



When Leaders Fail Democracy, Democracy Fails the People

ISABEL BOSMAN

Executive summary

Although democracy remains the form of government with the most popular support in Africa, several warning signs in recent years indicate that all is not well with democratic governance on the continent. An increasing number of disputed and criticised elections, as well as recurring unconstitutional changes of government – often popularly celebrated – are clear indications that the will of the people has not been finding expression and that there are difficulties in holding leadership accountable. In many instances, democracy is being mismanaged and has been failing to provide the most basic socio-economic needs of those it is meant to serve. If this is not carefully managed and navigated, popular support for democracy as a form of government could wane. Elected leaders need to come to terms with the fact that they are responsible not just to their electorate but also to the institution of democracy itself. More should be done to safeguard it and ensure accountable leadership that can provide the full spectrum of rights.

Introduction

Across Africa, alarm bells are ringing, proclaiming loudly that all is not well with democratic governance. Several recent disputed and criticised polls (see, for example, the 2023 elections in Nigeria,¹ Sierra Leone² and Zimbabwe³) are symptomatic not just of problems within those democracies but also of wider problems of democratic backsliding and threats posed to democracy. This is apparent as well in the spate of unconstitutional changes of government in the Sahel region since 2020. Elections on the continent are becoming ever more controversial and less expressive of the (dis)satisfaction of citizens with their leaders. Belief in the ability of elected leaders to fulfil their mandates is fading and recent polling trends show a maturing electorate on the continent ‘yearning for competent leadership’.⁴ There is also increasing evidence of elections being manipulated by incumbents to remain in power.

Thus, while many political elites would seek to retain their hold on power, what citizens really want is a system that provides responsible leaders that fulfil the basic requirements of good governance. The crux of the issue is that Africans want more democratic and accountable governance, but their leaders are not responsive to that need.⁵ Some of the recent coups on the continent were popularly celebrated – an indication that, where elections fail to deliver change, new avenues for expressing dissatisfaction emerge, often

1 Damilola Agbalajobi, “Nigeria’s Elections Were Once Again Disputed in Court, a Stark Reminder of a Weak Electoral System”, *The Conversation*, September 11, 2023.

2 Afolabi Adekaiyaoja, *Close, Contested but Credible? Sierra Leone’s 2023 Elections*, Report (Abuja: Centre for Democracy and Development, August 2023).

3 Nyasha Chingono, “Zimbabwean Opposition Leader Says Election Was ‘Gigantic Fraud’”, *The Guardian*, August 27, 2023.

4 Enoch Randy Aikins, “Recent Elections Show Africans Yearn for Competent Leadership”, *ISS Today*, April 19, 2023.

5 Afrobarometer, “Africans Want More Democracy, but Their Leaders Still Aren’t Listening” (Policy Paper 85, Afrobarometer, Accra, January 19, 2023).

posing a great threat to the longevity of democracy. The inability of elected governments to deliver basic goods and services is becoming harder to ignore. This is not necessarily indicative of a failure of democracy but rather of leaders being fundamentally out of touch with their electorates. They have misplaced their focus and as a result are failing the ideals of democracy. Democracy itself is being mismanaged.

Africans want more democratic and accountable governance, but their leaders are not responsive to that need

In a year with 64 scheduled elections across the world, it is important to take stock of what democracy has meant for Africans while also considering its future on the continent. In 2024, 22 general and presidential elections are scheduled in Africa, as well as one constitutional referendum in a country where a coup has taken place recently.⁶ Since the end of the Cold War, African states have been in agreement on the important role democratic governance plays in achieving socio-economic prosperity. Prior to this, the Organization of African Unity (OAU), established in 1963 and the predecessor of the AU, regarded 'decolonisation, territorial integrity and economic development' as its chief priorities.⁷

However, at the OAU Summit of 1990 in Addis Ababa, African states did express concern at the dire socio-economic state of the continent. In the 'Declaration on the Political and Socio-economic Situation in Africa and Fundamental Changes Taking Place in the World' they emphasised:⁸

We are fully aware that in order to facilitate this process of socio-economic transformation and integration, it is necessary to promote popular participation of our peoples in the processes of government and development.

This declaration also acknowledges that a 'political environment which guarantees human rights and the observance of the rule of law, would assure high standards of probity and accountability particularly on the part of those who hold public office'.⁹ Democracy is regarded in this declaration as the form of government most suited to inclusivity and universal suffrage. As a result, states committed to 'further the

6 Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa, "EISA African Election Calendar 2024", <https://www.eisa.org/election-calendar/>.

7 African Peer Review Mechanism, *Africa Governance Report 2023: Unconstitutional Changes of Government in Africa* (Johannesburg: APRM, 2023).

8 Organization of African Unity, "Declaration on the Political and Socio-economic Situation in Africa and the Fundamental Changes Taking Place in the World", AHG/Decl.1 (XXVI), 1990, https://archives.au.int/bitstream/handle/123456789/715/AHG%20Decl%201%20XXVI_E.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

9 OAU, "Declaration on the Political".

democratisation of our society and to the consolidation of democratic institutions in our countries'.¹⁰ However, more than three decades later, and in spite of several additional declarations, legal instruments and policy frameworks, this democratic consolidation is not complete. Across the continent, citizens are growing more frustrated with poor governance that fails to deliver on these commitments. Disputed elections exacerbate this situation and contribute to the declining support for democracy. This policy briefing explores these challenges, considers the feelings harboured by citizens of African countries toward democracy and gives recommendations on promoting democratic governance on the continent.

More than three decades later, and in spite of several additional declarations, legal instruments and policy frameworks, this democratic consolidation is not complete

How do Africans feel about democracy?

Data gathered by Afrobarometer overwhelmingly shows that support for democracy among Africans is high and that there is great demand for it. However – and this is where the problem lies – the data clearly indicates that the supply of democracy and the satisfaction of ordinary citizens with democracy is worryingly low. These findings are captured in an Afrobarometer paper, the title of which sums up the situation perfectly: 'Africans Want More Democracy, but Their Leaders Aren't Listening'.¹¹ In total, 34 African countries were included in Afrobarometer's Round 8 surveys conducted between 2019 and 2021. People were asked a series of questions related to democracy, governance and elections to get a sense of whether they feel democracy is working in their countries and where it needs improvement. Of the survey respondents, 68% indicated a preference for democracy 'to any other system of government' while 74% rejected military rule, 77% rejected one-party rule and 82% rejected so-called 'strongman' or one-person rule.¹²

Although these figures are positive, the same report notes a decrease across 30 countries observed in 'the proportion of citizens who say that "democracy is preferable to any other kind of government"' – from 73% in 2011 to 69% in the most recent round of surveys (2019–2021).¹³ In addition, a noticeable downturn from 2011/2013 of eight percentage points in support for elections has been noted in the Round 8 surveys, although it remains at a

¹⁰ OAU, "Declaration on the Political".

¹¹ Afrobarometer, "Africans Want More Democracy".

¹² Afrobarometer, "Africans Want More Democracy", 3.

¹³ Afrobarometer, "Africans Want More Democracy", 3.

firm 75% according to the 2023 report.¹⁴ Afrobarometer suggests that this drop in support for elections as an efficient way to choose leaders ‘may reflect some real disillusionment with elections and/or democracy, perhaps in light of often contested and sometimes violent polls’.¹⁵ Moreover, it also suggests that Africans are realising more and more that elections are ‘malleable and imperfect and do not, by themselves, guarantee democratic outcomes’.¹⁶ Increasing numbers of disputed elections, the growing amount of reported electoral irregularities and, more recently, popularly celebrated coups suggest that Africa may be experiencing significant disillusionment with democracy and elections.

Increasing numbers of disputed elections, the growing amount of reported electoral irregularities and, more recently, popularly celebrated coups suggest that Africa may be experiencing significant disillusionment with democracy and elections

These findings are corroborated by other reports. For example, *The Global State of Democracy 2023* report by International IDEA finds that the two biggest challenges to enhanced democratic consolidation in Africa are ‘failures in election administration and declining trust in institutions’.¹⁷ At the same time, democratic participation on the continent is high. This is a positive sign but, when combined with the fact that trust in democratic institutions is in overall decline, it leads to one important conclusion: ‘[P]eople care about democracy, and they are willing to mobilise to support it. However, this support is not unconditional.’¹⁸

These findings align with Afrobarometer data noting a decrease in citizens’ satisfaction with democracy. Across the countries surveyed, ‘satisfaction with how democracy is working is... down 7 percentage points, from 50% in 2011/2013 to 43% in the most recent round’.¹⁹ This figure is worrisome. Although there is significant support for democracy as the most appropriate form of government, if citizens continue to lose faith in its ability to deliver and function as intended, it is only a matter of time before support for democracy overall also dips. There is already evidence of greater open-mindedness when it comes to military intervention, particularly in Côte d’Ivoire, Guinea, Mali, Tanzania and Tunisia. Youth aged 18–36 especially showing more tolerance for military intervention.²⁰

14 Afrobarometer, “Africans Want More Democracy”.

15 Afrobarometer, “Africans Want More Democracy”, 6.

16 Afrobarometer, “Africans Want More Democracy”, 6.

17 International IDEA, “The State of Democracy in Africa”, 2023, <https://www.idea.int/gsod/2023/chapters/africa/>.

18 International IDEA, “The State of Democracy in Africa”.

19 Afrobarometer, “Africans Want More Democracy”, 10.

20 Afrobarometer, “[Afrobarometer Data Show Worrying Trends for Democracy in Africa, Prof. Gyimah-Boadi Warns](#)”, News Release, June 16, 2023.

As African states began to democratise following independence, belief in democracy as the system of government that would best deliver on socio-economic development was high. But the reality is that, in many African states, democracy has not delivered on its promises. Many continue to suffer extreme poverty and inequality, often the result of patronage, corrupt leadership and misguided public resource expenditure. A total of 33 African countries are counted among the 46 least developed countries in the world, according to the UN.²¹ Some of the countries on this list, such as Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Mozambique, also have considerable natural resources, but their populations rarely benefit from the resultant revenues.

In addition, many African leaders undermine democracy by curtailing democratic freedoms. They allow murky electoral practices and, in several cases, hold onto power and often cement, or try to cement, dynastic-type rule by handing over power to family members rather than allowing citizens to choose their leaders through legitimate elections. It is also not unusual for incumbents to resort to internet shutdowns, use force against protestors and, in some cases, arrest opposition leaders around the time of elections. In January 2023, Zimbabwean police disrupted an opposition gathering and arrested more than 20 party members.²² Globally, 2023 was the worst year on record in terms of the number of internet shutdowns: 283 across 39 countries. Elections are noted for being one of the biggest 'triggers' of government-sanctioned internet shutdowns, according to Access Now.²³ Furthermore, two African countries, Kenya and Mozambique, were added to the list as 'new offenders', according to its most recent #KeepItOn Report. A total of 17 internet shutdowns in nine African countries were recorded in 2023 – a worrying observation, since a steady decline in internet shutdowns was noted from 2020.²⁴ These factors all contribute to the erosion of democratic values and weaken some of democracy's core processes: elections, freedom of assembly and changes of government in alignment with national constitutions and election outcomes.

Leadership accountability therefore entails more than just committing to the fulfilment of campaign promises

Thus, while popular support for democracy remains intact, it is becoming more evident that those in leadership positions carry a double responsibility. Leaders should be accountable not only to their electorates but also to democracy itself. Leadership accountability therefore entails more than just committing to the fulfilment of campaign

21 UN Trade and Development, *Least Developed Countries Report 2023* (Paris: UNCTAD, 2024).

22 "Zimbabwe Police Arrest 25 Opposition Members Ahead of Presidential Election", *Reuters*, January 15, 2023.

23 Access Now, *Shrinking Democracy, Growing Violence: Internet Shutdowns in 2023*, Report (New York: Access Now, May 2024).

24 Access Now, *Shrinking Democracy, Growing Violence*.

promises. It also requires commitment to ensuring that democratic institutions retain their most basic functions so that they can also retain the trust that is so vital to their existence. There is a full spectrum of three generations of rights that democratic institutions can provide. If first-generation (civil and political) rights are undermined by unaccountable leadership, this comes at the expense of second-generation rights, socio-economic rights and the ability to provide for citizens' basic needs.²⁵ When leaders overstep the boundaries and infringe on democratic values, democracy fails those it is meant to serve: the people.

This is currently most evident in the recurring election irregularities recorded on the continent and in the series of coups in recent years. What makes the recurrence of coups the most threatening for democracy is the fact that, in some instances, they have received widespread popular support. This is a clear indication of dissatisfaction with how democracy works (or, rather, has not worked) and the need for accountable, action-driven leadership. Two recent elections in Zimbabwe and Gabon illustrate this point.

Election irregularities: Zimbabwe

On 23 August 2023, Zimbabweans went to the polls to vote in a high-stakes election, with the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) and Citizens Coalition for Change the chief contenders. ZANU-PF managed to secure 65% of the seats in the country's Assembly while its presidential candidate, Emmerson Mnangagwa, secured a second term in office with 52.6% of the vote.²⁶ The election outcome has been contested by the opposition and local and international observers have pointed to several irregularities. These include the electoral commission's withholding the final voter's roll, voter intimidation, banning of opposition rallies, incidents of violence and changes to electoral boundaries.

This is not the first time that the results of an election in Zimbabwe have been disputed. A clear pattern has been observable for decades. For example, state-sponsored violence marred the 2008 election,²⁷ while the results of the 2002 election were challenged in court.²⁸ When the integrity of an election is questioned, it opens the door to an assessment of the overall health of democratic institutions in a country. International observer reports on Zimbabwe's August 2023 election illustrate that all is not as it should be. The 31 August report by the Carter Center observer mission notes that voting took place 'in a restricted political environment'.²⁹ Furthermore, instead of passing much-needed electoral reforms

25 Mandla Makhanya, "Three Generations of Human Rights: Balanced Application Will Protect Our Poor and Vulnerable", *Daily Maverick*, April 29, 2019.

26 Cai Nebe, "Zimbabwean Election under Scrutiny for Irregularities", *Deutsche Welle*, August 28, 2023.

27 Human Rights Watch, "Bullets for Each of You": State-Sponsored Violence since Zimbabwe's March 29 Elections, Report, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2008/06/09/bullets-each-you/state-sponsored-violence-zimbabwes-march-29-elections>.

28 Andrew Meldrum, "Zimbabwe Opposition to Challenge Poll Win in Court", *The Guardian*, April 12, 2002.

29 The Carter Center, "Carter Center Preliminary Statement on Zimbabwe's 2023 Harmonized Elections", August 31, 2023, 1.

before the election, Parliament opted for legislation that restricts civil society and the opposition.³⁰ In an official statement on the election outcome, the US Department of State drew particular attention to ‘the systemic bias against political opposition during the pre-election period’. It has joined calls for the disaggregated polling station results to be made publicly available by the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC).³¹ In addition, it denounced the arrest of local election observers and the threats received by observers forming part of the SADC Election Observer Mission (SEOM).³²

The SEOM has been especially critical of the electoral process as a whole. The head of the mission, Dr Nevers Mumba, referred to this election as ‘the most fraudulent in the history of SADC’.³³ A significant majority of SADC leaders seemingly also could not endorse the results, with just three out of 16 in attendance at Mnangagwa’s inauguration in September 2023.³⁴

This is not the first disputed election outcome in the region in recent years. Malawi’s May 2019 election results were annulled by the country’s Constitutional Court in February 2020, after it found that ‘widespread, systematic and grave irregularities’ tainted the electoral process.³⁵ A new election was held in June 2020 and a coalition government headed by Lazarus Chakwera managed to unseat Peter Mutharika. Similarly, in Kenya in 2017, election results were overturned by the courts, citing inconsistencies with constitutional provisions. Fresh elections were held and the results accepted.³⁶ The 2021 presidential race in Zambia was also disputed and marred by irregularities, including censorship, misinformation, violence and the use of legislation (the Public Order Act) to ‘suppress opposition meetings or demonstrations’.³⁷ However, power did change hands peacefully in this election after the incumbent, Edgar Lungu, accepted defeat, stepping aside for the country’s seventh president, Hakainde Hichilema.

Unconstitutional changes of government

Similar patterns can be found elsewhere in Africa, most recently in Gabon. Gabonese legislative, parliamentary and presidential elections were held on 26 August 2023 under questionable conditions. No international election observers were present, a government-imposed internet shutdown was activated on the day and a nighttime curfew was

30 The Carter Center, “Zimbabwe’s 2023 Harmonized Elections”.

31 Matthew Miller, “Election Results in Zimbabwe”, US Department of State, Press Statement, August 28, 2023.

32 Miller, “Election Results in Zimbabwe”.

33 Jonathan Moakes, George Chichester and Emily Osborne, “SADC’s Election Report Leaves Mnangagwa Desperately Out in the Cold with One Option – Reform”, *Daily Maverick*, September 7, 2023.

34 Moakes, Chichester and Osborne, “SADC’s Election Report”.

35 Jason Burke and Charles Pensulo, ‘Malawi court annuls 2019 election results and calls for new ballot’, *The Guardian*, February 3, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/03/malawi-court-annuls-2019-election-results-calls-new-ballot>.

36 Jason Burke, “Kenyan Supreme Court Annuls Uhuru Kenyatta Election Victory”, *The Guardian*, September 1, 2017.

37 Tatenda Mazarura and Arnold Tsunga, ‘Zambian elections: The good, bad and the ugly’, *Daily Maverick*, August 30, 2021, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-08-30-zambian-elections-the-good-bad-and-the-ugly/>.

instituted.³⁸ President Ali Bongo was declared the winner of the election with 64.27% of the vote. As in Zimbabwe, the opposition declared the results fraudulent. On 30 August, a military coup took place in Gabon that ousted Bongo. Although this unconstitutional change of government has been condemned by the AU and other continental bodies, many in Gabon celebrated the event.

In the immediate hours after the coup, images surfaced in news reports of people celebrating in the streets of Gabon's capital, Libreville, expressing their gratitude to the country's military for ousting the long-sitting president. Until the coup in August 2023, the Bongo family had been in power in Gabon for 55 years. The celebration of a coup is linked to dwindling faith in elections and is concerning for the future of democracy. Gabon is a natural resources-rich country with a thriving economy and yet a significant proportion of its population lives in absolute poverty.

Gabon is rich in oil and other resources such as manganese, diamonds and gold, but revenues from these industries have not helped to better the socio-economic conditions of its more than 2 million citizens. According to the African Development Bank, poverty and unemployment in the country was estimated at 33.4% and 28.8% respectively in 2021.³⁹ In addition, public debt in 2023 reached 57.4% of gross domestic product, while food inflation in the country for the same period was recorded at 4.7%.⁴⁰

This is a frequent trend in African countries experiencing election irregularities: although they are rich in natural resources, wealth does not trickle down and service delivery is average at best. Democracy is no longer providing the socio-economic goods it has the potential to deliver. When elections do not result in change and fail to reflect the wishes of voters, coups become celebrated as the only means to effect change.

Conclusion

There are warning signs across the continent that urgent action is needed to secure the future of democracy. The most significant of these is the recurrence of disputed and criticised elections. Of course, elections alone do not equal democracy. Rather, they are only one component of a broader set of processes and values that together are considered democratic. Such processes include an independent, functioning justice system; freedom of assembly and expression; independent media; and the right to vote in an environment free from intimidation. Without elections, democracies cannot function. However, much of their ability to translate the will of the people into practice lies in the events before, during and after an election and the ability of other democratic institutions to function properly and unimpeded. And while coups are indeed bad for democracy,

38 "Gabon President Ali Bongo Wins Third Term after Disputed Election", *Reuters*, August 30, 2023.

39 African Development Bank Group, "Gabon Economic Outlook", 2023.

40 The World Bank, "The World Bank in Gabon", <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/gabon/overview>.

they are also a telling symptom of democratic ills. Looking at the example of Gabon, popularly celebrated coups are a warning sign, indicating that people feel let down by democracy and are willing to accept alternatives if it means that their needs may be met. Although such a determination cannot yet be made in the case of Gabon, it should be regarded as a powerful reminder that nothing is certain, and that democracy is a fragile thing deserving of safeguarding.

Recommendations

- The quality of elections alone does not define the quality of democracy. Focus should also be placed on values such as freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and media freedom when assessing the state of a country's democracy.
- Responses to unconstitutional changes of government by both regional and continental bodies should be consistent.
- Civil society organisations could be more active in shaping perceptions of election observer missions and ensuring that their assessments are publicised and understood by the electorate.
- Elected leaders have a responsibility not only to their electorates but also to the democratic government system itself. Citizens and civil society organisations should remind them of this.

Author

Isabel Bosman

has an MA in Political Studies from the University of the Witwatersrand. Her research centres on the nexus between technology and politics, and she has a particular interest in biometrics and electronic voting. She also studies African elections and democracy and has a keen interest in political theory. Before joining the research team at the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA) in 2021, she was a Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Scholar at SAIIA.

Acknowledgment

SAIIA thanks the government of Sweden for its generous support of this research.

About SAIIA

SAIIA is an independent, non-government think tank whose key strategic objectives are to make effective input into public policy, and to encourage wider and more informed debate on international affairs, with particular emphasis on African issues and concerns.

SAIIA's policy insights are situation analysis papers intended for policymakers, whether in government or business. They are designed to bridge the space between policy briefings and occasional papers.

Cover image

Nigerians protesting against the outcome of the 2023 presidential election. Bola Tinubu of the All Progressive Congress (APC) was declared winner by the Independence National Electoral Commission in Abuja, on March 1, 2023 (Olukayode Jaiyeola/NurPhoto via Getty Images)

All rights reserved. Copyright is vested in the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA) and the authors, and no part may be reproduced in whole or in part without the express permission, in writing, of the publisher. The views expressed in this publication are those of the author/s and do not necessarily reflect the views of SAIIA.

Please note that all currencies are in US\$ unless otherwise indicated.



Jan Smuts House, East Campus, University of the Witwatersrand
PO Box 31596, Braamfontein 2017, Johannesburg, South Africa
Tel +27 (0)11 339-2021 · Fax +27 (0)11 339-2154
www.saiia.org.za · info@saiia.org.za