

DEMOCRACY AND GOVERNANCE BRIEF

Democracy in Africa: What is Working, What is Not



1.0 The Question That Will Not Wait

There is a version of the democracy debate in Africa that never leaves the procedural. It counts elections held, turnout percentages, the presence or absence of term limits, the number of seats reserved for women or youth, and the ratings assigned by external democracy indices. By those measures, the picture is neither empty nor conclusive. International IDEA¹ notes significant progress in inclusive political participation and representation, especially for women, youth, and persons with disabilities. Yet Freedom House² also reports that political rights and civil liberties deteriorated in 21 of 54 African countries in 2024, while only 8 registered improvements. Even so, citizens continue to show up: UNDP's review of Africa's 2024 election cycle recorded an average turnout of 60.26 percent, almost level with the global average of 61 percent.³

¹ International IDEA, *Enhancing Inclusive Political Participation and Representation in Africa* (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2024), <https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/enhancing-inclusive-political-participation-and-representation-africa>

² Freedom House, "Africa," in *Regional Trends and Threats to Freedom in 2025* (2025), <http://freedomhouse.org/report/report-sub-page/2025/regional-trends-and-threats-freedom>

³ Robert Gerenge, "Africa's Super Election Year: Bolting Resilience Against Winds of Democratic Recession," United Nations Development Programme, April 30, 2025,

But those metrics, useful as they are, do not answer the question that the Development Dialogues webinar convened by the African Governance Network set out to interrogate in April 2026: Is democratic participation actually translating into real power, and are ordinary people experiencing the difference in their daily lives? That is a harder, less comfortable question, one that cannot be answered by pointing to election-day photographs or the passage of progressive legislation. It requires asking what happens after the votes are counted and the commissions are applauded, in the months and years when governance is supposed to show up.

The conversation that emerged resisted clean verdicts. The panelists, drawn from civil society leadership, policy research, government, and digital communications practice, did not reach for easy pessimism, nor for the cautious institutional optimism that often characterises official forums. What they offered instead was a more honest account: democracy in Africa is not failing, but it is not yet delivering. It is evolving under pressure, unevenly, against structural constraints that are as much economic as they are political. Progress and dysfunction coexist, neither cancelling the other out, and it is this tension that defines the trajectory of democratic development across the continent.

2.0 The Gains Worth Naming

Any honest account of African democracy has to start by taking its progress seriously. Electoral systems, whatever their remaining weaknesses, have in many countries become more technologically enabled and more transparent. International IDEA⁴ has documented how biometric technologies are used in voter registration and verification, while its Nigeria work notes that BVAS and the IReV portal were celebrated for improving result transparency and public confidence. UNDP's review of Africa's 2024 elections likewise found that technology continued to play an important role in electoral management across the continent. Disputed outcomes are also increasingly being fought in formal legal arenas: recent scholarship describes elections in many multiparty regimes as increasingly judicialized, even if courts do not always rule against incumbents.⁵ That shift is gradual, partial, and reversible, but it is real.

Legal frameworks have also moved. Nigeria's Not Too Young To Run Act remains one of the clearest examples, and President Buhari's 2018 signing remarks presented it as a landmark piece of legislation for young Nigerians.⁶ But the shift is broader than only Nigeria. Rwanda shows what quota-backed reform can deliver as women now hold 63.8 percent seats in the Chamber of Deputies, well above the constitutional minimum of 30 percent.⁷ Kenya shows both the ambition and the limits of reform: the 2010 Constitution entrenched the two-thirds gender principle, created 47 county women seats in the National Assembly, and reserved additional

<https://www.undp.org/africa/blog/africas-super-election-year-bolting-resilience-against-winds-democratic-recession>

⁴ International IDEA, *Introducing Biometric Technology in Elections* (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2023), <https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/introducing-biometric-technology-elections>.

⁵ Emmanuel Saffa Abdulai, "Judicialization of Elections," in *Electoral Politics, Laws and Ethnicity in Africa* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023) available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-34136-6_8>accessed14/04/2026.

⁶ Muhammadu Buhari, "President Buhari's Remarks at the Signing of the Not-Too-Young-To-Run Bill in Abuja," State House, Abuja, May 31, 2018,

<https://statehouse.gov.ng/president-buharis-remarks-at-the-signing-of-the-not-too-young-to-run-bill-in-abuja/>

⁷ United Nations in Rwanda, "Rwanda Reaffirms Its Unwavering Commitment to Gender Equality with 63.8 Per Cent Women in the Chamber of Deputies," November 4, 2024, UN Rwanda> available at:

<https://rwanda.un.org/en/282783-rwanda-reaffirms-its-unwavering-commitment-gender-equality-638-cent-women-chamber-deputies> > accessed 05/05/2026.

parliamentary seats for youth, persons with disabilities, and other special-interest groups, even though full implementation remains unfinished.⁸ The legal architecture of inclusion has therefore expanded in meaningful ways, even if the pace and depth of that progress remain uneven.⁹ The harder question now is whether these openings are translating into actual influence over decisions, budgets, and priorities.

Civil society's contribution to democratic function has deepened considerably. Afrobarometer's 2025 flagship report¹⁰ shows that civic participation remains substantial across the continent: 47 percent of respondents reported attending a community meeting in the previous year, 42 percent joined with others to raise an issue, and significant shares contacted traditional leaders, councillors, MPs, or party officials. These are not peripheral acts. They are evidence of a civic sphere still trying to bind institutions to public demands. Kenya's 2024 Gen Z mobilisation made that visible in an unusually dramatic fashion: Afrobarometer's Kenya case study found that social-media-led protests forced President William Ruto to withdraw the Finance Bill on 27 June 2024.¹¹

And then there is technology, specifically, social media and civic tech platforms. Their effect on the texture of democratic life in Africa has been substantial and is often under-read by commentary that focuses narrowly on disinformation while overlooking mobilisation. Afrobarometer's 2025 report¹² explicitly identifies social media as critical in movements such as #FeesMustFall in South Africa, #RejectFinanceBill in Kenya, and #EndSARS in Nigeria, noting that these platforms have enabled real-time information-sharing, coordination, protection, and bottom-up mobilisation. The channels exist. The energy exists.

3.0 Where the System Breaks Down

The difficulty is that almost every gain described above comes with a counterweight, a structural feature of how African democratic systems actually operate that prevents progress from accumulating into transformation. The most persistent of these is the gap between formal inclusion and substantive power. That progress, however, should be described carefully. It is real, but it is modest and uneven. International IDEA's 2025 scorecard¹³ notes that women's representation in African parliaments rose by just one percentage point over three years, from 24 percent to 25 percent. The same review found that, despite Africa's youth profile, only 2.2

⁸ Constitution of Kenya, arts. 27, 81, 97, 98, and 177, Constitution PDF; Parliament of Kenya, "The National Assembly"

⁹ International IDEA, *Women's Political Participation: Africa Barometer 2024*, 2nd ed. (2024), <https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/womens-political-participation-africa-barometer-2024>

¹⁰ Afrobarometer, *African Insights 2025: Citizen Engagement, Citizen Power: Africans Claim the Promise of Democracy* (2025), <https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Citizen-engagement-Afrobarometer-flagship-report-ENG-4july25.pdf>

¹¹ Daniel Iberi and Kamal Yakubu, "PP100: Predicting Protest Participation: Insights from the Year before Kenya's 2024 Anti-Tax Demonstrations," Afrobarometer, February 16, 2026, <https://www.afrobarometer.org/publication/pp100-predicting-protest-participation-insights-from-the-year-before-kenyas-2024-anti-tax-demonstrations/>

¹² Afrobarometer, *African Insights 2025: Citizen Engagement, Citizen Power: Africans Claim the Promise of Democracy*, Op. Cit.

¹³ International IDEA, "The Scorecard on Women's Political Participation and Representation in Africa," March 6, 2025, available at: <https://www.idea.int/news/scorecard-womens-political-participation-and-representation-africa>>accessed 05/05/2026.

percent of parliamentarians are young people, and less than 1 percent are young women. So the problem is not that inclusion has failed to enter the conversation. It is that legal and symbolic gains are moving faster than power is shifting in practice.

Political financing is a second structural barrier, and one of the most corrosive. Money often decides who gets close to power before voters get a real choice. When nomination fees are high, campaigns are expensive, and donations are opaque, the field tilts toward those with wealth, patronage networks, or privileged access to party gatekeepers. The result is narrower competition, weaker public trust, and representation that is easier to buy than to earn. Reform therefore matters not as a technical clean-up exercise, but as a way to make politics fairer, more transparent, and more open to capable people without deep pockets. Spending limits, disclosure rules, independent oversight, sanctions for abuse, and carefully designed public funding are established tools for reducing undue influence and protecting the integrity of democratic competition. The harder problem is political will: those best placed to change the rules often benefit from the rules as they stand.¹⁴

What this produces, over time, is a legitimacy problem that elections alone cannot solve. Afrobarometer's cross-country trust data¹⁵ show that Africans trust key institutions and leaders less than they did a decade ago, with political institutions ranking among the least trusted. At the same time, the World Bank's 2025 CPIA Africa report¹⁶ argues that governments urgently need to improve essential service delivery to promote inclusive growth and rebuild trust, noting rising public discontent and dissatisfaction with service quality. Youth unemployment also remains a structural pressure point in Sub-Saharan Africa, according to World Bank data drawing on ILO modelled estimates.¹⁷ When people ask whether democracy is working, they are not asking only whether ballots were counted. They are asking whether the public authority has become capable, responsive, and materially relevant to their lives.

The protests that have erupted across the continent in recent years are frequently misread as symptoms of democratic instability. They are often better understood as demands for democratic function. Citizens in the street are not, in the main, rejecting the idea of representative government. They are insisting that it actually represents them. Repression treats protest as a threat to democracy. Accountability treats it as democracy working. The distinction matters enormously for how institutions choose to respond.¹⁸

The digital dimension adds a further complication. Social media has created the impression of a generation that is intensely civically active, and in important senses that impression is correct.

¹⁴International IDEA, *Money in Politics* (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2015), <https://www.idea.int/theme/money-politics>

¹⁵ Afrobarometer, "Across Africa, Public Trust in Key Institutions and Leaders Is Weakening," Dispatch No. 891, October 31, 2024, <https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/AD891-PAP20-Africans-trust-in-key-institutions-and-leaders-is-weakening-Afrobarometer-31oct24.pdf>

¹⁶ World Bank, "Building Trust through Effective Service Delivery in Africa," July 10, 2025, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2025/07/09/building-trust-through-effective-service-delivery-in-africa>

¹⁷ International Labour Organization, *Global Employment Trends for Youth 2024: Sub-Saharan Africa* (August 2024), https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2024-08/Sub-Saharan%20Africa%20GET%20Youth%202024_0.pdf

¹⁸ Afrobarometer, "Africans' Commitment to Democracy Undermined by Poor Political Performance, but Not Economic Failures," July 18, 2024, <https://www.afrobarometer.org/articles/africans-commitment-to-democracy-undermined-by-poor-political-performance-but-not-economic-failures-afrobarometer-inaugural-flagship-report-reveals/>

But civic energy online and political organizations on the ground are not the same thing. Afrobarometer’s findings¹⁹ show that only 7 percent of young Africans surveyed in 28 countries said they had posted about politics or community affairs on social media in the previous year. The infrastructure for converting attention into a durable political organisation remains thin. And the access problem is real: GSMA reports²⁰ that Sub-Saharan Africa still has a 60 percent mobile-internet usage gap, driven in part by affordability and device costs, while the World Bank notes that coverage outpaces actual use by a wide margin and that the price of data and handsets remains a major constraint.²¹ Digital civic space is powerful, but uneven: it has widened the route into public action for many young citizens, even as cost, access, and infrastructure still keep that route narrower than it looks from the outside.

4.0 What Genuine Reform Requires

The real test of inclusion is not who is in the room. It is who shapes the decision. African democracies do not only need more diverse faces in public office; they need institutions in which youth, women, and marginalised communities can influence laws, budgets, and priorities in ways citizens can actually feel. When representation does not change outcomes, the public quickly reads it as symbolism rather than power.²²

Political financing needs reform because money often shapes who can compete long before citizens cast a vote. When nomination fees are high, campaigns are expensive, and donations are opaque, the field tilts toward those with wealth, patronage networks, or privileged access to party gatekeepers. The result is narrower competition, weaker public trust, and representation that is easier to buy than to earn. Reform, therefore, matters not as a technical clean-up exercise, but as a way to make politics fairer, more transparent, and more open to capable people without deep pockets. Spending limits, disclosure rules, independent oversight, sanctions for abuse, and carefully designed public funding are established tools for reducing undue influence and protecting the integrity of democratic competition.²³ The harder problem is political will: reforms are usually hardest to pass because those best placed to change the rules often benefit from the rules as they stand.

The responsiveness gap is a third structural priority. Afrobarometer’s 2025 flagship report²⁴ finds that citizens are more likely to participate politically when they believe elections are free and fair, when they are satisfied with how democracy works, and when local officials are

¹⁹ Afrobarometer, *African Insights 2025: Citizen Engagement, Citizen Power: Africans Claim the Promise of Democracy* (2025),

<https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Citizen-engagement-Afrobarometer-flagship-report-ENG-4july25.pdf> > accessed 05/05/2026

²⁰ GSMA, *The Mobile Economy: Sub-Saharan Africa 2024* (2024),

https://www.gsma.com/solutions-and-impact/connectivity-for-good/mobile-economy/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/GSMA_ME_SSA_2024_Web.pdf

²¹ African Union, *African Digital Compact (ADC)*, August 9, 2024, <https://au.int/en/documents/20240809/african-digital-compact-adc>

²² International IDEA, *Enhancing Inclusive Political Participation and Representation in Africa*, Op. Cit; International IDEA, *Women’s Political Participation: Africa Barometer 2024*, Op. Cit.

²³ International IDEA, “Money in Politics,” Op. Cit; International IDEA, *Political Finance Design Tool*, <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/tools/political-finance-design-tool>

²⁴ Afrobarometer, “Government Responsiveness and Democracy Are Important Drivers of Citizen Engagement in Africa, New Afrobarometer Flagship Report Reveals,” July 8, 2025,

<https://www.afrobarometer.org/articles/government-responsiveness-and-democracy-are-important-drivers-of-citizen-engagement-in-africa-new-afrobarometer-flagship-report-reveals/>

responsive to their needs. The World Bank's 2025 Africa governance work²⁵ makes the same point in administrative terms: trust depends on a government's ability to transform public resources into essential services. Democratic legitimacy is not produced once, during elections. It is produced or eroded continuously through what governments do between elections.

On the digital frontier, the task is twofold. First, affordable data and internet access now matter to civic participation as much as town halls, public hearings, and citizen-feedback channels do in offline democratic life: they are not the whole of participation, but they increasingly determine who can enter it, be heard within it, and organise through it.

Second, the work of converting digital civic energy into a political organisation has to become deliberate. GSMA's data²⁶ on the region's large usage gap, the World Bank's findings on affordability barriers, and the African Union's Digital Compact²⁷ all point in the same direction: digital inclusion is no longer a side issue. It is part of the institutional substrate of democracy itself.

5.0 Questions the Dialogue Left Open

Knowledge products of this kind do a disservice to their readers if they close every question with a tidy recommendation. The Development Dialogues webinar was valuable precisely because it generated productive uncertainty as well as convergent insight. Several questions left in genuine tension deserve to be carried forward into future research, programming, and policy design.

How do African democracies move from symbolic inclusion to substantive power-sharing without either waiting for a generation of reform or fracturing existing political coalitions? What institutional models exist, in Africa and elsewhere, for sharing executive decision-making authority in ways that are durable and not merely cosmetic? What does a financing reform agenda look like that has enough political buy-in to actually pass, given that it requires those who benefit from current arrangements to change them?

How do governments institutionalise faster responsiveness to citizen demands without creating feedback loops that enable populism or undermine evidence-based policy? What is the relationship between digital civic mobilisation and formal electoral participation, and is the apparent disconnect between online engagement and voting behaviour as significant as it appears, or is it partly a function of how participation is measured? How do African states negotiate the terms of their external dependencies in ways that protect policy autonomy without jeopardising development finance?

And perhaps most fundamentally: what does it mean to claim that democracy is working in a context where it has not yet delivered broadly shared economic improvement? Is the legitimacy of procedural democracy separable from economic outcomes, or is economic failure

²⁵ World Bank, "Building Trust through Effective Service Delivery in Africa," <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2025/07/09/building-trust-through-effective-service-delivery-in-africa>

²⁶ GSMA, *The Mobile Economy: Sub-Saharan Africa 2024*, Op. Cit.

²⁷ African Union, *African Digital Compact (ADC)*, Op. Cit

eventually fatal to democratic culture? The dialogue did not resolve these questions. It made it clear that they cannot be deferred.

6.0 Conclusion

African democracy is neither a success story waiting to be celebrated nor a failure waiting to be acknowledged. It is a project under construction, visible in the civic energy of its young people, the continued demand for democratic voice, the adaptive role of civil society, and the persistence of electoral participation even in periods of frustration and distrust. These are not small things.

What they add up to, however, is not yet transformation. The structural features that prevent participation from becoming power, the cost of politics, the thinness of substantive inclusion, the service-delivery gap, the erosion of trust, and the narrowing of policy space under economic and digital dependency are not self-correcting. They require deliberate, sustained, and politically uncomfortable reform. Democracy in Africa will be judged, ultimately, not only by the quality of its elections but by the quality of life and public agency it enables. That is the standard that citizens are already applying. It is past time for institutions to catch up.

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