly, representing 8.7%—a decline from 11% in 2019.<sup>7</sup> This trend is mirrored at the local government level, where women's representation among councillors and chairpersons remains minimal.

**Table 1: Women’s Representation in Botswana’s Parliament (1965–2024)**

Year	Total Seats	Women’s Seats	% of Women
1965	35	–	–
1969	35	0	0%
1974	36	–	–
1979	36	–	–
1984	38	–	–
1989	38	2	5.30%
1994	44	4	9.10%
1999	44	8	18.20%
2004	61	7	11.50%
2009	61	4	6.60%
2014	63	6	9.50%
2019	63	7	11.10%
2024	69	6	8.70%

*Source: Author’s compilation.*

*Table 2: Gender Distribution of Councillors and Chairpersons (2004–2019)<sup>8</sup>*

Year	Female Councillors	Male Councillors	Total Councillors	Female Chairpersons	Male Chairpersons	Total Chairpersons
2004	116	475	591	3	13	16
2009	139	464	603	1	15	16
2014	110	499	609	3	13	16
2019	111	493	604	2	14	16

*Source: Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy.*



Data from the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) indicates that women consistently register to vote in higher numbers than men. In the 2019 elections, 505,053 women registered compared to 420,425 men. However, this higher voter registration has not translated into increased political representation. In the 2024 elections, only 28 out of 264 parliamentary candidates were women (10.6%), and merely three women were directly elected to parliament.<sup>9</sup>

Since gaining independence, Botswana has predominantly been governed by the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP). It was not until the 2024 elections that an opposition party, the Umbrella for Democratic Change (UDC), won the parliamentary elections and formed the government.

Despite the challenges, there have been some positive developments. In 2018, there was a strategic increase in the number of women in leadership roles, culminating in the appointment of Botswana's first female Minister of Finance and Economic Development in 2021. Additionally, Dinah Marathe became the first female Commissioner of the Botswana Police Service in 2021.<sup>10</sup> These milestones serve to challenge gender biases and inspire younger women to pursue careers in public service.<sup>11</sup>

Achieving gender equality in politics extends beyond numerical representation; it necessitates gender-sensitive policymaking. Patriarchal societal norms and financial constraints continue to impede women's political participation. Cultural attitudes, such as the Setswana saying “ganke di etelelwa pele ke manamagadi” (a woman cannot lead), perpetuate the marginalisation of women in politics.

Economic disparities further exacerbate the issue. A higher percentage of female-headed households are classified as “poor” or “very poor” compared to male-headed households. Women consistently earn less than men across various sectors, with the wage gap widening at higher income levels.<sup>12</sup> This systemic financial disadvantage limits women’s ability to fund political campaigns and hinders their political aspirations. Further research is needed to explore the relationship between women’s economic empowerment and political participation, as well as the impact of increased female representation on policymaking and governance.

## **Steps to Increasing Female Representation in Politics**

In societies governed by patriarchal norms, deeply rooted attitudes and perceptions often place women in subservient roles. However, with the right reforms and a strong emphasis on education, more women can ascend to positions of political authority. Embedding political education within the general school curriculum, especially at the primary and secondary levels, is vital to fostering democratic growth in Botswana. Particular focus should be placed on encouraging girls to engage with politics from an early age. Early exposure to concepts of leadership and governance can help dismantle the perception that politics is a male domain and equip girls with the confidence to participate meaningfully.

Access to funding remains a critical barrier for aspiring female politicians in Botswana. Political parties should consider implementing quotas to support female candidates, particularly

during campaign periods, which are often financially demanding. Campaign financing plays a significant role in amplifying a candidate's voice, and the lack of gender-sensitive political finance regulations disproportionately affects women. Female candidates frequently face greater financial challenges than their male counterparts due to gender pay disparities, making it harder for them to run viable campaigns.

To address this, Botswana must institute gender-responsive political finance frameworks and support mechanisms. One key structural reform would be the establishment of a dedicated Ministry for Gender Affairs. Currently, the Department of Gender Affairs operates under a broader ministry and lacks the authority and resources to fully execute its mandate. A standalone ministry would be better positioned to address critical issues such as campaign finance inequality, gender budgeting, and mainstreaming gender considerations across policy and governance.

## **Conclusion**

Botswana's political landscape has evolved significantly since independence. Increasingly, women are expressing interest in political participation and aspiring to leadership roles. Those who have made notable strides in politics tend to be high-profile individuals with advanced academic and professional credentials. While their presence is commendable, it also reveals a systemic gap, as passionate, capable women with less formal education or elite status are often excluded from political opportunities.

Nevertheless, the outlook for Botswana women in politics is promising. Current national leadership appears committed

to enhancing female political participation and creating more inclusive spaces for women in governance. To ensure this vision is realised, the media and non-governmental organisations must take a more proactive and deliberate role in supporting women's political journeys.

Moreover, women must uplift and support one another. In Botswana, women constitute the majority of the population, and this demographic strength can be leveraged to drive systemic change. Unity, visibility, and mutual support among women will be crucial in shaping a more gender-balanced and truly representative democracy.

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## CHAPTER 10

# **National Conference, National Dialogue: In Search of Inclusive Democratic Models in Africa**

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### **Introduction**

Democratic governance, as defined by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, is “a system of government where institutions function according to democratic processes and norms, both internally and in their interaction with other institutions.”<sup>1</sup> Such a system is expected to encompass broad political participation within an open civic space. However, in recent years, Africa has witnessed a decline in democratic principles. The Economist Intelligence Unit’s 2023 Democracy Index reported a drop in Africa’s score from 4.14 in 2022 to 4.04 in 2023, indicating a regression in democratic standards.<sup>2</sup>

In Cameroon, for instance, despite moving from the 140th to the 138th position in the Democracy Index, the country has

transitioned towards a more authoritarian political system, imposing significant restrictions on civic space under the guise of maintaining public order.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have been justified as necessary interventions to combat corruption, curb authoritarian excesses, and end neo-colonial influences. In Gabon, the junta claimed its actions aimed to restore democratic foundations. Despite these varied justifications, the overarching reality is a pronounced decline in democracy across the continent.

Persistent violent conflicts across Africa often stem from inadequate democratic governance and non-inclusive decision-making processes. These challenges prompt a reevaluation of the democratic models adopted post-colonial rule. Pearl Robinson identified the “national conference” approach as a preferred method during the 1990s for countries transitioning to democratic rule in Francophone Africa.<sup>4</sup> John Clark echoed this sentiment,<sup>5</sup> while Wuyi Omitoogun and Kenneth Oningu-Otite viewed national conferences as effective tools for facilitating political transitions.<sup>6</sup> These conferences mobilised national stakeholders to address pressing issues and foster inclusive democratic societies.

While national conferences successfully bolstered democracies in the 1990s, a decline has been evident since 2010. Currently, the “national dialogue” approach has gained traction. Though similar in purpose to national conferences, aiming for inclusivity and democratic strengthening, the national dialogue has not yielded the anticipated results, particularly regarding inclusivity. This shortfall is attributed to a pervasive lack of democratic culture across the continent. Consequently,



Africa grapples with civil wars, political instability, tribalism, marginalisation, and injustice, casting uncertainty over its democratic future.

Nonetheless, there are glimmers of hope. The 2024 elections in Ghana and Botswana, where opposition parties unseated ruling parties, exemplify a growing desire for new leadership and ideologies. These instances should serve as models for other African nations, especially in Francophone regions.

Despite current challenges, the future of democracy in Africa is not irredeemable. The imperative lies in identifying models that effectively promote inclusivity and uphold democratic principles. Developing such models is undoubtedly challenging, but African countries must strive to explore new avenues, anchoring their democratic systems in traditional African social and cultural values. This chapter delves into historical contexts to identify factors crucial for effective democratic models, arguing that achieving an inclusive society and strengthening democracies in Africa necessitates radical change. Such transformation is attainable only when all national stakeholders, particularly the youth who have recently been at the forefront of activism, are granted a genuine sense of inclusion and empowerment.

The concept of “driving forces” in a nation often surfaces in political discourse to advocate for broader investment in and participation from demographics beyond the elite class. Arnaud Teyssier defines driving forces as social elites engaged in the democratic process, whose economic realities are pivotal to a country’s functioning. Matthias Bürgi and colleagues identify five primary domains where driving forces operate: socioeconomic, political, technological, natural, and cultural.<sup>7</sup> An inclusive society

is characterised by active participation from its members in decision-making processes, serving as a prerequisite for inclusive democracy. Takis Fotopoulos describes inclusive democracy as “a new conception of democracy,” wherein all societal members have equal opportunities to partake in decisions across social, political, and economic spheres.<sup>8</sup> For contemporary Africa, building inclusive democracies is both a priority and a formidable challenge. This chapter explores how inclusivity manifests within the frameworks of national conferences and national dialogues.

### **National Conference in Benin, National Dialogue in Cameroon**

Africa has witnessed several national conferences, particularly during the period from 1990 to 1993, which saw such gatherings in Benin, Gabon, Congo, Mali, Togo, Niger, and Zaire. These conferences yielded varying degrees of success. In countries like Mali, Niger, and Benin, they contributed significantly to the establishment of stronger democracies. The February 1990 national conference in Benin, for instance, was notable for claiming to represent all the living or driving forces of the nation. These forces included religious institutions, trade unions, students, diaspora communities, the military, agricultural representatives, civil servants, international financial institutions, and political interest groups. Delegates from these diverse sectors convened to build consensus around a democratic governance model.

From 19 to 28 February 1990, 488 delegates openly deliberated on national issues, resulting in the adoption of major reforms intended to strengthen democracy. This culminated in

the introduction of a new constitution, which laid the foundation for a peaceful democratic transition and ushered Benin into a period of relative democratic stability.

According to Omitoogun and Onigu-Otite, the effectiveness of a national conference in building democracy depends on three key factors: a desire to improve the economic situation, the interests of external powers, and the stance of the military. In Niger, for example, the transition from military to civilian rule faced considerable obstacles, as the military actively blocked efforts to convene a national conference. This reinforces Ateba Quainoo's assertion that "one of the most vital institutions in a democracy is the military."<sup>9</sup>

Since 1990, Benin has consistently met the basic requirements of a democratic state: holding regular, free, and fair elections, and observing constitutional term limits. However, the country continues to grapple with issues such as governance quality, rule of law, accountability, and institutional transparency. These challenges became more apparent following the 2016 election of President Patrice Talon, under whom Benin's democratic standards began to decline. The 2023 Democracy Index by the Economist Intelligence Unit gave Benin a score of 4.68, signalling a retreat from the country's earlier democratic gains.

This situation prompts critical questions, such as the one posed by Pippa Norris: "Did the power-sharing constitution adopted in Benin during the early 1990s facilitate the development of a sustainable democracy?"<sup>10</sup> The answer lies in recognising that Benin's current democratic structure still owes much to the foundational decisions made during the 1990 national conference. Despite present challenges, the power-sharing model

remains essential to minimising sectarian conflict and promoting inclusivity—a lesson relevant to many other African nations.<sup>11</sup>

Cameroon's 2019 experience with a national dialogue offers another perspective. National dialogues are often described as “nationally owned political processes aimed at generating consensus among a broad range of stakeholders in times of deep political crisis, post-conflict settings, or during major political transitions.”<sup>12</sup> Initiated by President Paul Biya, Cameroon's Grand National Dialogue (GND), held from September to October 2019, was intended to address the Anglophone crisis and promote a more inclusive democracy. In the same year, Benin, Zambia, Mali, and Burkina Faso also hosted national dialogues with different objectives.

Christina Murray stresses that such dialogues must involve honest and constructive conversations and foster inclusive processes to build national consensus around political, social, or economic concerns.<sup>13</sup> Comparing Mali's Inclusive National Dialogue and Cameroon's GND, Mehler and others concluded that Mali's process was relatively more inclusive, though both suffered from limited quality in terms of execution.<sup>14</sup>

Cameroon's GND fell short of its stated goals. The main opposition party, the Cameroon Renaissance Movement, boycotted the dialogue, partly due to the imprisonment of several of its leaders. Similarly, separatist leaders were excluded. These omissions undermined the dialogue's credibility and inclusiveness.

Although some of the GND's recommendations have been implemented, the root causes of the Anglophone crisis remain unresolved. Democratic principles in Cameroon continue to be

questioned, with widespread violations of individual freedoms and fundamental human rights. Civic space remains constrained, and political participation is limited for many communities. In this context, the national dialogue failed to achieve its intended purpose. As the 2025 elections approach, the outlook for Cameroon's democracy appears uncertain. Should Paul Biya be re-elected, the expectation is that democratic standards will further decline, with increased restrictions on civic space.

### **In Search of the Ideal Model**

In 1990, several African countries responded to increasing pressure to adopt “open and democratic governance, characterised by popular participation, competitive elections, and the free flow of information.”<sup>15</sup> Some countries, such as Niger and Mali, responded by organising national conferences as pathways to democratic transition. The military played a significant role in these processes. In Niger, the 1991 conference (held from 29 July to 3 November) brought together approximately 1,200 delegates representing political parties as well as a wide range of political and non-political associations. The conference laid the foundation for a democratic constitution, an electoral code, and the formation of political parties.

Despite these efforts towards stability, Niger has experienced several coups since 1993—on 27 January 1996, 9 April 1999, 18 February 2010, and most recently on 26 July 2023. These repeated interventions suggest, perhaps ironically, that the military in Niger has come to see itself as the guardian of the post-1991 democratic order. The short-lived civilian transition that began

in 2021 was broken by the July 2023 coup, undermining hopes for sustained democratic rule.

Alex Thurston's analysis of the situation in Mali reflects a broader concern: that the framework of democracy in Africa is disintegrating.<sup>16</sup> Mali began its political transition with a national conference in 1991 (from 29 July to 12 August), initiated by the military after a coup. Unlike Niger's months-long process, Mali's conference lasted less than a month. The first democratic elections in 1992 produced the country's first democratically elected president, and Mali was subsequently hailed as one of Africa's most successful democracies, respecting the rule of law and presidential term limits. However, the surprise coup in March 2012 and the occupation of northern Mali by Islamist militants collapsed this democratic order.

The presence of military juntas in Niger and Mali does not negate the principle that the military must, ideally, support democratic institutions by standing with the people against corrupt governance. In Niger, military interventions have consistently been triggered by political failures to deliver transparency, development, and accountability. In both countries, juntas have justified their actions by citing the lack of accountability and rampant corruption. This demonstrates that establishing a democratic system is not enough; it must be consolidated through a strong democratic culture embedded in state institutions, including the military.

Globally, democracy is undergoing redefinition. Even long-standing democracies like the United States are no longer seen as unimpeachable models. The diversity in democracy measurement indices also illustrates this point.<sup>17</sup> For instance,

Ghana's democracy was scored 6.30/10 by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), 8.00/10 by Freedom House, and 8.00/10 by Polity. In 2023, Botswana received scores of 8.00/10 (Polity), 7.2/10 (Freedom House), and 7.73/10 (EIU), placing it second only to Mauritius—Africa's only full democracy according to the EIU that year.<sup>18</sup> These discrepancies, while not vast, reveal the subjectivity and variability in defining and measuring democracy.

Ghana, now in its Fourth Republic, which began in 1992, has been largely dominated by two political parties: the New Patriotic Party and the National Democratic Congress. Despite this, Ghana remains a stable democracy and is frequently cited as a model of democratic resilience in Africa. Regarding Botswana, scholars like Kenneth Good and Ian Taylor describe it as a minimalist democracy<sup>19</sup>—one in which elections, a free press, and civil liberties exist, but real power lies with elite actors beyond the reach of popular control.<sup>20</sup> This concept closely mirrors that of a “flawed democracy.” Nevertheless, Botswana has upheld a liberal democratic framework since implementing major political reforms in 1995. Though the Botswana Democratic Party has governed uninterrupted since independence in 1966, the country has witnessed five elected presidents, all assuming office through elections. Botswana's democratic reputation is further upheld by the collaborative roles played by civil society organisations and state institutions in ensuring peaceful political transitions.

The characterisation of Botswana as a minimalist democracy gained greater traction after the 2024 elections, in which the Botswana Democratic Party was unseated after 58 years in power. The opposition coalition, known as the Umbrella for Democratic Change, achieved an unprecedented mobilisation, resulting

in a transfer of power and further strengthening Botswana's democratic profile.

## **Conclusion**

The democratic models established in the 1990s and reinforced in the early 2000s now appear outdated and insufficient for meeting the aspirations of Africa's younger generations. A reassessment and reconstruction of these models are urgently required. Sovereign national conferences once held promise, helping some nations to initiate democratic governance. However, many of the leaders who rose to power through these processes failed to uphold or deepen the democratic gains, leading to regression.

While national dialogue emerged as an alternative mechanism for reform, its effectiveness has similarly waned due to inadequate inclusivity. For such dialogues to succeed, they must meaningfully engage all major stakeholders—the full range of a country's driving forces.

Ultimately, Africa must evolve beyond democratic models inherited from European systems, as these frameworks do not always align with the continent's socio-cultural realities. Only through bold, inclusive, and context-sensitive reforms can Africa chart a stable and sustainable democratic future.



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## CHAPTER 11

# **Threats and Opportunities for Democracy in East Africa: The Case of Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania**

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This chapter examines the recent trajectory of democracy in East Africa, focusing specifically on Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania. These nations were the founding members of the East African Community (EAC) in the early 2000s, prior to the inclusion of Rwanda, Burundi, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and Somalia. Herein, I explore the historical evolution of democracy within the EAC region, the factors influencing it, significant challenges, prevailing threats, and prospects for its advancement.

Abraham Lincoln aptly described democracy as a “government of the people, by the people, and for the people.” This notion implies that no individual or government should operate in isolation from the populace or contravene their interests. Fundamentally, it suggests that “the people” should

wield supreme power. In East Africa, however, this ideal remains largely unfulfilled, casting uncertainty over the region's democratic future.

Prior to colonial rule, political systems in East Africa were predominantly decentralised, with governance rooted in indigenous leadership structures, clan systems, and consensus-building mechanisms. For instance, before the establishment of modern Uganda, the Buganda Kingdom was led by the Kabaka (King). These traditional leadership systems persist today, albeit with diminished authority. Over time, various kingdoms and chiefdoms were amalgamated to form modern states—some heterogeneous, comprising diverse ethnic groups and cultures, and others more homogenous. The advent of colonialism in the late 19th century, primarily by Britain and Germany, introduced centralised governance models that often marginalised traditional systems.<sup>1</sup>

Following independence in the 1960s, democratic institutions began to emerge across the region. In 1965, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania instituted a one-party system aimed at fostering national unity. Conversely, Uganda experienced a military dictatorship under Idi Amin from 1971 to 1979, a period marked by egregious human rights violations. The 1990s heralded significant shifts towards multi-party politics: Kenya and Tanzania transitioned from one-party rule in 1991, while Uganda adopted a no-party system under Yoweri Museveni, eventually moving to multi-party politics in 2005. Despite these reforms, electoral violence has remained a persistent feature of East African democracies. Notably, Kenya experienced a severe post-election crisis between 2007 and 2008. In Uganda, constitutional amendments in 2005

and 2018 removed presidential term and age limits, and since 2020, Tanzania has enacted laws curtailing opposition activities and civil liberties.

The expansion of the EAC over recent decades has facilitated democratic growth. This regional integration has led to the establishment of institutions like the East African Court of Justice, which adjudicates cases related to human rights and governance, thereby enhancing the rule of law across member states.<sup>2</sup> The proliferation of smartphones and increased internet access have also bolstered civic engagement, enabling citizens to monitor elections and hold governments accountable.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, East Africa continues to grapple with restrictive civic spaces, characterised by laws that limit freedom of speech and assembly, often targeting civil society organisations and opposition groups. Internet shutdowns and censorship during elections are commonplace. For instance, during Uganda's 2021 general elections, the government blocked access to Facebook, alleging that fake and duplicate accounts were being used to amplify the popularity of opposition candidate Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu, also known as Bobi Wine. Such actions not only suppress freedom of expression but also undermine democratic processes, extending to the trial of civilians in military court-martials, a move that was alleged to have targeted opposition politicians.

Amid these challenges, civil society organisations (CSOs) remain vibrant in East Africa, achieving notable successes in advocating for pro-democracy reforms. In Tanzania, the Legal and Human Rights Centre has played a pivotal role in election monitoring and raising awareness about governmental performance. Similarly, the Kenya Human Rights Commission

and the Uganda Human Rights Commission actively engage stakeholders to promote freer and fairer elections, despite occasional political interference compromising their independence.

Another catalyst for democratic advancement in the region is the participation of EAC member states in various United Nations programmes and international treaties, such as the International Criminal Court. Such engagements have fostered respect for democratic institutions, facilitated election funding and monitoring, and provided recommendations to enhance transparency and fairness.

### **Some Progress for Democracy in East Africa**

The post-independence era in East Africa has been marked by contentious elections, often marred by malpractices, imprisonment of political opponents, intimidation, and extrajudicial killings. To promote transparent electoral processes, several agencies have been established within East African Community (EAC) member states. In Kenya, the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) was established in November 2011 under Article 88 of the 2010 Constitution.<sup>4</sup> Uganda's Electoral Commission was instituted through the Electoral Commission Act of 1997,<sup>5</sup> while Tanzania's National Electoral Commission, originally established in October 1970, was restructured and renamed the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in April 2024.<sup>6</sup>

Regarding political parties, the three countries exhibit varying dynamics. In Kenya, no single political party has dominated the democratic space. The Kenya African National

Union, established in 1963, is the oldest party, but others like the Forum for the Restoration of Democracy–Kenya, Orange Democratic Movement, and United Democratic Alliance have also thrived. Inter-party political alliances are common in Kenya. Conversely, Uganda's political landscape has been dominated by the National Resistance Movement (NRM), which has commercialised and militarised elections, hindering the growth of political alliances. Tanzania has been under the continuous rule of Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) since independence, effectively operating as a one-party state.

In all three countries, eligible voters participate in elections to choose their leaders. However, these elections are frequently characterised by ballot stuffing, post-election court cases leading to the nullification of results, election-related violence, and a 'do-or-die' approach to politics. For instance, Kenya's 2017 presidential election saw Uhuru Kenyatta's victory overturned due to significant irregularities, necessitating a re-run in which he was re-elected.<sup>7</sup> In Uganda, every presidential election since 2001 has been contested in court, with limited expectations of impartial adjudication due to perceived executive influence over the judiciary. Tanzania has experienced authoritarian practices, including the abduction of political opponents and the suppression of the press during elections. Additionally, economic inequality and high unemployment rates, particularly among youth, have led to public disillusionment with the efficacy of democracy.

Presidential terms in these countries are set at five years. Kenya and Tanzania have constitutional provisions limiting presidents to two terms. In contrast, Uganda has undergone

multiple electoral law reforms: the presidential term limit was removed in 2005, and the age limit was abolished in 2018. These changes are widely viewed as facilitating President Yoweri Museveni's prolonged tenure, leading to increased election-related expenditures and the militarisation of politics, with a grand plan of Museveni's son, General Muhoozi Kainerugaba, potentially succeeding his father. This could expose Uganda to a hereditary dictatorship similar to North Korea. Kenya's 2010 Constitution strengthened citizen participation in democratic processes, curtailed presidential powers, and fostered a more robust multi-party system. However, Uganda's and Tanzania's multi-party systems remain weak. A positive development is the emergence of youth-led opposition parties and movements in both countries.

There has been commendable progress in Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania concerning the inclusion of women, older citizens, and persons with disabilities (PwDs) in electoral processes and broader democratic participation. Women now hold top governmental positions in all three countries. Uganda has had two female Speakers of Parliament: Rebecca Alitwala Kadaga (2011–2021) and Annet Anita Among (2022–present). In 2021, Lady Justice Martha Koome became Kenya's first post-independence female Chief Justice, and Tanzania inaugurated Samia Suluhu Hassan as its first female President.. Women also occupy other significant positions across these nations. Moreover, several young individuals and PwDs have attained high-level governmental roles.



## The Place of Opposition Parties

Over the years, opposition parties in East Africa have faced challenges in establishing a formidable presence. In Tanzania, the CCM, dubbed the “Party of the Revolution,” has maintained political dominance since its formation in 1977. Election outcomes often suggest that Tanzania functions as a de facto one-party state. Opposition parties, such as the Civic United Front and Chama cha Demokrasia na Maendeleo (CHADEMA), consistently lag behind CCM in vote share. Notably, following the 2020 elections, the Tanzanian parliament became overwhelmingly one-sided, with 99% of members representing the ruling CCM, enabling the swift passage of policies without substantial opposition scrutiny.<sup>8</sup>

In Kenya, opposition leader Raila Odinga has historically formed alliances with ruling parties. In 2008, he became Prime Minister in President Mwai Kibaki’s cabinet. In 2018, his coalition, the National Super Alliance, partnered with President Uhuru Kenyatta’s Jubilee party. More recently, in July 2024, President William Ruto appointed four members of Odinga’s Azimio la Umoja coalition to quell protests aimed at his ousting. President Ruto also endorsed Odinga for the African Union Chairmanship. These alliances suggest that the opposition often aligns with ruling parties for convenience, thereby limiting its capacity to hold the government accountable.

Uganda’s opposition faces suppression through authoritarian tactics employed by President Museveni. Prominent opposition figures, like Dr. Kizza Besigye, have seen their influence curtailed. Allegations have surfaced that President Museveni injected funds into the Forum for Democratic Change, Uganda’s main opposition party, to exert control, leading to internal divisions

that weakened the party's ability to challenge the NRM effectively. Additionally, Democratic Party leader Norbert Mao signed a memorandum of understanding with Museveni, preceding his appointment as Minister of Justice and Constitutional Affairs, further fragmenting Uganda's opposition.

Given these challenges, it is evident that opposition parties in East Africa must undergo strategic restructuring to remain relevant and effectively contribute to democratic processes. Opposition activities should be recalibrated, with party policies formulated to enhance independence and impact. During elections, opposition parties often field separate candidates, diluting their collective strength and reducing their chances of success.

Moving forward, it is imperative for opposition parties to collaborate, not only during elections but also in the post-election period, to present a united front against the ruling parties. Embracing intra-party policies that ensure transparency in candidate selection, financial management, and general operations will bolster public trust and distinguish opposition parties from ruling entities that often operate with impunity and political patronage.

## **Protecting Institutions and the Civic Space**

Over recent decades, serious allegations have surfaced suggesting that electoral bodies in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda lack impartiality, often serving the interests of political elites who appoint their leadership. In Kenya, the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC), under Chairman Wafula Chebukati, faced scrutiny during the 2022 elections.<sup>9</sup> Four out

of seven commissioners disowned the presidential results, citing a lack of transparency in the tallying process. Despite these concerns, the Supreme Court upheld the election outcome, affirming William Ruto's victory. Similarly, in Uganda and Tanzania, electoral commissions have been accused of bias and malpractice. In Uganda, the Electoral Commission has faced criticism for alleged ballot stuffing and voter suppression. In Tanzania, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) disqualified the main opposition party, CHADEMA, from the 2025 elections, citing procedural non-compliance, a move widely viewed as politically motivated.

Typically, the executive branch orchestrates electoral irregularities, the electoral body announces manipulated results, and the judiciary legitimises them. Legislatures often rubber-stamp executive decisions without public consultation, undermining democratic principles.

To fortify democracy, electoral bodies must not only be legally independent but also operationally autonomous. Their structures should be decentralised, extending from the grassroots to the national level. Furthermore, the judiciary and legislature should perform their constitutional roles of checks and balances effectively. The executive's powers must be curtailed to prevent authoritarianism. Parliamentary committees should engage in stakeholder consultations before enacting legislation, ensuring transparency and public participation.

Comprehensive electoral reforms are urgently needed, including reinstating presidential term limits, enhancing judicial independence in electoral matters, and establishing robust feedback mechanisms for electoral bodies.

The civic space is integral to democracy, enabling citizens to engage in political discourse, advocate for rights, and hold leaders accountable. However, East African governments often restrict this space under the guise of maintaining law and order, accusing critics of being influenced by foreign entities. Such allegations hinder public policy advocacy. Law enforcement agencies, and occasionally the military, are used to intimidate and suppress dissent.

In Uganda, the government has been accused of undermining freedom of speech through arrests, violent crackdowns on protests, and censorship of media platforms. Opposition leader Bobi Wine has faced multiple arrests and allegations of torture against his supporters.<sup>10</sup> In Tanzania, opposition figures like Tundu Lissu have been arrested and charged with treason for advocating electoral reforms. In Kenya, journalists and activists have reported abductions and harassment. Additionally, civil society organisations have faced financial restrictions, including the freezing of bank accounts, which impede their operations.

## **Future Challenges and Solutions to Democracy in East Africa**

The trajectory of democracy in East Africa is complex, influenced by anti-colonial struggles and turbulent post-independence transitions. While the 1990s saw a shift towards multi-party systems, the promise of democratic governance has been undermined by authoritarian regimes, military coups, and electoral violence. Uganda has never experienced a peaceful transfer of presidential power since its independence. Tanzania's political landscape remains dominated by a single party, and

Kenya has grappled with post-election violence, notably in 2007-2008 and 2017.

Currently, East African democracies are fragile. Authoritarian tendencies persist, with leaders extending their rule through constitutional amendments. In Uganda, President Museveni removed both term and age limits, allowing indefinite tenure. Such actions threaten democratic integrity, necessitating future governments to revisit and amend these constitutional changes to restore checks and balances.

Ethnic-based politics further exacerbate divisions, particularly in Kenya and Uganda, where political alliances often align along ethnic lines. This identity politics fosters conflict and undermines national unity, posing significant challenges to democratic consolidation.

## **Conclusion**

Many East Africans perceive democracy as failing to deliver tangible benefits. To rebuild trust, it's imperative to strengthen the independence of institutions like the judiciary, ensuring fairness and justice. The executive must respect judicial autonomy as fundamental to democracy's survival.

Promoting inclusive governance requires addressing ethnic and regional disparities. Achieving national unity involves collaborative efforts from governments, religious leaders, and cultural influencers. Civil society should intensify advocacy for accountability, encouraging citizen participation in political processes. Public awareness campaigns are essential to empower citizens to demand transparency and responsiveness from their leaders.

Addressing issues like electoral corruption, political intimidation, militarisation of governance, and suppression of civil society is crucial. Ultimately, the future of democracy in East Africa hinges on implementing reforms that safeguard electoral integrity, uphold judicial independence, and protect civic freedoms.

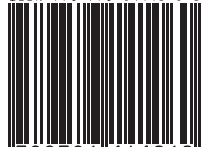
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