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Reframing Democracy in Africa: From Ritual to Transformative Solidarity Economics

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Recommendations

- The AU Commission should adopt a continental framework for solidarity economy development, harmonising cooperative laws and embedding community-owned enterprises within Agenda 2063 and the African Continental Free Trade Area.
- Ministries of education, youth and information should lead reforms to embed civic literacy, critical thinking and policy awareness across all levels of learning, in collaboration with civil society and media.
- National governments and oversight bodies should institutionalise competency standards and performance evaluations that align leadership promises with measurable results.
- Ministries of justice and constitutional affairs should lead efforts to transform constitutions into living, adaptive frameworks that decentralise power, strengthen citizen agency and respond to social, economic and environmental change.

Executive summary

Across Africa, democracy endures in form but falters in substance. While citizens continue to express support for democratic ideals, their lived realities reveal deep disillusionment with governance systems that preserve colonial socio-economic structures and elite control. This policy briefing explores how the promise of democracy has been hollowed out by economic entrapment, where procedural institutions exist yet power remains concentrated, inequality persists and citizens are excluded from meaningful participation. Drawing on foresight dialogues held in Addis Ababa and the South African National Dialogue process, the research applies futures methods to reimagine democracy as a participatory, value-driven system grounded in accountability, equity and ethical leadership. The South African case illustrates the urgent need for structural transformation that moves beyond symbolic reform towards genuine people-centred governance. For democracy to regain its legitimacy and resilience, Africa should move from procedural participation to structural transformation. This requires embedding anticipatory governance, restoring citizen agency and aligning democratic practice with African relational values such as *ubuntu* and *ujamaa*. The research calls for renewed collective action between governments, civil society and citizens to rebuild trust and shape democratic futures that serve both people and, ultimately, the planet.

Overview of the state and futures of democracy in Africa

Across much of Africa, democracy today survives in form but not in substance.¹ The symbols of democracy – elections, constitutions and parliaments – remain intact, yet the economic foundations sustaining them are deeply eroded. Systems of extraction established under colonial rule and maintained by post-colonial elites have hollowed out democratic institutions, turning them into mechanisms for preserving privilege rather than enabling participation.² Citizens are not rejecting democracy itself; they are rebelling against its betrayal.

Surveys show that most Africans still prefer democracy to any other system, rejecting military or one-party rule.³ Yet satisfaction with how democracy works has sharply declined, even in countries once seen as exemplars, such as South Africa, Botswana,

1 Oluwatobi O. Alaka, "Post-Sovereignty: Reframing Democratic Legitimacy in African" (SSRN Scholarly Paper 5375101, Social Science Research Network, August 1, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5375101>.

2 "Precolonial Elites and Colonial Redistribution of Political Power", *American Political Science Review*, accessed October 19, 2025, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/american-political-science-review/article/precolonial-elites-and-colonial-redistribution-of-political-power/026AFFB7F59A53634270D82D2D69F924>.

3 J. Asunka and E. Gyimah-Boadi, "Governance trends in Africa: Resilient demand, flagging supply", *Governance: Foresight Africa*, 2024.

Ghana and Mauritius.⁴ For many, democracy has failed to deliver the economic security, public services and dignity it promised. Widespread unemployment, corruption, power shortages and deepening inequality have transformed elections into referenda on broken systems rather than expressions of democratic renewal.

These crises are not random; they reflect the continuity of colonial political economies built on extraction, inequality and dependency. The institutions that replaced colonial administrations often replicate the same logics of elite capture. As one participant in the Futures of Democracy Think Session in Addis Ababa noted, democratic institutions exist 'on paper' to claim legitimacy, while real power remains concentrated in the hands of those who control the economic levers.⁵ Reforms are partial, laws are selectively applied, and corruption corrodes citizens' faith in governance.

Despite structural constraints, technology and civil society continue to offer glimpses of resistance. Social media campaigns, youth-led protests and demands for accountability demonstrate the persistence of democratic aspirations. In 2020, for example, Nigerian youth mobilised mass protests via platforms like Twitter (now X) and Instagram to demand an end to police brutality. Yet, despite this decentralised and empowered activism, bolstered by global solidarity, the movement faced severe government repression, including internet shutdowns, arrests and surveillance targeting protest leaders.⁶ Similar movements across the continent are frequently undermined by disinformation, digital monitoring and state crackdowns.

Democracy struggles not because its ideals are inherently flawed, but because the underlying economic system remains untransformed. The enduring gap between the promises of independence and the realities of poverty, exclusion and dependency has become increasingly untenable.

Elections across 18 African countries in 2024 underscored that democracy is no longer judged merely by legitimacy but by its ability to secure rights, justice and equity.⁷ Futures dialogue participants described democracy not as a procedural mechanism but as a living ethic of self-governance, equality and shared responsibility.⁸ It is understood as relational and participatory, a moral practice rooted in collective agency rather than a transactional exchange of votes for services.

Lived realities across the continent often subvert these ideals. Governments restrict civic participation, deploy state institutions for private gain and suppress dissent. When basic needs remain unmet, citizens' frustration turns to protest, sometimes symbolically

4 "Declining Satisfaction Threatens African Democracy, Afrobarometer CEO Reveals", accessed October 1, 2025, <https://www.afrobarometer.org/articles/declining-satisfaction-threatens-african-democracy-afrobarometer-ceo-reveals/>.

5 Anonymous, "Futures of Democracy Think Session" (Paper, Addis Ababa, February 17, 2025).

6 Stella Omotejohwo Emakpor et al., *Digital Activism and the #EndSARS Movement*, n.d.

7 Joseph Siegle and Candace Cook, "Africa's 2024 Elections: Challenges and Opportunities to Regain Democratic Momentum", *Africa Center*, n.d., accessed March 19, 2025, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/2024-elections/>.

8 Anonymus, "Online Futures Dialogue Session – Futures of Democracy in Africa, Beyond the Binary" (Webinar, August 12–13, 2025).

targeting state institutions themselves.⁹ South Africa's escalating service delivery protests,¹⁰ Rwanda's restrictive NGO laws¹¹ and Uganda's clampdown on civil society¹² reflect a pattern where states close the very spaces through which democracy might be renewed.

This policy brief explores how Africa's democracies can evolve from procedural survival to transformative resilience, arguing that the continent's democratic challenges stem not from failed ideals, but from structural economic and institutional entrapment. It builds on foresight dialogues, think sessions and interviews held at the AU in Addis Ababa and virtually. Foresight methods were used, such as the Futures Triangle,¹³ Backcasting¹⁴ and Causal Layered Analysis¹⁵ to unpack how colonial legacies, governance cultures and economic systems continue to shape democratic realities.

The research identifies systemic causes of democratic stagnation and proposes actionable pathways for renewal through solidarity economics, education reform, accountable governance and adaptive constitutionalism. The analysis unfolds through four parts: an overview of Africa's democratic condition, a case study on the South African National Dialogue, a discussion of enduring economic entrapment and a foresight-based set of policy recommendations. The future of African democracy depends on structural, not symbolic, reform. By linking economic design, civic learning and institutional accountability, it calls on policymakers, civil society and citizens to reclaim democracy as transformation, not ritual and to build systems that protect people, not power.

South African National Dialogue case study

In 2024, South Africa commemorated 30 years of democracy amid deepening public disillusionment. Confidence in governance fell to historic lows, with only 13% expressing positive sentiment and over 60% dissatisfied with how democracy functions.¹⁶ Persistent unemployment, corruption, inequality and faltering public services have compounded frustrations, while Freedom House's score decline from 79 to 74 reflects a broader erosion

9 "Tactics of Repression", *CIVICUS Monitor*, accessed October 19, 2025, https://monitor.civicus.org/globalfindings_2023/tacticsofrepression/.

10 Kenny Chiwarawara, "South Africa's Service Delivery Crisis: Why Protesters Are Using More Militant Tactics", *The Conversation*, August 27, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.64628/AAJ.e3qxprhtx>.

11 "Rwanda – ICNL Civic Freedom Monitor", International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, n.d., accessed October 19, 2025, <https://www.icnl.org/resources/civic-freedom-monitor/rwanda>.

12 "Uganda: Harassment of Civil Society Groups", *Human Rights Watch*, accessed October 19, 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/08/27/uganda-harassment-civil-society-groups>.

13 The Futures Triangle is a foresight tool developed by Professor Sohail Inayatullah that helps analyse and map the forces shaping the future of a topic.

14 Backcasting is a planning and foresight method that starts by defining a desirable future outcome – a specific goal or vision – and then works backward step-by-step to the present to identify the actions, milestones and policies needed to achieve that future.

15 Causal Layered Analysis is a futures research method that examines problems and issues across four levels or layers to reveal different causal factors and deepen understanding.

16 Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa, "Trust in the Government and Its Institutions. What Support for a GNU Governing Coalition in South Africa?" July 4, 2024, <https://www.eisa.org/trust-in-the-government-and-its-institutions-what-support-for-a-gnu-governing-coalition-in-south-africa/>.

of institutional credibility.¹⁷ Critics have labelled President Cyril Ramaphosa's tenure as the weakest for economic growth in democratic South Africa,¹⁸ highlighting the urgency of initiatives like the National Dialogue, envisioned as a pathway to participatory renewal.

Yet efforts to revitalise democracy must confront structural and political barriers within the ruling African National Congress (ANC). The practice of democratic centralism, which enforces unity after internal debate, has entrenched loyalty over merit, weakened parliamentary oversight and constrained citizen participation.¹⁹ This has reinforced a culture of patronage and blurred the line between state and party, culminating in the 2024 election setback and the formation of the Government of National Unity.

In this context, Ramaphosa's launch of the 2025 National Dialogue sought to revive the spirit of deliberation that ended apartheid. His address at the first National Convention called for inclusion, accountability and trust, positioning the Dialogue as a vehicle for social renewal amid crises of inequality and institutional decay. The initiative aims to produce a National Compact grounded in ethical leadership, shared responsibility and social justice, translating constitutional values into tangible outcomes through sectoral and community consultations aligned with Vision 2030 and the National Development Plan.

The first National Convention revealed a nation divided and distrustful. Citizens expressed exhaustion with performative politics, manipulation of vulnerable communities and the capture of democratic spaces by elites. Many viewed the Dialogue as another 'talk shop' conceived without genuine public input, evidence, to them, of a government more interested in symbolism than reform. The lack of political literacy among citizens further compounds alienation, weakening democratic accountability and participation.

Discussions also exposed fractures among citizens themselves, on issues of xenophobia, social policy and inequality, demonstrating not only institutional failures but also the fragmentation of a shared national narrative. These tensions reflect four intersecting conflicts: people versus people (social division), people versus system (institutional failure), people versus government (disillusionment) and system versus government (inefficiency and contradiction). By the end of the Convention, the question lingered: do state officials truly understand the meaning and obligations of democracy in action?

Post-convention reflections deepened public scepticism. Interviews revealed widespread doubt about the Dialogue's intent, with many perceiving it as a political manoeuvre by the ANC to regain electoral ground before the 2026 provincial elections. Concerns over financial transparency and misuse of public resources, amplified by scandals such as

17 "South Africa: Country Profile", Freedom House, accessed October 3, 2025, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/south-africa>.

18 "Cyril Ramaphosa the Worst President for Economic Growth in Democratic South Africa", *Daily Investor*, accessed November 25, 2024, <https://dailyinvestor.com/south-africa/52291/cyril-ramaphosa-the-worst-president-for-economic-growth-in-democratic-south-africa/>.

19 "50th National Conference: Organisational Democracy and Discipline in the Movement – 50th National Conference Discussion Document – ANC", accessed October 19, 2025, <https://www.anc1912.org.za/50th-national-conference-organisational-democracy-and-discipline-in-the-movement-50th-national-conference-discussion-document/>.

Thembisa Hospital and the Madlanga Commission, fuelled mistrust. Even Ramaphosa's assurance that the process 'requires no major funding'²⁰ failed to bridge the credibility gap between government and civil society.

Underlying these sentiments is a broader democratic paralysis: South Africans remain trapped between survival and disillusionment, burdened by economic structures that replicate apartheid-era hierarchies under democratic guise. The state, shaped by party patronage and fiscal policies favouring capital, continues to serve the few while excluding the many. As one participant remarked, 'Cyril Ramaphosa is committing economic genocide,' reflecting anger at policies seen to privilege elites over citizens' basic rights.

The proposed VAT increase from 15% to 16% epitomises this tension between fiscal reform and social justice. While justified as necessary to fund essential services, it would have disproportionately burdened low-income households and widened inequality, contradicting democratic ideals of fairness and equity. Critics argue that such measures reveal the state's prioritisation of revenue over redistribution,²¹ undermining the moral contract between citizens and government and disregarding a national history that demands restorative, not extractive, justice.

The National Dialogue mirrors the contradictions of African democracy itself: procedural vitality masking structural stagnation. Though framed as a participatory renewal, it risks entrenching the very hierarchies it seeks to reform. For democracy to regain meaning, South Africa must move beyond consultation towards structural transformation, where governance serves people over power, accountability over patronage and justice over profit.

Futures research and dialogues highlight three interlinked challenges: overreliance on formal institutions without substantive citizen power; the imposition of a one-size-fits-all Western democratic model; and the neglect of historical legacies that continue to define African governance. Theorists like Theda Skocpol,²² Daron Acemoglu,²³ James Robinson²⁴ and Partha Chatterjee²⁵ remind us that democratisation is shaped by deep historical and structural forces, such as revolutions, class relations and colonial inheritances that cannot be reformed away through procedure alone.

Renewing African democracy requires dismantling inherited hierarchies and grounding governance in Africa's own relational philosophies such as *ubuntu* (I am, because you are), *ujamaa* (familyhood/brotherhood), *gadaa* (a cyclical indigenous democratic governance

20 President Ramaphosa, "South African National Dialogue First Convening" (Speech, Pretoria, August 15, 2025).

21 South African Federation of Trade Unions, SAFTU Statement on the Proposed VAT Increase: A Regressive Attack on the Working Class (February 20, 2025), accessed April 10, 2025, <https://saftu.org.za/archives/8822>.

22 Theda Skocpol, "America's Incomplete Welfare State: The Limits of New Deal Reforms and The Origins of The Present Crisis", in *Stagnation and Renewal in Social Policy* (Routledge, 2024), 35–58.

23 Daron Acemoglu et al., *Misperceptions and Demand for Democracy Under Authoritarianism*, Working Paper w33018 (National Bureau of Economic Research, 2024).

24 James A. Robinson, *Paths to the Periphery*, Working Paper w33671 (National Bureau of Economic Research, 2025).

25 Partha Chatterjee, *The Black Hole of Empire: History of a Global Practice of Power* (Princeton University Press, 2012), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7s81t>.

system) and *omoluabi* (the embodiment of moral integrity and social responsibility, respectively), that prioritise interdependence, moral leadership and community participation.²⁶ The South African National Dialogue exemplifies this turn: an effort to realign democratic governance with local values, participatory foresight and structural reform. Such spaces signal that democracy's future in Africa depends not on imitation, but on imagination, on reclaiming the moral and relational foundations that make collective self-rule possible.

Democracy and the persistence of economic entrapment

Across much of Africa, democracy has not dismantled the deep economic hierarchies inherited from colonialism. Constitutions, elections and pluralist politics have provided formal freedom, yet the underlying systems of ownership, production and distribution remain intact. Political liberation has not translated into structural transformation; instead, a pattern of economic entrapment endures, one that grants political illusion of choice but withholds material agency.

South Africa's 1994 democratic breakthrough promised redress and inclusive growth, but the architecture of the apartheid economy persists. Wealth and production remain concentrated among a few dominant firms, inequality continues to rank among the world's highest and unemployment is entrenched. Policies like broad-based black economic empowerment, while symbolically redistributive, have largely benefited a politically connected elite, reinforcing rather than dismantling class divisions.

Namibia's 1990 independence reflected similar hopes for justice and equity, yet the colonial legacy of land ownership remains largely intact. Vast tracts of productive land are still controlled by a small minority, reproducing apartheid-style spatial segregation and economic exclusion. The result is a dual society where prosperity and deprivation coexist and where democracy, instead of advancing equity, too often safeguards privilege.

These patterns reveal how many African democracies protect profit before people. Elections occur regularly, but the structures that determine who owns, produces and benefits remain unchanged. As James Robinson²⁷ observes, democratisation under conditions of entrenched inequality frequently functions less as a transformative revolution than as a strategic elite bargain, a recalibration of power designed to preserve the status quo beneath a democratic façade. To move beyond this cycle of procedural democracy and economic stagnation, the following recommendations outline pathways for structural transformation, reimagining governance, education and the economy as interconnected foundations of genuine democratic renewal.

26 The Cohort, "Futures of Democracy Think Session", (Discussion Session, Addis Ababa, February 17, 2025).

27 Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, "Culture, Institutions, and Social Equilibria: A Framework", *Journal of Economic Literature* 63, no. 2 (2025): 637–92.

Building democratic resilience through solidarity economics

Democratic renewal demands a reckoning with the economic structures that continue to reproduce exclusion and dependency. Political power may have changed hands, yet the systems of ownership, production and distribution remain locked in hierarchies that prioritise capital over community (profit over people). To move beyond this stalemate, democracy should be reimagined not only as a form of governance but as an economic ethic, one grounded in shared ownership, participatory production and mutual accountability.

Solidarity economics offers a transformative lens for this reimagining. It rests on the conviction that economies should serve people and the planet, not the other way around.²⁸ Its defining features include cooperation, social equity, environmental sustainability and collective well-being, rooted in values of mutual aid, reciprocity and fairness.²⁹ By promoting worker self-management, inclusion of marginalised groups and democratic decision-making within economic life, it seeks to restore agency to those historically excluded from the benefits of growth.

Adoption of solidarity economics stands in sharp contrast to neoliberal economics, which prizes market efficiency, profit maximisation and competition above social and ecological balance. Neoliberalism has often deepened inequality and environmental degradation in the pursuit of deregulation, privatisation, financialisation and the expansion of market logic into non-economic spheres, whereas solidarity economics calls for systemic transformation that prioritises justice over profit and participation over deregulation. It insists that economic design is inseparable from democratic integrity.

Applied within the context of development, solidarity economics resonates deeply with the AU's Agenda 2063 and other continental aspirations for inclusive, sustainable transformation. Through collective ownership, cooperative enterprises and ethical finance, it offers a pathway to reduce poverty, generate decent work and rebuild trust between citizens and institutions. Redirecting state resources, such as Nigeria's Niger Delta Development Commission funds, towards community-owned aquaculture or renewable energy cooperatives illustrates how solidarity-based initiatives can localise production and redistribute power in tangible ways.

Institutionalising this paradigm requires visionary leadership and coordinated frameworks. A Framework for Solidarity Economy Development, guided by the AU and supported by regional cooperative funds and harmonised legislation, would embed these values in the continent's economic architecture. Such reforms would not only strengthen inclusive industrialisation but also cultivate a culture of accountability and shared prosperity.

28 Koldo Casla and Marion Sandner, "Solidarity as Foundation for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights", *Human Rights Law Review* 24, no. 2 (2024): ngae011.

29 Chris Benner and Manuel Pastor, *Solidarity Economics: Why Mutuality and Movements Matter* (John Wiley & Sons, 2021).

Solidarity economics redefines what democratic resilience means: not merely the survival of institutions, but the ability of communities to co-create value, steward resources ethically and govern their collective futures. It transforms democracy from a procedural exercise into a living system of care, reciprocity and belonging, one that reclaims both the moral and material dimensions of freedom. For such an economy of solidarity to take root and endure, it must be anchored in a citizenry capable of critical thought, civic agency and ethical participation – making the transformation of education the next essential frontier in rebuilding democratic consciousness.

Reforming education for democracy

Africa's democratic fragility is not only institutional but cognitive. Weak civic understanding has left citizens vulnerable to populism and manipulation, reducing participation to performance rather than deliberation. Education systems that prioritise rote learning over critical reasoning perpetuate this disempowerment, producing citizens who know their rights but cannot exercise them effectively.

Reforming education as the cognitive foundation of democracy means embedding civic literacy, critical thinking and policy awareness across all levels of learning. Ministries of education, youth and information should collaborate with civil society and media to build curricula and informal learning platforms that link civic knowledge with practical governance engagement.

Community-based learning hubs and participatory teaching models can create citizens capable of questioning power and contributing to decision-making. Success should be measured not only by test scores but by civic participation, media literacy and policy engagement.

In the medium term, such reforms will yield electorates resilient to demagoguery; in the long term, they will foster democratic cultures that value deliberation, accountability and evidence-based policymaking. A future-ready Africa must therefore treat education as a democratic safeguard, cultivating critical inquiry and civic empowerment as lifelong competencies essential to democratic transformation. However, an educated and civically conscious populace can only thrive within governance systems that reflect the same principles of integrity and accountability, making the enhancement of public sector competence and responsive leadership the next critical step in restoring trust and effectiveness in democratic governance.

Enhancing competency and accountability in governance

The credibility of democracy ultimately rests on the competence and integrity of those who govern. Yet governance systems continue to be weakened by inefficiency, fragmentation and a lack of accountability, eroding both development outcomes and public trust. The challenge is not only institutional but cultural: a governance ethos that prizes position over performance, rewards loyalty over learning and status over service.

Reversing this decline requires viewing governance as a living network of accountability, in which institutions, civil society and citizens are bound by reciprocal obligations of transparency and performance. Public service must be treated as a vocation of stewardship, not entitlement. To achieve this, competence should become a measurable and enforceable standard of leadership, rather than an assumed virtue.

A National Competency Framework for Public Service should define clear criteria for ethical leadership, administrative skill and measurable delivery. Elected officials and senior civil servants must undergo periodic competency evaluations that assess both performance and alignment between campaign promises and tangible outcomes. These assessments, linked to scorecards that are both publicly influenced (meaning citizens have a say and vote on them) and readily accessible, would ensure that policy rhetoric translates into measurable progress within defined timeframes.

To sustain learning and integrity, leadership development should include structured mentorship programmes that pair experienced administrators with new officeholders to strengthen foresight, decision-making and ethical judgement. Governance must be treated as a discipline, one that evolves with practice, reflection and civic accountability.

Equally, citizens must hold a direct and time-sensitive right of recall or vote of no confidence when elected representatives fail to deliver or violate the public trust. This mechanism would ensure that accountability is immediate, not deferred until the next electoral cycle. Delayed correction allows harm to deepen, turning temporary neglect into enduring disenfranchisement. Democracy must therefore protect citizens not only through free elections but through continuous, responsive mechanisms that adjust to their collective will.

Governments should also institutionalise participatory monitoring, evaluation and learning systems, integrating citizen feedback, open data and transparent progress tracking. Collaborative initiatives such as Nigeria's partnership between the Bureau of Public Procurement and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission demonstrate how oversight can restore both performance and legitimacy.

Democratic resilience depends not on the persistence of authority, but on the timeliness of accountability. When governments respond late, rights are not merely delayed, they are denied. It is only fair and fundamentally democratic that citizens have the power to remove those who betray their mandate or neglect urgent needs. The duty of governance is to safeguard people's dignity and welfare in real time, not in hindsight. For when the system delays justice, it becomes complicit in its erosion.

A truly democratic state must therefore act with moral urgency, ensuring that responsiveness is not optional, but constitutional, for time lost to neglect is time stolen from the very people democracy claims to centre its function around. To secure this moral and temporal responsiveness at the core of governance, democracy must be anchored

in adaptive constitutional frameworks, living documents that evolve with society, uphold accountability as a continuous practice and renew the social contract across generations.

From static constitutions to living frameworks of democracy

Many constitutions on the continent remain constrained by colonial legacies, elite interests and historical inertia, limiting their ability to respond to contemporary social, economic and environmental change. Drafted during moments of liberation, these founding documents captured the spirit of freedom but often froze it in time. Decades later, many states still operate under frameworks built for a past that no longer reflects present complexities. Constitutions that remain static risk becoming instruments of preservation rather than transformation.

To advance from procedural democracy to living democracy, constitutions should evolve into adaptive governance architectures, flexible systems that consistently decentralise power, strengthen citizen agency and anticipate future challenges. From a systems perspective, constitutions are not static legal texts but dynamic infrastructures that connect political, social and economic networks.

Embedding adaptive mechanisms such as citizen recall rights, popular initiatives and independent oversight commissions can ensure that governance remains responsive and legitimate. Yet beyond formal reform, it is essential to institutionalise the periodic revisiting of the constitution as both a citizen's right and a democratic responsibility. Each generation should have the opportunity to reinterpret and renew the social contract, ensuring that constitutional governance evolves with the aspirations, experiences and challenges of its people. Regular constitutional review should not be seen as a disruption to order but as an affirmation of democracy's vitality, a mechanism that keeps power accountable and governance human centred.

A practical example of this is Namibia's ongoing land reform debates, which show that constitutional renewal is inseparable from the broader quest for justice, redistribution and restorative governance. Ministries of justice and constitutional affairs should therefore treat constitutional reform as a continuous process of civic learning and adaptation – a living framework that evolves with the state's experience. In this sense, constitutions are not monuments to liberation but records of collective renewal, shaped by the ongoing dialogue between law, society and time.

Looking forward, such living constitutions will enable democracies to balance equity, justice and sustainability, embedding foresight and intergenerational accountability at their core. Launching inclusive constitutional dialogues and nationwide civic education initiatives will deepen citizens' understanding of their rights and responsibilities, positioning them as co-authors of governance rather than subjects of it.

Modernising constitutions in this way ensures democracy remains not only procedurally intact but substantively just, participatory and future-oriented, a governance model capable of learning, adapting and evolving with its people.

Reclaiming democracy as transformation

Africa's democratic crisis is not the failure of an idea but the failure of its foundations. For too long, democracy has been enacted as ritual, through constitutions, elections and slogans, without transforming the structures of ownership, knowledge and accountability that define people's daily lives. Political freedom has not yet dismantled economic dependency and institutional reform has too often substituted form for substance. The golden thread running through this paper is that democracy cannot thrive where its economic, cognitive and moral infrastructures remain extractive. Political reform without structural transformation merely extends the logic of inequality under the guise of representation.

Through the lens of the South African National Dialogue, this paper reveals democracy's paradox, a system that promises inclusion but too often reproduces exclusion. Yet it also illuminates a deeper possibility: that renewal lies in reimagining democracy as a living, anticipatory ecosystem, one capable of learning from its fractures, adapting to its people's needs and grounding legitimacy in participation rather than performance.

The integration of futures thinking and systems perspectives enables the reframing of democracy. Within this new paradigm, democracy becomes an evolving social system, dynamic, relational and regenerative, whose vitality depends on feedback loops between citizens, institutions and the structures of production and knowledge. This framework entails four interdependent pathways for transformation:

- solidarity economics, which reclaims production and ownership for communities;
- democratic education, which cultivates critical reasoning and moral agency;
- competent and accountable governance, which measures leadership by its performance, responsiveness and integrity; and
- living constitutions, which evolve continuously through citizen participation and serve as records of collective renewal.

These pathways are not reforms in isolation but mutually reinforcing circuits of renewal. Together, they shift democracy from survival to substance, from procedural legitimacy to moral accountability.

Future research should deepen this systemic understanding by examining how democratic renewal unfolds through feedback between the economy, education, governance and law. Combining participatory foresight, longitudinal study and

community-based inquiry can help map how these systems co-evolve, revealing where transformation is occurring and where stagnation persists.

Africa's people do not ask to simply reform democracy but want to reclaim and reimagine it as a shared ethical project. A democracy that responds to citizens in real time, that allows the removal of leaders who fail their mandate, that regards constitutional renewal as both a right and a responsibility and that treats public service as a covenant of trust, this is the democracy Africa must build.

Its survival depends not on repetition but on reinvention: a democracy lived, not performed; defended, not deferred; continuously renewed by citizens who recognise themselves not as subjects of governance, but as its source.

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