

## The State of Democracy in the SADC region

In the early to mid-2000s there was a strong sense of optimism about the deepening of democratic governance in Africa. John Endres, political risk analyst and the founding CEO of Good Governance Africa (GGA), [observed](#) in 2012 “a growing chorus of voices heralding a surge of prosperity and good governance in Africa: The World Bank believes that ‘sub-Saharan Africa’s economic growth is poised for acceleration.’” He highlighted the growth of multiparty democracy, the regularity of elections, the drop in the number of successful coups per decade and the rapid reduction in the number of people experiencing extreme poverty in Africa in the 1980s and into the early 2000s.

Political scholars Jolade Omede et al.<sup>1</sup> [argue that](#) the Southern African sub-region had “the most vibrant economy in sub-Saharan Africa...Democratic ideals also rank higher in the region compared to other regions in the continent. This has made the region, among others in the continent, the preferred choice of many migrants from different parts of the world.” These were times and voices of optimism for democracy in the region.

However, recent research shows that the quality of democracy is declining both globally and in the SADC region. According to [The Economist Intelligence Unit](#) (EIU), democracy in most parts of the world went into reverse.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Afrobarometer [notes that](#) Africa is experiencing a serious democratic backsliding.<sup>3</sup> This democratic regression and eroded tolerance for political plurality and freedom of expression are also evident in the SADC region, Human Rights Watch said in its [World Report 2024](#).<sup>4</sup>

Omede et al provided the most accurate picture of democracy in the SADC. While countries like Botswana, South Africa, Namibia and Mauritius demonstrate stable liberal democracies, the majority of SADC countries, including Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Tanzania and Zambia – experience significant democratic deficits beyond regular elections. Zimbabwe, for instance, holds regular elections, but they are largely seen as a façade for an authoritarian regime while Swaziland represents the lost group which is indifferent to the multiparty democracy.

[Afrobarometer](#) data<sup>5</sup> indicates that in countries with one-party dominance, such as Namibia, Angola, Zimbabwe, Botswana, there has been significant democratic regression. In South Africa, 72% of respondents expressed willingness to forego elections if it meant increased security and material wellbeing. This reflects a worrying trend, especially given South Africa’s role as a regional leader.

### Challenges to democratic governance

The deterioration of democracy in the SADC region cannot be understood in isolation. Kofi Annan, former Secretary General of the United Nations, emphasised that the will of the people must be the foundation of democracy and good governance.<sup>6</sup> Elections are supposed to represent this will and serve as the driving force for accountability. However, several challenges undermine the quality of elections and governance in SADC countries.

One significant administrative issue is the lack of identity documentation. The Mo Ibrahim Foundation [reports](#) that nearly 500 million Africans lack proof of identity, which prevents many from voting. Another issue further eroding the legitimacy of elected leaders is declining voter turnout over the last 15 years. Although

1 Omede, J, Akindola R and Ngwube, A. 2016. Institutionalisation of democracy without responsible and accountable governance in African Journal of Politics and Administrative Studies, Vol. 9, 1; March, 2016. Department of Political Science, Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki

2 Economist Intelligence Unit. 2024. Democracy Index 2023: Age of Conflict

3 Afrobarometer. 2023. Africans want more democracy, but their leaders still aren’t listening”

4 Human Rights Watch. 2024. World Report 2024

5 Harvey, R. 2024. The allure of the “Rwanda Model”: why it’s misplaced

6 Kofi Annan Foundation and Nelson Mandela School of Public Governance. 2020. Democracy in Central and Southern Africa

Africa has the youngest population, it also has some of the oldest leaders, limiting new ideas and innovation in governance.

Another challenge is the institutionalisation of democratic rule without corresponding accountability. Omede et al argue that institutions such as electoral management bodies, parliaments, the judiciary, the media and civil society organisations are weakened or abused. The implications are severe, as the ruling elites in these countries are not incentivised to govern in the interests of citizens or to create broad-based development, as any reduction in inequality appears to be seen as a threat to their rule.

In their [paper](#) on the SADC democracy agenda, Katundu, Ronceray and Runji highlight the region's slow adoption of continental governance norms, such as the African Charter of Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG), especially when compared to the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).<sup>7</sup> For example, out of 16 SADC member states, 13 have signed the ACDEG and 10 have ratified it, while all 15 ECOWAS members have signed and 13 have ratified it.<sup>8</sup> Civil society in SADC needs to double policy advocacy efforts to improve the speed and levels of ratification of ACDEG and not leave it up to SADC structures and individual countries.

The SADC has also faced criticism for its lack of intervention in key moments of democratic breakdown, such as the 2017 military coup in Zimbabwe. Despite its role as regional leader, South Africa failed to effectively exert its influence in promoting democratic governance across the region.<sup>9</sup> For instance, it did not hold the Zimbabwean government accountable

for rigging 2023 general elections, suppressing opposition, and using state violence against its citizens, leading to the migration of millions of Zimbabweans. And in the aftermath of the 2024 post-election violence in Mozambique, SADC has been silent thus further compromising its credibility.

### The path forward: development and democracy interconnectedness

The Afrobarometer notes that 66% of Africans prefer democracy. The United Nations and International IDEA [assert that](#) "development also matters for democracy."<sup>10</sup> In other words, SADC's greatest democratic need is development which entails poverty reduction, employment and economic growth. In fact, democracy and development are two sides of the same coin. Pippa Norris illustrates the interdependence and interconnectedness between democracy and development by indicating that the functioning of democratic institutions, accountable governance and creating free space for citizens to hold elected politicians to account by raising their voices and the strengthening of the government's capacity to deliver public services and creating opportunities for the private sector to thrive are important preconditions for development.<sup>11</sup> This is especially crucial because Southern Africa has some of the world's most unequal countries, with enormous social cleavages.<sup>12</sup>

*A major challenge is the institutionalisation of democratic rule without corresponding accountability.*

7 Katundu, E; Ronceray, M and Runji, N.2023. The SADC democracy agenda: Channels, lessons and digital technologies for civil society engagement

8 Ibid

9 Mashingaidze, S. 2024. 2024 SADC elections: A call to deepen grassroots democracy

10 United Nations. 2013. Democracy and Development: The Role of the UN

11 Norris, Pippa. 2011. Making Democratic-Governance Work: The Consequences for Prosperity. HKS Faculty Research Working Paper Series RWP11-035, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. <http://web.hks.harvard.edu/publications/workingpapers/citation.aspx?PubId=7967>.

12 Nordiska Afrikainstitutet/ Nordic Africa Institute (NAI).2018. Peace and Security Challenges in Southern Africa: Governance Deficits and Lucklustre Regional Conflict Management: Policy note No 4:2018

This suggests that development thrives in a democratic environment where the voice of the people is heard and the democratic institutions are respected. In his book, *Nigeria: Democracy without Development: How to Fix it*, Omano Edigheji states, “a democracy that is not able to deliver socio-economic benefits will end up in social and political instability...Democracy, simply put, means development. So, a country in which people go hungry is not a democracy.”<sup>13</sup>

Equally crucial is the need to educate the public through the schooling system and civil society awareness raising initiatives, particularly targeting the youth that democratic and accountable governance has a deep history in Africa and is not a colonial imposition. Moses Ochuni, an African history professor at Vanderbilt University, [states that](#).

*“Pre-colonial African histories furnish us with political cultures and leadership modalities that were democratic in their own ways. They were variously founded on consensus, inherited authority, or sacred, religious and ancestral ordination. What they all had in common was legitimacy, the basic idea of a leader, group of leaders, or a political configuration being accepted as representing the will and interest of a people at a particular time.*”

*Not only did these pre-colonial forms of African democratic practice possess the key ingredient of legitimacy, they had in-built mechanisms of accountability, participation and checks and balances. Moreover, there were procedures for addressing post-selection grievances and managing the occasional crisis of succession and leadership failure.”<sup>14</sup>*

This is what the former Organisation of African Unity (OAU) Secretary General Salim Ahmed Salim called “homegrown” form of democracy. It dispels the myth that accountable democracy is “unAfrican.” Speaking at the OAU summit in 1990, Salim stated, “Africa could not ignore the global consensus on the value of democracy; but democracy must be home-grown.” The ruling elites in Africa have appropriated the dividends of democracy among themselves through corruption, bad governance, abuse of state power and cronyism. Ordinary Africans today hanker after democracy because historically they experienced an accountable, people-centric and homegrown form of governance which benefited the majority. Instead of backsliding, the SADC citizens and upcoming leaders need to rekindle their belief in democratic ideals and strengthen accountable governance and democratic institutions in all the countries in the region to fulfil the aspirations of our forebears. Even though accountable democratic governance is facing headwinds, there is hope. Our hope lies in the development of young ethical leaders who must get involved in governance issues in order to access the power to lead the continent with innovation.

13 Edigheji, O.2020. *Nigeria Democracy without Development: How to Fix it*.

14 Ochonu, M. 2022. How can we develop a uniquely African form of democracy? Published in Mail & Guardian newspaper