State of Internet Freedom in Africa 2024

Africa's Electoral Democracy and Technology:

Pitfalls and Promises

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Executive Summary

This report examines the interplay between technology and elections in Africa during the so-called Year of Democracy, when at least 20 African countries were scheduled to go to the polls. The unprecedented increase in internet and mobile phone penetration rates, coupled with the enhanced digitalisation programmes, including the adoption of technology in electoral processes such as the use of biometric voter registration and verification applications by different governments had raised a lot of promise for better outcomes due to the anticipated increased transparency, efficiency and affordance that technology would lend to the electoral processes especially in 2024. While highlighting the growing influence of technology in elections, the study documents that much of the deployment has been characterised by risks and pitfalls where the majority of authoritarian governments have selectively deployed technology to extend their stay in power.

The study employed a qualitative approach, including literature reviews, legal and policy analysis, and surveys with key informants who are experts in digital rights, electoral democracy, and technology across Africa. The research team gathered insights from the study countries into how technology has been deployed in their election cycles, the legal frameworks at play, and the challenges and benefits observed. This was followed by comprehensive analysis and development of findings on the overall impact of technology on electoral democracy in Africa.

Main Findings

- **Democratic Governance Under Siege:** The study noted a significant decline in the state of democratic governance in Africa, with growing authoritarianism, coups, hereditary presidencies, weakened oversight institutions, political instability and restricted political competition. The persistent failure to address corruption, social divisions, and economic inequality continues to undermine electoral integrity and public trust. In these contexts, political elites manipulate elections and exploit historical tensions and unresolved economic grievances to maintain power, thus eroding public trust in democratic foundations necessary for fair and fair elections.

- **Intensification of Digital Authoritarianism:** The study notes that digital authoritarianism is a growing concern in Africa as governments continue to deploy a combination of tools and tactics of repression such as internet shutdowns, censorship of news outlets, targeted surveillance and regressive laws to limit civic participation and suppress dissent. These practices have a significant social and economic cost and create an environment where technology and democratic processes can be exploited to undermine democracy rather than strengthen it. Restrictions on civic space lead to self-censorship, citizen apathy towards elections and widespread discontent with governance, which in turn could foment political instability, unrest and conflict.

- **The Persistent Digital Divide is Deepening Political Inequalities and Exclusion:** The study further establishes that Africa's digital divide remains a significant barrier to inclusive political participation, with rural, underserved communities, and marginalised groups disproportionately affected. High internet usage costs, expensive digital devices, inadequate digital infrastructure and low digital literacy compound political inequalities, thus limiting citizens' ability to engage in political discourse and access critical electoral information. In the year of elections, such a disconnect is profound.

- **The Rise of AI-Enabled Disinformation Narratives:** The study underscores the growing threat of misinformation and disinformation, particularly AI-generated content, in shaping electoral outcomes. AI tools were used in countries such as Rwanda and South Africa to create deep fakes and synthetic media, manipulating public perception. Social media platforms have been slow to address this issue, and where they have, the approaches have not been uniform across countries. Disinformation campaigns can make it difficult for voters to access credible information, stifle democratic participation online, and erode citizens' trust in democratic processes.

- **Progress and Innovation in the Use of Technology during Elections:** The study has established the progress in the adoption of technologies in Ghana, Namibia, and South Africa for voter registration, results tallying and transmission, voter education and engagement. Despite challenges in deployment, these technologies have the potential to improve electoral transparency, efficiency and accountability. Also notable were the various initiatives to combat disinformation, build solidarity for good governance, and increase access to election information.

The study concludes that the continent is at a crossroads as the use of technology in Africa's 2024 elections presents both promises and pitfalls. On the one hand, technology has the potential to improve electoral transparency, promote citizen engagement, and ensure credible elections. On the other hand, the misuse of digital tools by authoritarian regimes, combined with the digital divide, the rise of disinformation, and declining constitutional governance risk undermining the democratic process. Governments, election management bodies, and civil society must work collaboratively to safeguard digital rights, promote digital inclusion, and build robust frameworks for the ethical use of technology in elections.

Moreover, while technology played a central role in the 2024 elections in several countries, one of the highlights has been the use of AI in ways that illuminate both its promises and dangers for electoral integrity and democracy. Clearly, few African countries have adopted the use of AI in elections, and this holds true for various election stakeholders, such as election observers, political parties, candidates, and Election Management Bodies (EMBs). Nonetheless, in the few countries studied where AI was adopted, some positive results could be discerned. Still, even in those countries where elements of AI were adopted, they were small-scale and did not fully exploit the promise that AI holds for enhancing the efficiency and transparency of elections.

Key Recommendations

1.Strengthen protection for digital rights: Countries should adopt progressive legal and policy frameworks that safeguard digital rights, protect privacy, entrench transparency and accountability in the technology sector, and govern the use of technologies, including artificial intelligence, in elections.

2. Demand accountability: Civil society organisations, the tech community, media and academia should leverage their watchdog role to document digital rights abuses, educate and raise awareness on the importance of internet freedoms, data privacy, AI governance and their role in elections, in order to enable them to demand accountability from platforms and governments.

3. Address the digital divide: The study proposes wide investments to expand internet access especially in marginalised and underserved areas, together with measures to reduce the cost of access, the promotion of digital literacy and building resilient digital infrastructure.

4. Combat disinformation: Joint efforts bringing together social media platforms, election bodies, fact-checkers, civil society, academia and media should be encouraged in efforts to combat disinformation.

5. Innovate election tech: Election management bodies should adopt transparent processes in the design, development and deployment of election technologies, including disclosing independent audit and impact assessment reports, facilitating election observation and independent monitoring of election technologies to promote and maintain public trust.

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Introduction and Background

According to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), half of democratic governments around the world are in decline, with more than two-thirds of the global population living in backsliding democracies or authoritarian and hybrid regimes.[1] Africa's democratic performance remains at a crossroads with progress in participation, while rights, representation and the rule of law continue to decline.[2] The key concerns include unconstitutional changes of government, executive supremacy, weak oversight institutions and mechanisms, limited political competition, few credible elections, shrinking civic space, and barriers to political participation. Notably, African countries continued to rank poorly in the Democracy Index 2023 where up to half are categorised as authoritarian.[3] Also, compared to other regions, Africa is generally rated poorly on political rights,[4] civil liberties[5] and democratic electoral institutions,[6] according to 2022 data from Freedom House.

The year 2024 has been hailed as a year of democracy with over 4.2 billion people[7] from 70 countries[8] worldwide expected to hold elections. These countries are spread out across the spectrum of democratic states, ranging from those that are strong, peaceful and influential to the weak, conflict-stricken and autocratic states. The erosion of democracy signifies that not all 2024 elections will be free, fair or guarantee democracy. Of concern is that spaces for political competition and civil society are shrinking, political polarisation is growing, public trust in electoral institutions and the legitimacy of elections is waning, attacks on electoral integrity are increasing and authoritarianism is taking root. Despite these troubling patterns, 2024 remains historic as so many countries are going to the polls, which is a testament to the progress towards advancing civic rights and political freedom worldwide.

At least 20[9] of the scheduled elections are in Africa. These include Algeria (presidential), Botswana (Presidential, National Assembly and Local elections), Cape Verde (local), Chad (Presidential, National Assembly and Local), Comoros (Presidential and governors), Ghana (Presidential and National Assembly), Guinea Bissau (Presidential), Madagascar (Parliamentary), Mauritania (Presidential and Senate), and Mozambique (Presidential, National Assembly and Local). Others are Namibia (Presidential, National Assembly and Local), Rwanda (Presidential and National Assembly), Senegal (Presidential), Somaliland (Presidential), South Africa (National Assembly and Local), South Sudan (Presidential, National Assembly and Local), Tunisia (Presidential), Mali (Presidential), and Mauritius (General).

1 *Global State of Democracy Initiative, "The New Checks and Balances: The Global State of Democracy 2023," https://www.idea.int/gsod/2023/*
2 *Global State of Democracy Initiative, "The state of democracy in Africa," https://www.idea.int/gsod/2023/chapters/africa/*
3 *Democracy index, https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/democracy-index-eiu?region=Africa*
4 *Political rights rating 2023, Our World in Data, https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/political-rights-rating-fh?region=Africa*
5 *Civil liberties rating 2023, Our World in Data, https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/civil-liberties-rating-fh*
6 *Democratic electoral institutions, 2023, Our World in Data, https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/democratic-electoral-institutions-fh*
7 *A Make-or-Break Year for Democracy Worldwide, Time, https://time.com/6551743/2024-elections-democracy-trump-putin/*
8 *'2024: Year of Democracy' Inception Phase Report, Digital Action, https://digitalaction.co/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Digital-Action-Year-of-Democracy-campaign-inception-report.pdf*
9 *Africa Elections 2024: All the upcoming votes https://africanarguments.org/2024/01/africa-elections-all-upcoming-votes/*

Countries Holding Election in Africa

As these electoral contests occur, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is expected to play a more significant role in electoral democracy than before. These roles may include improving the efficiency of voter registration, voting and result transmission; promoting transparency of electoral information and outcomes; enhancing access and participation in electoral processes; and ultimately, facilitating citizen engagement, political participation and informed decision-making. Reflecting on past experiences, five broad challenges and concerns remain that affect the use of ICT during elections in Africa. These include government restrictions on internet freedom; growing threats to digital rights; gaps in internet access; hate speech, misinformation and disinformation; and challenges with the deployment and implementation of election technology.

Trends over the past five years show the continued use of internet disruptions and restrictions on social media access during protests, conflict and key political events. In 2023, 283 shutdowns were recorded in 39 countries globally, with at least 17 shutdowns in nine African countries, an increase of 82 shutdowns, or a 41% increase, from 2022, when 201 shutdowns in 40 countries.[10] Previously, countries[11] such as Chad, Gabon,[12] Liberia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Congo, Mali,[13] Niger, Sierra Leone,[14] Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe[15] have disrupted access to the internet during elections. These disruptions affect elections' credibility, integrity, and legitimacy as they limit transparency and access to information; erode public trust in electoral processes and outcomes; disrupt communication, public discourse and political engagement; and contribute to conflict, protests and political turmoil.

Moreover, the continued restrictions and controls of the digital civic space in Africa have continued to undermine electoral democracy and internet freedom as countries adopt repressive legislation, tactics, practices and tools to control civic space. Key targets of these measures are bloggers, government critics, human rights defenders, media, and political opposition.

For 2024, there was great optimism that the increased adoption of technology within the electoral process will facilitate democracy by enhancing the effectiveness, efficiency, accountability and transparency of elections. Previous studies have shown that technology can have a positive impact on the electoral process as it enhances the registration and inclusion of voters, prevents fraud and electoral malpractices, quickens voting and tallying as well as results transmission and consequently, ensures transparency, credibility and integrity of elections.[16] However, the use of Biometric Voter Verification Systems (BVVS) in countries such as Uganda, Liberia, Nigeria and Zimbabwe[17] has been criticised for wide disenfranchisement and exclusion.

Despite the potential Africa has in improving electoral integrity, the use of technology in voting has not progressed much partly because of the limited investments in the requisite digital public infrastructure, low uptake of internet and digital technologies, low levels of digital literacy and high internet costs across several African countries. Further, internet infrastructure and electricity remain concentrated in urban areas, with most rural communities being excluded. All this continues to happen as African states grapple with competing demands including the pressing need for essential services and responses to conflict, climate change and growing national debt. All this is happening in a dynamic ICT space with the emergence of new technologies, evolving policy and regulatory changes, and national governance challenges.

Pertinent questions remain regarding the role of technology in transforming Africa's electoral democracy; the roles of electoral, telecommunications and security agencies during elections; roles of civil society organisations (CSOs), Human Rights Defenders, and the private sector including telecommunication companies, internet service providers and social media platforms in facilitating the use of technology in elections.

The Year 2024 presents enormous opportunities to reflect on electoral reforms and democracies.

The Year 2024 presents enormous opportunities to reflect on electoral reforms and democracies. How countries have or will employ technology is a reflection of the current and future roles of technology in shaping electoral democracy.

10 *The most violent year: internet shutdowns in 2023 Access Now, https://www.accessnow.org/internet-shutdowns-2023/*

11 *Internet restrictions during African elections, Surfshank, https://surfshark.com/research/chart/internet-restrictions-african-elections*

12 *Internet cut in Gabon on election day, Netblocks, https://netblocks.org/reports/internet-cut-in-gabon-on-election-day-Q8oxM3An*

13 *Mali elections marred by internet disruptions, Netblocks, https://netblocks.org/reports/mali-elections-marred-by-internet-disruptions-G3Anxqy2*

14 *Sierra Leone Joins Global Trend: Shuts Down Internet and Mobile Services during Elections, Africa Freedom of Expression Exchange https://www.africafex.org/digital-rights/sierra-leone-joins-global-trend-shuts-down-internet-and-mobile-services-during-elections__trashed*

15 *Netblocks, X, https://x.com/netblocks/status/1693997476691558644?s=46&t=M4_z9pT4YSEqFxZSt3wFMA; Internet slowdown limits coverage of Zimbabwe opposition rally, Netblocks, https://netblocks.org/reports/internet-slowdown-limits-coverage-of-zimbabwe-opposition-rally-oy9Ykoy3*

16 *Holly Ann Garnett and Toby S. James (2020). Cyber Elections in the Digital Age: Threats and Opportunities of Technology for Electoral Integrity, https://doi.org/10.1089/elj.2020.0633*

17 *Biometric voter registration progresses unevenly in 3 African countries, https://www.biometricupdate.com/202212/biometric-voter-registration-progresses-unevenly-in-3-african-countries*

1.2 Aim of the Study

The aim of this research was therefore to examine the role that technology played in elections in the various African countries going to the polls in 2024. The research identifies the key challenges which faced the use of technology in various countries but also points to the benefits it delivered that contributed to electoral integrity and transparency and the building of digital democracy. The study also offers recommendations for various actors, including governments, parliaments, the judiciary, CSOs, media, the private sector, academia and development partners on the steps they need to take to ensure meaningful use of technology in elections and other democratic processes without endangering digital rights and freedoms.

1.3 Methodology

The study employed a combination of qualitative research methods including literature review, policy and legal analysis, and self-administered survey questionnaires with key informant respondents with expert knowledge and experience on digital rights, electoral democracy, governance, internet shutdowns, digital accessibility and data privacy and protection and generative artificial intelligence (Gen AI). Respondents were asked to share the current legal frameworks governing elections and technology within their countries, relevant cases of how the different countries deployed technology during election cycles as well as the type of challenges or gaps citizens faced in exercising their democratic rights due to the adoption of technology for electoral purposes.

In addition, the research team conducted a comprehensive legal and policy analysis of the relevant laws and policies on digital rights, technology and elections, privacy and data protection. Reports of previous studies, media reports, academic works, government documents, and other literature touching on digital rights, elections and technology, were also reviewed. Besides setting out the regulatory practices landscape, both the legal and policy analysis and literature reviews provided a contextual analysis and aided the researchers to gain a better understanding of the current developments, promises challenges, debates and pitfalls or technology and elections within the last few years and how it contributed to the current challenges around the deployment of technology during the and elections across the continent, but more specifically, within the study countries.

2.0 Trends in Technology and Electoral Democracy

This section discusses the complex interplay and dynamics between governance, technology, socio-economic issues, and electoral processes. It highlights trends of the role of technology and its influence on political discourse, participation and election outcomes.

2.1 Democratic Governance Under Siege

Many African countries are experiencing a decline in democratic governance, marked by unconstitutional changes of government, executive supremacy, weak oversight institutions, and restricted political competition. These challenges are further exacerbated by the failure of these governments to heed their promises to resolve the social divisions, economic disparities, and corrupt practices that stain the electoral environment and impede the conduct of peaceful, free and fair elections.

2.1.1 The Surge of Military and Authoritarian Regimes Amidst Declining Democratic Governance

The state of constitutional governance and the rule of law varies across countries but is gradually declining across the continent as militaries and authoritarian governments consolidate their grip on power. According to the 2023 Democracy Index, Mauritius is the best ranked at position 20, which is significantly above South Africa (47), Tunisia (82), Senegal (83) Madagascar (87), Algeria (110), Ethiopia (116), Gabon (146) and Chad (161).[18] Under the Freedom House Global Freedom Index,[19] South Africa, Ghana, Cape Verde, Mauritius, Namibia and Botswana stood out as they were rated as "Free". Burkina Faso, Chad, Somalia, Libya, South Sudan, Mali, Rwanda, and Mozambique were rated as "Not Free".

Concerningly, there has been a surge of coups on the continent with various militaries overthrowing civilian governments ostensibly for abuse of office and other dictatorial tendencies, often with popular promises to restore electoral democracy, constitutionalism, peace and economic stability. However, countries such as Burkina Faso,[20] Guinea Bissau,[21] Mali,[22] and Gabon,[23] which have experienced coups and political instability in recent years, remain under military rule with suspended constitutions or significantly disrupted constitutional order. They face challenges in restoring civilian rule and transitioning back to constitutional governance.

There have also been reports of significant human rights abuses, including repression of civil liberties and media freedom and a crackdown on political dissent by security forces. In most of these countries, electoral processes have been disrupted.

In addition, critical institutions in these countries remain weak and struggle to maintain independence and authority amidst political instability and military control. For example, coup leaders in Burkina Faso and Mali have indefinitely postponed scheduled elections and failed to commit to a definitive timeline for elections or the end of transition periods, amidst concerns that they have no intention of relinquishing power despite their earlier commitments to do so.[24] They also announced their exit from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in January 2024.[25] Moreover, despite a disputed win in the 2019 election, Guinea Bissau's current president, Umaro Embalo, has dismissed the legislature twice in two years, most recently in December 2023.[26] Similarly, Gabon's coup leader, Gen. Brice Oligui Nguema, dismissed the head of the Constitutional Court and reconstituted the court with nine of his appointees.[27]

Further decline has been noted in Algeria,[28] Comoros,[29] Mauritania, Rwanda,[30] and Tunisia with significant signs of constitutional backsliding over the years, increasing centralisation of executive power at the expense of other government branches, increasing restrictions on civil liberties and media freedom, and suppression of peaceful dissent, resulting in weak checks and balances. These governments have imposed significant restrictions on civil liberties and media freedom, and increased suppression of peaceful dissent. For instance, Rwanda's government has consistently clamped down on opposition leaders, silenced regime critics and muzzled the media through a well-orchestrated recipe of intimidation, harassment, arbitrary arrests and detentions, creating an environment of self-censorship.[31]

18 Economist Intelligence, "Democracy index: Age of Conflict," https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/Democracy-Index-2023-Final-report.pdf?version=0&mkt_tok=NzUzLVJJUS00MzgAAAGVvc6-GbbNTXD_44De86ykBzUfbPjYuWilFZXP5ga3V1jIb2vAK12fHLBHnl2OmITMTl-R-hC2_ZFa2OpQmZDaofqD8K1Vp7KM_4Djd_HG87jKaw

19 Freedom in the World https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores

20 Burkina Faso: July https://africacenter.org/spotlight/2024-elections/burkinafaso/

21 Guinea-Bissau: December https://africacenter.org/spotlight/2024-elections/guineabissau/; Guinea-Bissau's 'attempted coup': What you need to know https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/2/explainer-guinea-bissau-attempted-coup

22 Mali: February 4 https://africacenter.org/spotlight/2024-elections/mali/

23 Freedom in the World 2024: Gabon https://freedomhouse.org/country/gabon/freedom-world/2024; Has Gabon's 'all-powerful' Bongo dynasty really lost its 55-year grip? https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/9/1/has-gabons-all-powerful-bongo-dynasty-really-lost-its-55-year-grip

24 Burkina Faso: Emergency Law Targets Dissidents https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/11/08/burkina-faso-emergency-law-targets-dissidents; Opinion: Elections in Mali and Burkina Faso postponed for forever (and a day) https://www.theafricareport.com/346803/elections-in-mali-and-burkina-faso-postponed-for-forever-and-a-day/

25 Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger Quit Regional Bloc https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/02/02/burkina-faso-mali-and-niger-quit-regional-bloc

26 Guinea-Bissau: The tug-of-war over governance https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/president-embalo-buinea-bissau-coup/

27 Freedom in the World 2024: Gabon https://freedomhouse.org/country/gabon/freedom-world/2024

28 Algeria: September 7 https://africacenter.org/spotlight/2024-elections/algeria/

29 Comoros Election Exercise Promises More of the Same https://africacenter.org/spotlight/comoros-election-exercise-promises-more-of-the-same/

30 Rwanda: July 15 https://africacenter.org/spotlight/2024-elections/rwanda/

31 Freedom in the World 2024 Rwanda https://freedomhouse.org/country/rwanda/freedom-world/2024

In addition, elections in these countries have been criticised for lack of fairness, competitiveness and transparency. Former military chiefs turned civilians and incumbent presidents Mohamed Ould Cheikh El Ghazouani and Paul Kagame of Mauritania and Rwanda respectively were comfortably re-elected in the 2024 elections, with Kagame taking 99.18 per cent of the vote in an election where eight of his opponents were disqualified from running.[32] Mauritania's recent elections were relatively credible and the political space is expanding despite a strong military influence.[33] Moreover, there are ongoing concerns about judicial independence and parliamentary oversight which have been compromised by strong and growing authoritarian control by long-serving presidents aided by military control. President Kagame, for example, who has led the country for three decades, removed constitutional term limits and could remain in office till 2034.[34] In fact, 10 of the 14 leaders of African countries who have evaded term limits, have come to power via military coup, civil conflict, or military support.[35] Mauritania and Rwanda's judiciaries also lack autonomy from the executive and key judicial officers are presidential appointees.

10 of the **14** leaders of African countries who have evaded term limits, have come to power via military coup, civil conflict, or military support

Likewise, Cameroon's President Paul Biya has continued to consolidate his grip on power through a combination of violence, media repression, and government dominance to undermine democracy.[36] In July, Cameroon's parliament approved President Biya's request to postpone the country's parliamentary and municipal elections until 2026, a move the opposition opposed and termed a strategy to frustrate the electoral process.[37] The severe restrictions on free expression and civic space have cast doubt on the fairness of the electoral process.

Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique,[38] Senegal,[39] Somaliland[40] and Togo[41] are fairly stable but face some challenges in their level of constitutionalism and democracy. Political repression and suppression of media and civil liberties have been reported across these countries. Mozambique, Senegal, and Somaliland have a history of imposing internet shutdowns.[42] Also, Mozambican security forces used excessive force to suppress protests during the 2023 municipal elections[43] and regularly intimidated and harassed critical journalists, political commentators, activists and opposition leaders.[44]

In his final months in office, Senegal's president Macky Sall's administration escalated its affront on the country's democracy by postponing the February 2024 general elections, prosecuting, detaining and disqualifying opposition leader Ousmane Sonko from the presidential race, violently cracking down on protestors and muzzling the media. Local and international pressure forced him to call and hold the elections in March, which the opposition candidate won. Similarly, Somaliland's incumbent president, Musa Bihi, controversially extended his term in office in August 2022 and postponed elections to November 2024.[45] Another growing challenge is the emergence of hereditary presidencies or political dynasties, where autocrats are increasingly using their power and positions to force national institutions and the political apparatus to accept the transfer of power to a member of their family, as has been the case in Chad, Togo, Gabon and the Republic of the Congo.[46] There are also fears and pointers that the hereditary practice might as well affect Equitorial Guinea, Rwanda, Uganda, Zimbabwe and Cameroon, where some family members of incumbents are already being groomed for office, given their meteoric rise to senior positions within the military and the executive. [47]

32 *Mauritania re-elects President Ghazouani for a second term https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/7/1/mauritania-re-elects-president-ghazouani-for-a-second-term; Rwanda's Kagame wins fourth presidential term: Provisional results https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/7/16/rwandas-kagame-on-track-for-fourth-presidential-term*

33 *Freedom in the World: Mauritania https://freedomhouse.org/country/mauritania/freedom-world/2024*

34 *Rwanda's Kagame wins fourth term with 99.18% of the vote, provisional results show https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20240718-rwanda-s-kagame-wins-fourth-term-with-99-18-of-the-vote-provisional-results-show*

35 *Term Limit Evasions and Coups in Africa: Two Sides of the Same Coin https://africacenter.org/spotlight/term-limit-evasions-coups-africa-same-coin/*

36 *Cameroon events of 2023, Human Rights Watch https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/cameroon*

37 *How Cameroon's Paul Biya, 91, plans to stay in power https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/rest-of-africa/how-cameroon-paul-biya-91-plans-to-stay-in-power-4686788*

38 *Mozambique: October 9 https://africacenter.org/spotlight/2024-elections/mozambique/*

39 *Senegal: March 24 https://africacenter.org/spotlight/2024-elections/senegal/*

40 *Somaliland: November 13 https://africacenter.org/spotlight/2024-elections/somaliland/*

41 *How to Advance Peace and Stability in Coastal West Africa https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/12/how-advance-peace-and-stability-coastal-west-africa*

42 *Internet Shutdowns in 2023: Shrinking Democracy, Growing Violence https://www.accessnow.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/2023-KIO-Report.pdf*

43 *Mozambique: Police Fire on Protesters https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/10/28/mozambique-police-fire-protesters*

44 *Freedom in the World 2024: Mozambique https://freedomhouse.org/country/mozambique/freedom-world/2024*

45 *Freedom in the World 2024: Somaliland https://freedomhouse.org/country/somaliland/freedom-world/2024*

46 *Senegal and Chad's Elections and the State of African Democracies https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/analyses/senegal-and-chad%E2%80%99s-elections-and-state-african-democracies*

47 *Africa's 'Leaders for Life' https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/africas-leaders-life*

Whereas the elections have remained fairly competitive across these fairly stable countries, there have been concerns about fairness and transparency. In Mozambique, independence party FRELIMO continues to dominate the political space amidst its reluctance to implement reforms [48] and evidence of manipulation of the 2019 and 2023 general and municipal election results respectively, in its favour.[49] Also, the October 2023 municipal elections were marred by violence, irregularities, and fraud allegations as the government violently cracked down on opposition protests.[50] The state of the rule of law is mixed, with Senegal having strong judicial systems evident in the decision of the Constitutional Council to declare the decision of then-president Sall and Parliament to postpone the February elections unconstitutional.[51] However, countries such as Togo are struggling with executive influence and corruption. Similarly, while Somaliland's informal and consensus-based mechanisms led by traditional clan elders were previously successful in resolving election and political disputes, they stunted the role of its judiciary and those disgruntled by their decisions have in recent years resorted to violence.[52]

Countries like Chad,[53] Ethiopia, Libya, Somalia and South Sudan are in transition and continue to face conflict, violence and political instability, thus undermining the implementation of their constitutional frameworks. In the conflict zones, severe violations and violent suppression of human rights occur, including internet shutdowns in Chad, Ethiopia and Libya.[54] Political instabilities and armed conflict have also adversely impacted electoral governance and weakened the independence of legal institutions and the rule of law in these countries. Following the end of the transitional period from military rule, Chad held its presidential election on May 6, which was won by General Mahamat Déby, a military officer who succeeded his authoritarian father after a protracted political crisis between 2014 and 2018. The election was termed as neither credible, free nor democratic, as the election period was fraught with violence, fear and intimidation from the Chadian military.[55]

The Cameroon, Tunisia and Algeria governments have intensified crackdowns on critical voices and the political opposition ahead of upcoming elections, using vague laws to target, arrest and detain journalists, activists, government critics, and opposition figures. During the 2022-2023 parliamentary elections, the Tunisian government imposed adverse conditions against the opposition, leading to lack of meaningful competition, low voter turnout and poor representation of the country's major political parties in the national legislature.[56] Also, the Independent High Authority for Elections (ISIE) refused to implement the ruling of the administrative court that reinstated the list of candidates who were excluded from the final list of candidates for the election.[57] In Algeria, opposition leaders condemned the lack of genuine democracy and unfair conditions such as a legal framework skewed to prevent opponents from running under the military-backed President Abdelmadjid Tebboune's tenure. In September 2023, the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association declared that the criminalisation of civil society work in Algeria had "a chilling effect and had created a climate of fear, resulting in a severe shrinking of civic space".[58]

> **"a chilling effect and had created a climate of fear, resulting in a severe shrinking of civic space."**

48 *Mozambique: October 9 https://africacenter.org/spotlight/2024-elections/mozambique/; Special report: Reading the numbers of the CNE election results of 26 October 2023 https://www5.open.ac.uk/technology/mozambiue/sites/www.open.ac.uk.technology.mozambique/files/files/Election-Bulletin-170_31Oct23_Special-Report-Leitura-numeros.pdf*

49 *Fraudulent municipal elections cripple democracy in Mozambique https://issafrica.org/iss-today/fraudulent-municipal-elections-cripple-democracy-in-mozambique?utm_source=BenchmarkEmail&utm_campaign=ISS_Weekly&utm_medium=email*

50 *Freedom in the World: Mozambique https://freedomhouse.org/country/mozambique/freedom-world/2024*

51 *Senegal constitutional council finds election delay unlawful https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/rest-of-africa/senegal-constitutional-council-finds-election-delay-unlawful-4527016*

52 *Somaliland: Pulling back from the brink https://www.theelephant.info/analysis/2024/05/02/somaliland-pulling-back-from-the-brink/*

53 *Chad: May 6 https://africacenter.org/spotlight/2024-elections/chad/*

54 *Internet Shutdowns in 2023: Shrinking Democracy, Growing Violence https://www.accessnow.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/2023-KIO-Report.pdf*

55 *Chad's Mahamat Deby confirmed as winner of disputed presidential election https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/5/16/chads-mahamat-deby-confirmed-as-winner-of-disputed-presidential-election; Chad: Political Transition Ends with Déby's Election https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/05/13/chad-political-transition-ends-debys-election*

56 *Freedom in the World 2024: Tunisia, https://freedomhouse.org/country/tunisia/freedom-world/2024*

57 *Tunisia: (CFJ) rejects the latest decision by the electoral commission to refuse implementation of administrative court rulings, calls for an end to legal manipulation https://www.cfjustice.org/tunisia-cfj-rejects-the-latest-decision-by-the-electoral-commission-to-refuse-implementation-of-administrative-court-rulings-calls-for-an-end-to-legal-manipulation/;*

58 *Prominent Algerian opposition figures blast 'authoritarian climate' ahead of presidential election https://apnews.com/article/algeria-election-opposition-denounce-authoritarian-climate-1979092c65cffdbbc4902c158cd69f6e; Freedom in the World 2024: Algeria https://freedomhouse.org/country/algeria/freedom-world/2024; Report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, Clément Nyaletsossi Voule* https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g24/079/03/pdf/g2407903.pdf*

Botswana,[59] Cape Verde, Ghana,[60] Mauritius,[61] Namibia,[62] and South Africa stand out with fairly stable democratic systems, well-respected and strong constitutional frameworks and functional separation of powers. These countries have maintained relatively good human rights records, with high rankings in freedoms and civil liberties, albeit with some challenges. They are also multi-party democracies which hold regular, competitive, peaceful, free and fair elections. However, Mauritius has postponed municipal elections thrice since 2021.[63]

In addition, these countries have relatively strong legal and electoral institutions and independent judiciaries, and the rule of law is generally respected. Notably, the Mauritius Electoral and Boundaries Commission (EBC) has a reputation for impartiality and enjoys the trust of a majority of the population.[64] Likewise, the Electoral Commission of Namibia and the country's judiciary are generally considered open, impartial and autonomous from political influence.[65] The militaries of these countries have a reputation for neutrality in political matters while civil society is vigilant and well-organised. However, ahead of Ghana's December election, there is heightened mistrust of these institutions amidst fears of electoral manipulation.[66] Also, the country has witnessed a regression in governance, as young Ghanaians face disillusionment with growing corruption, economic mismanagement, soaring public debt and the lack of economic opportunity.[67]

2.1.2 Unresolved Social Divisions, Economic Disparities and Corruption Impede Election Integrity

Across Africa, there is a complex relationship between historical tensions and elections. Social divisions, economic disparities, and corruption shape electoral processes. Social divisions across countries, driven by factors such as ethnicity, race, colonial legacies, inequality, politics, culture, religion, natural resources, marginalisation, and exclusion remain a complex challenge, often leading to conflict during elections.[68] They are also key election topics and have formed the basis of political struggles in the past. More importantly, they also manifest online as the underlying drivers of the endless cycles of polarising narratives that are often hijacked by political actors to fan hate speech, misinformation and disinformation during politically sensitive periods; and, by autocrats to instil fear of potential conflict and violence, drown out calls for alternative leadership and rally for public support as they paint themselves as the perpetual saviours of their countries, thus leaving the populace resigned to their authoritarian rule.

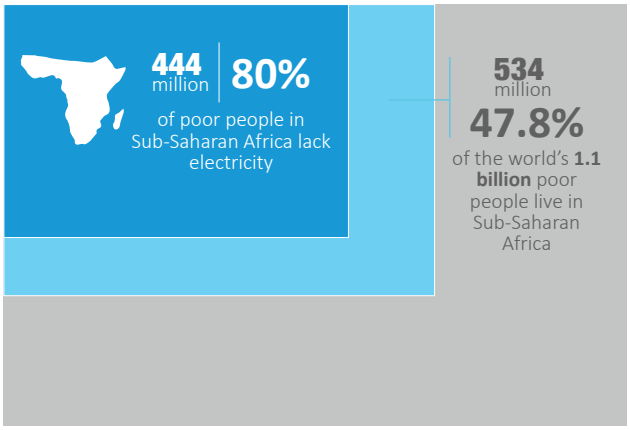
Burkina Faso, Chad, Ethiopia, Guinea Bissau, Libya, Mali, Somalia, Somaliland and South Sudan are experiencing ongoing conflict fueled by these divisions. For example, Burkina Faso's multiple coups in recent years are based on longstanding tensions around religion, ethnicity, access to natural resources, social injustice, marginalisation, economic grievances and political power.[69] Chad's inter-ethnic conflict is linked to its French colonial past and deep-seated historical rivalries between the largely Arab-Muslim herders in the north and the marginalised Christian and Animist farmers of the south.[70] Ethiopia's ongoing conflict between its major ethnic groups such as the Oromo, Amhara and Tigrayans has led to a state of insecurity, loss of lives and internal displacement of at least 2.9 million people.[71] In Guinea-Bissau, ethnic and regional divisions have fueled political instability and weak governance.[72] In Libya, ethnic and regional conflict contributed to the ongoing armed conflict and political instability as rival political factions compete for control of the country.[73] In Mali, the diverse ethnic and religious composition has fueled communal tensions and ongoing armed conflicts over natural resources.[74] Somalia and Somaliland's complex clan-based divisions have fueled decades of conflict and instability, although the latter is more stable.

59 Botswana: October https://africacenter.org/spotlight/2024-elections/botswana/
60 Ghana Presidential and Legislative, December 7 https://africacenter.org/spotlight/2024-elections/#ghana; Ghana https://freedomhouse.org/country/ghana/freedom-world/2024
61 Mauritius: November 30 https://africacenter.org/spotlight/2024-elections/mauritius/
62 Namibia: November 27 https://africacenter.org/spotlight/2024-elections/namibia/
63 Freedom of the World 2024: Mauritius https://freedomhouse.org/country/mauritius/freedom-world/2024
64 Mauritians' assessment of election quality took a hit in 2019 https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/ad453-mauritians_assessment_of_election_quality_took_a_hit_in_2019-afrobarometer_dispatch-21may21.pdf
65 Namibia: November 27 https://africacenter.org/spotlight/2024-elections/namibia/
66 Is Ghana heading towards election-related unrest? https://issafrica.org/iss-today/is-ghana-heading-towards-election-related-unrest
67 The rule of law and democracy in Ghana since independence: Uneasy bedfellows? https://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1996-20962018000100013; The state of democracy in Africa https://www.idea.int/gsod/2023/chapters/africa/, https://cddgh.org/2024/02/ghanas-democracy-worrying-signals-from-the-2023-democracy-index/, https://www.myjoyonline.com/yaw-nsarkoh-under-the-spells-of-founders-and-coups-another-august-of-ghanaian-political-metaphysics
68 Ethnicity and Democracy in Africa https://www.jica.go.jp/Resource/jica-ri/publication/workingpaper/jrft3q000000239k-att/JICA-RI_WP_No.22_2010.pdf
69 Burkina Faso https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2024-01/27_Burkina_Faso.pdf; CrisisWatch Tracking Conflict Worldwide https://www.crisisgroup.org/crisiswatch/june-trends-and-july-alerts-2024
70 Between violence, geopolitical competition, and the quest for social justice: Chad's road to election https://acleddata.com/2024/04/30/between-violence-geopolitical-competition-and-the-quest-for-social-justice-chads-road-to-elections/#:~:text=Between%20January%202022%20and%20March,years%20in%20Chad's%20recent%20history.
71 Ethiopia Events of 2023 https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/ethiopia
72 Freedom in the World 2024 Guinea-Bissau https://freedomhouse.org/country/guinea-bissau/freedom-world/2024; Guinea-Bissau: The tug-of-war over governance https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/president-embalo-buinea-bissau-coup/
73 World Report 2024: Libya https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/libya; Will 2024 finally see elections in Libya? https://www.omct.org/en/resources/blog/will-2024-finally-see-elections-in-libya
74 Mali Events of 2023 https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/mali; Pastoralist Violence in North and West Africa https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2021/07/pastoralist-violence-in-north-and-west-africa_541e23b6/63dff519-en.pdf

Countries such as Gabon, Mauritania, Mozambique, Rwanda, South Africa, and Tunisia have made some progress but still face challenges. Gabon struggles with ethnic tensions due to the imposition of a dynastic rule.[75] In Madagascar, historical tensions exist among ethnic groups due to the practice of domestic slavery, the caste system, and French colonial divide and rule policies[76] impacting electoral dynamics and participation.[77] In Mauritania,[78] tensions exist between the dominant Arab-Berber elite and the Black African "Afro-Mauritians", with practices such as hereditary racial slavery, racial discrimination and the progressive "Arabization" of the country remaining a recurrent source of conflict and protests.[79] In Mozambique, political and economic neglect, competition for oil and gas extraction, and ethnic and religious tensions have led to conflict in the northern Cabo Delgado region.[80] Three decades since Rwanda's 1994 genocide, the ongoing conflict in the mineral-rich eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) remains rooted in ethnic divisions between Hutus and Tutsis and continues to cast a long shadow over the country's future.[81] In South Africa, the legacy of apartheid continues to shape race relations, with economic inequality, crime, unemployment, social divisions and xenophobia persisting three decades later.[82] Similarly, racism against Black Tunisians, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers from Sub-Saharan Africa has been a challenge in Tunisia.[83] These divisions can complicate efforts to conduct credible elections or deploy election technologies, as tensions, conflict, mistrust and political instability undermine the security and integrity of the electoral environment.

Socio-economic inequalities can also exacerbate political instability and affect the use of technology during elections. The Human Development Index (HDI) highlights stark disparities in development across the African continent.[84]

According to the 2022 index, Sub-Saharan Africa had the lowest average score of 0.549, compared to the global average HDI value is 0.739. The countries which ranked higher such as Mauritius (0.796), Libya (0.746), Algeria (0.745), Tunisia (0.732), South Africa (0.717) and Botswana (0.708) have better access to education, healthcare, and access to essential services. The countries with low HDI values such as Rwanda (0.548), Togo (0.547), Mauritania (0.54), Senegal (0.517), Malawi (0.508), Ethiopia (0.492), Madagascar (0.487), Guinea Bissau (0.483), Mozambique (0.461), Burkina Faso (0.438), Mali (0.41), Chad (0.394), South Sudan (0.381) and Somalia (0.38) face widespread poverty and low development. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP),[85] almost half (534 million or 47.8%) of the world's 1.1 billion poor people live in Sub-Saharan Africa. Further, 444 million (80%) of poor people in Sub-Saharan Africa lack electricity and thus are being left behind in the digital world. The high poverty levels and low development can limit access to the internet and digital technologies, impede the deployment of election technologies by countries and thus hamper democratic participation.



The Human Development Index 2022 (HDI) for Sub-Saharan Africa

75 *Gabon Coup Leader Visits Cameroon to Press for End to CEMAC Sanctions https://www.voanews.com/a/gabon-coup-leader-visits-cameroon-to-press-for-end-to-cemac-sanctions-/7386680.html*
76 *Constructing the Local in Madagascar: Resistance and Politics of Scale https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17502977.2024.2353013#abstract*
77 *Committee On Elimination Of Racial Discrimination Considers Report Of Madagascar https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2009/10/committee-elimination-racial-discrimination-considers-report-madagascar; Madagascar https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/madagascar/*
78 *Mauritanian Political Landscape after President Ghazouani Wins Second Term https://epc.ae/en/details/brief/mauritanian-political-landscape-after-president-ghazouani-wins-second-term*
79 *Much need for action https://www.bmz.de/en/countries/mauritania/political-situation-120990; Ending Hereditary Slavery in Mauritania: Bidan (Whites) and Black "Slaves" in 2021 https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/ending-hereditary-slavery-in-mauritania-bidan-whites-and-black-slaves-in-2021/; Mauritania: Full Country Dossier https://www.opendoors.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Full-Country-Dossier-Mauritania-2024.pdf*
80 *Rigid power structures hamper good governance https://www.bmz.de/en/countries/mozambique/political-situation-146330; On The Horizon: June - November 2024 https://www.crisisgroup.org/burundi-colombia-mozambique-pakistan/horizon-june-november-2024; Freedom in the World 2024: Mozambique https://freedomhouse.org/country/mozambique/freedom-world/2024*
81 *Ethnic Violence Still Plagues Central Africa Decades After Genocide https://adf-magazine.com/2024/04/ethnic-violence-still-plagues-central-africa-decades-after-genocide/*
82 *Xenophobia, politics, and religion as we approach the 2024 elections in South Africa https://kujenga-amani.ssrc.org/2024/03/12/xenophobia-politics-and-religion-as-we-approach-the-2024-elections-in-south-africa/; South Africa: 30 years after apartheid, what has changed? https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/4/27/south-africa-30-years-after-apartheid-what-has-changed*
83 *Black Tunisians lie low as violence against Black people worsens https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/7/14/black-tunisians-lie-low-violence-against-black-people-worsens*
84 *UNDP, Human Development Index (HDI) https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/human-development-index#/indicies/HDI; The index provides a composite measure that assesses countries based on life expectancy, education, and per capita income indicators.*
85 *Global Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) 2023, Unstacking global poverty: data for high impact action https://hdr.undp.org/system/files/documents/hdp-document/2023mpireporten.pdf*

Corruption is a pervasive issue across the continent that erodes public trust and undermines electoral integrity and democratic governance. Sub-Saharan Africa ranks the lowest in the 2023 Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI).[86] Notably, Africa's score of 33 was well below the global average of 43, with at least 90% of Sub-Saharan countries scoring below 50, and making no progress or declining in the last decade.[87] Further, the report noted that democracy and the rule of law remained under pressure in the region, with poverty, under-development and socio-economic issues remaining persistent challenges stemming from decades of underfunding of public sectors exacerbated by corruption and illicit financial flows from the siphoning of public resources.[88] The countries with the lowest scores, notably those perceived as having the most corruption, were Somalia (11), South Sudan (13), Libya (18), Chad (20), Comoros (20), Guinea Bissau (22), Madagascar (25), Mozambique (25), Mali (28), Gabon (28), Mauritania (30) and Togo (31). Those that scored better than the global average were Cape Verde (64), Botswana (59), Malawi (53), Rwanda (53), Mauritius (51), Namibia (49) and Ghana (43).

socio-economic issues remaining persistent challenges stemming from decades of underfunding of public sectors exacerbated by corruption and illicit financial flows from the siphoning of public resources.

Notably, conflict and security challenges such as coups, extremism and terror attacks have weakened institutions and undermined states' ability to respond to corruption decisively, even as oversight institutions such as judiciaries remain heavily politicised.[89] Corruption and clientelism are a major problem in Africa that subverts democracy and democratic principles, by undermining the ability of ordinary citizens to elect and hold government officials accountable and eroding public trust in democratic processes, thus weakening citizens' desire to participate or vote.[90] Consequently, long-term corruption is detrimental to the legitimacy of future elections and could also affect the ability of countries to deploy election technologies that inspire public confidence and ensure the integrity of elections.

86 *Corruption Perceptions Index https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2023; The CPI ranks countries by their perceived levels of public sector corruption, scoring on a scale of 0 (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean).*

87 *CPI 2023 for Sub-Saharan Africa: Impunity for corrupt officials, restricted civic space & limited access to justice https://www.transparency.org/en/news/cpi-2023-sub-saharan-africa-corruption-impunity-civic-space-access-justice*

88 *CPI 2023 for Sub-Saharan Africa: Impunity for corrupt officials, restricted civic space & limited access to justice https://www.transparency.org/en/news/cpi-2023-sub-saharan-africa-corruption-impunity-civic-space-access-justice*

89 *CPI 2022 for Sub-Saharan Africa: Corruption compounding multiple crises https://www.transparency.org/en/news/cpi-2022-sub-saharan-africa-corruption-compounding-multiple-crises*

90 *The impact of corruption and clientelism on voter turnout in Africa https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s10611-023-10092-z.pdf*

2.2 Intensification of Digital Authoritarianism

Digital authoritarianism has intensified in the past year as governments move to apply various technologies to close all avenues for critical expression and citizen organising against poor governance. Notably, there is increasing appropriation of technology by authoritarian and military regimes in pursuance of their agenda to entrench their hold on power. These governments are instituting repressive controls on citizens' use of digital technologies, and are deploying various technologies to monitor the activities of their opponents, control online narratives, stifle dissenting voices and crack down on activists, especially through the use of real-time surveillance.

Such governments are likely to shun the adoption of election technologies or if they do, they could implement them so poorly, or manipulate them to irregularly secure their win, further compromising the possibility of free and fair elections. This growing digital authoritarianism reflects autocrats' realisation that technology can expand citizens' rights and support democratisation in ways that mirror the Arab Spring wave of demonstrations and uprisings that started in Tunisia in December 2010, and by February 2012 had forced the rulers of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen out of power.

2.2.1 New Dimensions and Threats to Digital Rights

The landscape of freedom of information, expression, and media in Africa remains complex. Across the study countries, there have been notable advancements, while in others, challenges persist. The democratic regression and digital authoritarianism are enabled by laws that undermine open expression, freedom of assembly and association and the opportunity to campaign.

The study countries that face significant challenges concerning civil and political rights include Algeria, Burkina Faso, Chad, Ethiopia, Gabon, Libya, Mali, Rwanda, Somalia and South Sudan. These countries implement severe restrictions on rights and internet access and were rated as "Not Free" in the Freedom of the World Report 2023. The government's control of the media is extensive with widespread censorship and stringent internet controls frequently imposed. In some of the countries, access to information is often hampered by conflict, poor infrastructure and low media and digital literacy. Also, hate speech and disinformation are prevalent, often state-driven.

Comoros, Guinea Bissau, Madagascar, Mauritania, Malawi, Mozambique, Senegal, Somaliland, Togo, and Tunisia have mixed levels of freedom of information, media and expression, and were rated as "Partly Free" in the 2023 Freedom of the World Report.[91] These countries have made some progress over the years but continue to face various challenges during politically sensitive periods such as protests and elections, leading to the restriction of rights, increased government influence on media, imposition of internet controls and censorship, and spread of hate speech and disinformation.

The countries with relatively strong protections for freedom of information, expression, media, assembly and association include Botswana, Cape Verde, Ghana, Mauritius, Namibia and South Africa. These countries were rated as Free in the 2023 Freedom of the World Report. However, it is uncertain whether they offer leading examples with strong legal frameworks that support digital rights and freedoms, relatively high media and digital literacy levels, and a population that actively utilises digital platforms for civic engagement. Notably, government regulators and the media in these countries are relatively independent and the government's influence on media and control of the internet is minimal. Also, whereas there have been incidents of hate speech and disinformation, these have been minimal during the election period as the public discusses issues such as governance, economic reform, social justice and service delivery.

whereas there have been incidents of hate speech and disinformation, these have been minimal during the election period as the public discusses issues such as governance, economic reform, social justice and service delivery.

91 *Countries and Territories: Global Freedom Scores https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores*

Can Senegal's Renaissance be a Beacon?

Amidst the gloom, there were some bright lights. An illustrative case is Senegal, where democracy triumphed remarkably in early 2024. A president who appeared keen on staying in power longer than the constitution mandated him, announced a delay to elections scheduled for February 2024 attracting profound civic action and international pressure. The president ultimately conceded, allowing elections to be held in March. An opposition candidate, who had been released from jail a few days earlier, won the peaceful elections, and the government candidate conceded.

Senegal has always been among the bright lights of democracy in Africa, with regular, free and fair elections, presidents leaving office when their constitutional mandates end, and digital repression fairly low. The country starkly stands out in the so-called Francophone Africa, which has been a hotbed of coups (e.g. Mali), internet shutdowns (e.g. Chad), and rulers staying in power for decades (e.g. Cameroon). As the president schemed to remain in power beyond the constitutional mandate, the media was attacked, protesters brutalised, and the internet shut down.

2.2.2 Deployment of Internet Disruptions to Suppress Democratic Participation

A growing trend of government-imposed internet disruptions during elections and political protests significantly impacts transparency, credibility, and public trust in electoral processes. Internet shutdowns have become a tool for stifling political dissent and controlling the flow of information, especially during politically sensitive periods such as elections and protests. Across the continent, various controls including internet disruptions, censorship, blocking, and filtering of content to restrict online expression and association have left African democracy hanging in the balance. Since 2022, there have been more than 18 electoral-related internet disruptions in Africa.[92]

Traditionally, authoritarian countries have been the front-runners in ordering internet disruptions in Africa - although more recently even more democratic states such as Kenya, Nigeria and Tanzania joined the fray. During 2024, the countries that disrupted the internet over elections-related matters included Senegal[93] and Sudan.[94] Gabon, Chad, Ethiopia, Libya and Zimbabwe are among those that experienced disruptions during 2023. These disruptions stifle citizens' right to organise, express themselves, and access pluralistic information. They also undermine electoral transparency and accountability and may perpetuate political instabilities since they breed distrust in the credibility of elections. The African countries that have experienced internet disruptions include Benin, Burundi, Cameroon, Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Eswatini, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Gambia, Guinea, Kenya, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Togo, Tanzania, Tunisia and Uganda.[95]

In 2023, internet disruptions increased almost two-fold from seven in 2022 to 17. These were recorded in nine countries led by Ethiopia (4 instances of disruptions) and Senegal (4), followed by Guinea (2), Tanzania (2), Somaliland (1), Uganda (1), Mozambique (1) and Kenya (1).[96] Among the study countries, Botswana, Cape Verde, Ghana, Mauritius, Namibia and South Africa have no history of imposing internet shutdowns. On the other hand, Algeria, Chad, Ethiopia, Mauritania and Senegal have had the highest frequency and duration of shutdowns.

92 Jerry Fisayo-Bambi, "Uganda, the 15th country in Africa to restrict social media due to elections- report," Africanews 13 August, 2021, https://www.africanews.com/2021/01/14/uganda-the-15th-country-in-africa-to-restrict-social-media-due-to-elections-report//

93 Ngouda Dione, "Senegal cuts internet again amid widening crackdown on dissent," Reuters 13, February, 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/ahead-planned-march-over-vote-delay-senegal-suspends-internet-access-2024-02-13/

94 Khanyi Mlaba, "Africa's Internet Shutdowns: Where, Why, and How Do They Happen?" Global Citizen, 9 May, 2024, Africa's Internet Shutdowns: Where, Why, and How Do They Happen? (globalcitizen.org)

95 Jerry Fisayo-Bambi, "Uganda, the 15th country in Africa to restrict social media due to elections- report," Africanews 13 August, 2021, https://www.africanews.com/2021/01/14/uganda-the-15th-country-in-africa-to-restrict-social-media-due-to-elections-report//

96 Shrinking Democracy, Growing Violence Internet Shutdowns In 2023 https://www.accessnow.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/2023-KIO-Report.pdf

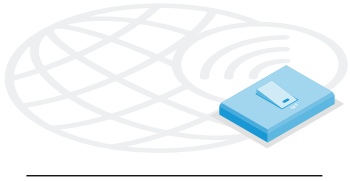
Algeria imposed at least 15 internet shutdowns between March 2019 and June 2024, with a total economic impact estimated at USD 70.4 million. These disruptions were implemented to curb cheating during examinations and during protests and elections. Four shutdowns were implemented in 2024 between June 9 and 13 during the Baccalaureate examinations.[97]

Ethiopia continues to utilise internet shutdowns regularly as a tactic to suppress dissent. It has imposed at least 10 internet disruptions since June 2019, with an ongoing shutdown that has lasted at least 1,400 days since November 2020 and targets the conflict-prone Tigray region.[98] In August 2023, the government suspended mobile internet services, fixed line internet and communication platforms amidst escalating conflict in the Amhara region between its military and the Amhara Fano fighters, which has now lasted at least 400 days.[99] Before that, the government blocked access to social media platforms (TikTok, Facebook, Telegram and YouTube) in February 2023 for five months in response to calls for protests by religious groups.[100] The economic impact of these shutdowns is estimated at more than USD 200 million.

Senegal has imposed five shutdowns since its first two-day shutdown in March 2021, when it blocked access to social media following large protests in the country after the arrest of opposition leader Ousmane Sonko. Following the postponement of the February 2024 elections and the ensuing widespread protests rejecting the decision, the Senegalese Ministry of Communication, Telecommunication, and Digital Economy issued a public communique ordering the blocking of mobile data access on two occasions - February 4 and 13 - citing the spread of "hateful and subversive messages on social media."[101] The collective impact of the February shutdowns is estimated to be USD 2.4 million. A lawsuit has been filed before the ECOWAS Court of Justice seeking to prevent further shutdowns in the country.[102]

Between May 2023 and August 2024, Mauritania imposed at least four internet shutdowns. In March and May 2023, Mauritania blocked mobile internet access in response to the escape of four prisoners accused of being linked to militant Islamic groups, and during protests following the death of an Afro-Mauritanian man, Oumar Diop in police custody.[103] In July 2024, mobile internet networks were disrupted for 23 days between July 2 and 24, following protests that erupted after President Mohamed Ould Ghazouani was re-elected for a second term.[104] This had an economic impact of at least USD 4.8 million. The country's internet services were also disrupted twice during baccalaureate exams on August 12 and 13.

Similarly, Chad has imposed four shutdowns since March 2018. The first disruption lasted 16 months and was ordered for "security reasons" ostensibly to silence discontent regarding constitutional reforms to extend President Idriss Deby's stay in power.[105] The most recent disruption was recorded in February 2024 lasting two days and seven hours, implemented after civil unrest following attacks on the offices of Chad intelligence services in N'Djamena.[106] Collectively, the shutdowns have had an economic impact of USD 28 million.



Burkina Faso, Comoros, Gabon, Mali, Mozambique, Somalia, Togo and South Sudan have also experienced shutdowns, including during protests and elections.[107] Burkina Faso imposed two shutdowns in November 2021 and January 2022 following anti-government protests and after an attempted military coup respectively.[108] The incidents, which lasted a collective nine days, affected access to mobile internet services and had an economic impact of at least USD 4.4 million. In January, the Comoros imposed its first internet shutdown over 2.5 days following post-election protests called by the opposition rejecting the presidential election results that granted President Asali Assounami another term.[109] It had an overall cost of USD 51,365.

97 *Internet Shutdown For Algeria Exams, 9 June 2024 https://pulse.internetsociety.org/shutdowns/internet-shutdown-for-algeria-exams-9-june-2024*
98 *Shrinking Democracy, Growing Violence Internet Shutdowns In 2023 https://www.accessnow.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/2023-KIO-Report.pdf*
99 *Internet shutdown in Amhara region, Ethiopia, August 2023 https://pulse.internetsociety.org/shutdowns/internet-shutdown-in-amhara-region-ethiopia-august-2023*
100 *Ethiopian authorities must stop blocking social media https://www.accessnow.org/press-release/ethiopia-social-media-protest/*
101 *Senegal into presidential elections February 2024 https://pulse.internetsociety.org/shutdowns/senegal-into-presidential-elections*
102 *SLS's Rule of Law Impact Lab and Media Defence File Case Before ECOWAS Court Challenging Senegal's Internet Shutdowns https://law.stanford.edu/2024/02/12/slss-rule-of-law-impact-lab-and-media-defence-file-case-before-ecowas-court-challenging-senegals-internet-shutdowns/?utm_source=Committee+to+Protect+Journalists&utm_campaign=2bac242b2c-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2024_02_13_02_38&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_-2bac242b2c-%5BLIST_EMAIL_ID%5D*
103 *Freedom in the World 2024: Mauritania https://freedomhouse.org/country/mauritania/freedom-world/2024*
104 *Global internet shutdowns https://pulse.internetsociety.org/shutdowns?search=mauritania#events*
105 *Social Media Services Blocked in Chad, March 2018 https://pulse.internetsociety.org/shutdowns/shutdown-0*
106 *Internet Shutdowns: Chad https://pulse.internetsociety.org/shutdowns/internet-connectivity-disrupted-in-chad-amidst-unrest*
107 *Comoros post-poll clashes turn deadly as opposition calls protest https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/rest-of-africa/comoros-post-election-violence-turns-deadly-4496066*
108 *2022 Kicks Off with More Shutdowns in Burkina Faso https://pulse.internetsociety.org/shutdowns/second-shutdown-in-a-month-in-burkina-faso; No Mobile Data in Burkina Faso https://pulse.internetsociety.org/shutdowns/no-mobile-data-in-burkina-faso*
109 *Internet Shutdowns https://pulse.internetsociety.org/shutdowns/comoros-internet-suspended-among-election-unrest*

During Gabon's August 2023 presidential and legislative elections, the Ali Bongo-led government blocked internet access, imposed a night-time curfew, and suspended three media outlets - France 24, Radio France Internationale, and TV5 Monde.[110] The government cited the threat of online disinformation as the basis for the nationwide shutdown. These restrictions were later reversed. Mali's last shutdown was imposed in July 2020 when social media and messaging applications were blocked during protests calling for President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta's resignation. The disruption lasted six days with an overall economic impact of USD 2.1 million.[112]

In October 2023, Mozambique experienced its first internet disruption which lasted for at least three hours and was imposed at 1800 hours as polling in the municipal elections closed. While there was no official reason for the incident, it was likely meant to curb the spread of unofficial information relating to the election outcomes.[113] South Sudan imposed its first shutdown in August 2021, lasting three hours, following anti-corruption protests and calls for the resignation of President Salva Kiir.[114] Togo's most recent shutdowns were recorded in January and February 2020 during the presidential elections and included the blockage of messaging services such as WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger and Telegram on two networks.[115]

Some of the recent shutdowns have had a transnational effect. When Kenya imposed a nationwide internet shutdown on June 25, 2024, during the #RejectFinanceBill2024 protests, internet access and mobile money services in Kenya and in neighbouring countries like Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi were also affected.[116] In 2021, Uganda implemented a total internet blackout on the eve of elections, which was lifted five days later after the election results had been declared.[117] However, the Facebook app has as of September 2024 continued to be blocked over what appears to be an electoral standoff between the government and its parent company, Meta.[118]

Instructively, Internet disruptions are key political tools, weapons or currencies of control and censorship of information flow and access.

Instructively, Internet disruptions are key political tools, weapons or currencies of control and censorship of information flow and access.[119] Most of the governments such as in Algeria, Cameroon, Chad, and Rwanda that have implemented internet controls and restrictions are authoritarian, leaving little room for public participation in the electoral process during the periods of the blackouts.[120] Their control of the digital civic space is made possible by the desire to continue hegemony in leadership over other groups including government opponents, dissidents and critics.[121] Consequently, they target human rights defenders, journalists and other civic actors by tightening the noose of information flow to restrict efforts that challenge electoral results[122] by compromising transparency and accountability.[123]

The enablers of these controls include regressive cybercrime and penal laws such as Algeria's Penal Code, Cameroon's Law N° 2010/012 of 21 December 2010 on cybersecurity and cybercrime, and the 2015 Cybercrime Law, and Chad's 2018 Law on Prevention and Punishment of Cybercrimes. These laws are developed under the guise of safeguarding national security but in practice are implemented in disregarding the rule of law and in the absence of clear safeguards and independent oversight.[124] They are often abused by governments to order telecommunication operators to limit, filter and censor because they may be due. Notably, few operators challenge or disclose government orders, and their continued failure to do so violates their obligations under the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.[125]

110 *Freedom in the World 2024: Gabon https://freedomhouse.org/country/gabon/freedom-world/2024*
111 *Gabon cuts internet, imposes curfew amid election voting delays https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/gabon-vote-president-bongo-seeks-extend-56-year-family-dynasty-2023-08-26/*
112 *Social media restricted in Mali amid protests against president https://netblocks.org/reports/social-media-restricted-in-mali-amid-protests-against-president-QyKpdX8D*
113 *Mozambique: Internet Shutdown as Polls Close https://allafrica.com/stories/202310120129.html; CIP Mozambique Elections: Internet cut, counting starts https://clubofmozambique.com/news/cip-mozambique-elections-internet-cut-counting-starts-246517/*
114 *Internet Disruptions in South Sudan https://pulse.internetsociety.org/shutdowns/internet-disruptions-in-south-sudan*
115 *An Internet shutdown taints Togo's 2020 presidential elections https://pulse.internetsociety.org/shutdowns/togo; Internet shutdown reported during elections https://pulse.internetsociety.org/shutdowns/togo-2 KenSafeSpace: Statement on the Nationwide Internet Disruption in Kenya https://www.kictanet.or.ke/mdocs-posts/kensafespace-statement-on-the-nationwide-internet-disruption-in-kenya/*
116 *Jerry Fisayo-Bambi, Supra.*
117 *Merinah Mbabazi and Muganzi, "Govt, Facebook in Talks to End Three Year Blockage," New Vision, 22 January, 2023,*
118 *https://www.newvision.co.ug/category/news/govt-facebook-in-talks-to-end-three-year-bloc-NV_179442/ Khanyi Mlaba, "Africa's Internet Shutdowns: Where, Why, and How Do They Happen?" Global Citizen, 9 May 2024, Africa's Internet Shutdowns: Where, Why, and How Do They Happen? (globalcitizen.org)*
119 *Rydzak, Jan, Moses Karanja, and Nicholas Opiyo. "Internet shutdowns in Africa | Dissent does not die in darkness: Network shutdowns and collective action in African countries." International Journal of*
120 *Communication 14 (2020): 24. Egbunike, Nwachukwu Andrew. "Two Sides of the Same Coin: Digital Authoritarianism and Press (Un) Freedom in Africa." Journal of African Film & Diaspora Studies (JAFDIS) 7, no. 1 (2024).*
121 *Stremlau, Nicole, and Nathan Dobson. "Information Controls and Internet Shutdowns in African Elections." JournaL of african Elections (2022).*
122 *Tegegn, Dunia Mekonnen. "Why Access to Information is Essential for Democratic Elections in Africa." (2021); Freyburg, Tina, and Lisa Garbe. "Authoritarian practices in the digital age | Blocking the bottleneck:*
123 *Internet shutdowns and ownership at election times in Sub-Saharan Africa." International Journal of Communication 12 (2018): 21.*
124 *CIPESA "State of Internet Freedom in Africa 2023: A decade of internet freedom in Africa: Recounting the past, shaping the future, https://cipesa.org/wp-content/files/reports/SIFA23_Report.pdf*
125 *Unite Nations, "UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights," HR/PUB/11/04, 2011, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/guidingprinciplesbusinesshr_en.pdf*

Rwanda has employed various internet controls,[126] censorship measures, and legal restrictions to limit online content during elections. Independent news outlets and opposition blogs have been blocked, especially around election periods, such as during the 2017 presidential election. The government has implemented legal restrictions, including a 2018 cybersecurity law that criminalises publishing "rumours that may incite fear, insurrection or violence," a penal code that criminalises defamation of the president, and a 2016 ICT law that prohibits disseminating "grossly offensive" or "indecent" messages online.[127]

As highlighted above, these disruptions have significant economic implications as they not only disrupt the flow of information but also affect businesses, and impede financial transactions and other economic activities that rely on the internet and digital platforms. The disruptions also affect the delivery of healthcare, education and other essential services that rely on the internet. Ultimately, these shutdowns make a country's environment hostile to foreign direct investment as prospective investors shy away from countries where disruptions are common, thereby limiting job creation opportunities and resulting in reduced revenue for governments in foregone taxes and other economic benefits for the country.

Moreover, the internet is an enabler for the enjoyment of rights including access to information, freedoms of expression, assembly and association and the realisation of the full democratic potential.[128] Restrictions to the internet, critical websites and online platforms limit citizens' ability to access diverse perspectives and information during politically sensitive periods such as protests and elections. They also undermine internet freedom by restricting citizens' ability to express their views, associate freely, and assemble online.[129] Innovation in the digital sector is also compromised since the process of developing new ideas is frustrated.[130] Their imposition during election periods could also impede the deployment and use of election technologies which rely on the Internet to function.

2.2.3 Enhanced Surveillance Amidst Weak Privacy and Data Protection Laws

Across the continent, there has been a growing concern regarding communication interception and surveillance related to activism and political activities during election periods. Practices reportedly include monitoring phone calls, intercepting SMS messages, and tracking social media to gather intelligence on political opponents or perceived threats. Although concrete evidence is often lacking, accusations, rumours and fears of surveillance are common. The use of communication interception and surveillance during election periods varies across the study countries, with some experiencing significant issues and others facing moderate or low problems.

there has been a growing concern regarding communication interception and surveillance related to activism and political activities during election periods.

Chad, Ethiopia, Libya, Rwanda, and Somalia extensively deploy malware and spyware such as Pegasus, Circles, and FinFisher, under the guise of national security to suppress dissent and target opposition figures, journalists and civil society. High levels of surveillance result in limited citizen participation, a cowed electorate that practices self-censorship and is not wholly free to make choices about its leaders, and generally undermines freedom of expression and access to information.

126 *Rwanda: National Election Commission to censor candidates' online campaign messages https://www.article19.org/resources/rwanda-national-election-commission-to-censor-candidates-online-campaign-messages/*

127 *State of Internet Freedom in Rwanda 2019, https://cipesa.org/wp-content/files/State-of-Internet-Freedom-in-Rwanda-2019.pdf*

128 *African Union, "Resolution on Internet Shutdowns and Elections in Africa - ACHPR.Res.580 (LXXVIII)2024," https://achpr.au.int/en/adopted-resolutions/580-internet-shutdowns-elections-africa-achprres580-lxxvii*

129 *Nerissa Muthayan, "Internet Shutdowns Threaten Democracy in World's Biggest Voting Year," SAIIA 1 March, 2024 https://saiia.org.za/research/internet-shutdowns-threaten-democracy-in-worlds-biggest-voting-year/*

130 *CIPESA, "Technology amd Elections in Uganda: A Digital Rights View of the Uganda 2021 General Elections," http://cipesa.org/wp-content/files/briefs/Uganda-A-Digital-Rights-View-of-the-January-2021-General-Elections.pdf*

In Rwanda, the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) has been cited for using Pegasus spyware to conduct surveillance against journalists and opposition leaders,[131] journalists, and activists, as well as arrests, detentions, and harassment of journalists and bloggers for critical online posts.[132] For instance, during the 2017 elections, evidence surfaced of spyware being used to track the communications of opposition figures such as Diane Rwigara whose WhatsApp messages were allegedly intercepted.[133] These practices have been used to curtail free press and the independence of government bodies.[134] The impact of Rwanda's surveillance tactics has extended beyond its borders. In the 2021 Ugandan general elections, the Rwanda government reportedly targeted the mobile devices of prominent journalists with malware.[135] Rwanda has also taken steps to restrict anonymity by implementing SIM card registration requirements that compromise anonymous communication. In 2017, plans to vet candidates' social media posts were announced but later shelved. These measures reportedly intensify around election periods to restrict critical voices and control the online narrative, resulting in a significant limitation on free expression and access to diverse information during elections in Rwanda.

Algeria, Burkina Faso, Gabon, Guinea Bissau, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, Madagascar, Malawi, Senegal and Tunisia have moderate levels of surveillance. In applying surveillance controls, these governments make use of a combination of inadequate legal frameworks for privacy protection, broad surveillance powers, weak oversight over state surveillance, various surveillance technologies, and political instability due to ongoing conflicts. The surveillance creates a chilling effect on the information age in the countries often leading to self-censorship.

Countries like Botswana, Cape Verde, Gabon, Ghana, Mauritius, Namibia and South Africa have lower levels of abuse of surveillance. They are stable democracies with relatively open democratic environments and commendable strong data protection agencies. In 2016, there were reports that Ghanaian state security agencies used Pegasus technology to track opposition communications. During the 2020 elections, fears intensified over the use of spyware and interception tools by political actors and the state, with politicians and opposition figures expressing fears about phone tapping.[136] Ghana's law enforcement agencies have access to interception tools, but oversight and accountability regarding their use—especially during elections—remain weak. The Ghana Data Protection Act provides for the protection of privacy, but enforcement is not always robust, leading to fears of misuse of surveillance tools. Despite limited direct evidence on state surveillance during election periods, the lack of transparency about the government's surveillance capabilities perpetuates suspicions of abuse during elections.

131 *Freedom on the Net 2020 Rwanda https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2039112.html*

132 *Tightening the noose on public dissent: Rwanda's Internet policy https://democracyinafrica.org/tightening-the-noose-on-public-dissent-rwandas-internet-policy*

133 *Authoritarianism and Digital surveillance: Has the internet become a new battleground for monitoring public dissent in Rwanda? https://www.mediadefence.org/news/authoritarianism-and-digital-surveillance-rwanda/*

134 *Authoritarianism and Digital surveillance: Has the internet become a new battleground for monitoring public dissent in Rwanda? https://www.mediadefence.org/news/authoritarianism-and-digital-surveillance-rwanda/*

135 *Nile Post. (2021). Pegasus: Ugandan journalists targeted in spying scandal. https://nilepost.co.ug/news/121941/pegasus-ugandan-journalists-targeted-in-spying-scandal; Freedom House. (2018). Freedom in the World 2018 - Rwanda. https://www.refworld.org/reference/annualreport/freehou/2018/en/122222; Media Defence. (2021). Authoritarianism and Digital Surveillance in Rwanda. https://www.mediadefence.org/news/authoritarianism-and-digital-surveillance-rwanda/; European Country of Origin Information Network. (2020). Rwanda: Freedom of Expression. https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2039112.html*

136 *Israel's Spyware Diplomacy in Africa https://orientxxi.info/magazine/israel-s-spyware-diplomacy-in-africa,5859*

In South Africa state security agencies are empowered by the Regulation of Interception of Communication and Provision of 70 of 2002[137] (RICA) to undertake lawful communication interception and surveillance in the interest of national security. South Africa's communication interception and surveillance laws underwent a review[138] following a ruling by the Constitutional Court that certain sections of RICA were unconstitutional. This followed a judgement[139] in the AmaBhungane case where a journalist discovered that the state had been intercepting his private communications. The Constitutional Court found that current surveillance and bulk interception practices were unlawful[140] in that they failed to notify the individual post-surveillance, the state did not have adequate data protection mechanisms regarding the processing of personal data and that current practices did not distinguish between subjects who are lawyers or journalists, and have a higher requirement of privacy of communication.[141] The South African Parliament passed the General Intelligence Laws Amendment Bill B4-2023 (GILAB)[142] on 16 May 2024, just before the elections. The Bill currently awaits the President's signature for it to become law. The GILAB states that: "if whilst conducting bulk interception, it becomes necessary to engage in surveillance of a citizen of the Republic of South Africa whether within or outside of the Republic, the Centre must comply with the procedure envisaged in RICA." The revised requirements[143] include remedying the defects as per the Constitutional Court ruling, and more explicitly setting out the requirements for bulk interception by the state's interception facility, the National National Communications Centre (NCC).

In Algeria, the national law allows authorities to conduct surveillance and requires internet and telephone providers to cooperate with the Defence Ministry.[144] There have been reports by human rights activists that citizens widely believed the government conducted frequent electronic surveillance.[145] Arrests of some political opponents and activists also appear to be linked to surveillance. In August, opposition leader Fethi Ghares, and his wife Messaouda Cheballah were charged with various offences including insulting the president and disseminating misleading information and hate speech and are prohibited from publishing on social media or expressing their opinions through the media.[146] Similarly, Karrim Tabbou, an opposition leader and key figure of the Hirak pro-democracy movement, who in March 2020 was sentenced to a one-year imprisonment for a video he posted on his Facebook account critical of the government, was arrested in August and detained for 48 hours over unspecified charges.[147] South Sudan's Cybercrimes and Computer Misuse Provisional Order 2021 whose section 6 imposes an obligation on service providers to store information relating to communications, such as personal data and traffic data of subscribers for 180 days, has been criticised for having a chilling effect on digital rights.[148]

137 *RICA https://www.justice.gov.za/legislation/acts/2002-070.pdf*

138 *Bulk interception and surveillance and the might of the State https://www.werksmans.com/legal-updates-and-opinions/bulk-interception-and-surveillance-and-the-might-of-the-state/*

139 *Amabhungane Centre for Investigative Journalism NPC and Another v Minister of Justice and Correctional Services and Others; Minister of Police v Amabhungane Centre for Investigative Journalism NPC and Others CCT278/19 & CCT279/19 https://www.concourt.org.za/index.php/judgement/383-amabhungane-centre-for-investigative-journalism-npc-and-another-v-minister-of-justice-and-correctional-services-and-others-minister-of-police-v-amabhungane-centre-for-investigative-journalism-npc-and-others-cct278-19-cct279-19*

140 *South African Constitutional Court declares bulk surveillance powers unlawful https://privacyinternational.org/news-analysis/4416/south-african-constitutional-court-declares-bulk-surveillance-powers-unlawful*

141 *South Africa: Constitutional Court upholds declaration of invalidity of RICA https://bowmanslaw.com/insights/south-africa-constitutional-court-upholds-declaration-of-invalidity-of-rica/*

142 *General Intelligence Law Amendment Bill B4-2023 https://www.stateofthenation.gov.za/assets/scc-legislation-and-reports/gilab-final-draft---may-2023--final-version-including-memorandum_cover.pdf*

143 *Op-ed | Despite important gains, the new General Intelligence Laws Amendment Bill fails to safeguard against a second state capture https://intelwatch.org.za/2024/04/08/despite-important-gains-the-new-general-intelligence-laws-amendment-bill-fails-to-safeguard-against-a-second-state-capture/*

144 *Algeria, RSF, https://rsf.org/en/country/algeria*

145 *2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Algeria https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/algeria/*

146 *Political Opponent Fethi Ghares and His Wife Messaouda Cheballah Placed Under Judicial Supervision https://shoaa.org/political-opponent-fethi-ghares-and-his-wife-messaouda-cheballah-placed-under-judicial-supervision/*

147 *Algeria: Karim Tabbou released, under judicial supervision https://www.africanews.com/2023/05/26/algeria-karim-tabbou-released-under-judicial-supervision//*

148 *South Sudan's Cybercrimes and Computer Misuse Order 2021 Stifles Citizens' Rights https://cipesa.org/2021/12/south-sudans-cybercrimes-and-computer-misuse-order-2021-stifles-citizens-rights/#:~:text=With%20no%20specific%20data%20protection,the%20citizens%20is%20at%20stake*

The enactment of data protection legislation is well-intentioned but falls short of the expected mandates for lack of strong oversight mechanisms.[149] Collected data is often deployed in surveillance measures such as in Algeria, Cameroon, Namibia, Senegal, South Africa, and Tunisia to track the activities of political opponents and activists. Laws that enable lawful surveillance, such as the Cybersecurity Act in Ghana, the Code of Criminal Procedure in Senegal, Law Relating to the Interception of Communications and the Law Relating to the Prevention, Suppression, and Punishment of Cybercrimes[150] in Rwanda,[151] and the Communication-Related Information Act in South Africa[152] facilitate government actions to intercept communications.

The existing data protection practices, which are largely weak, have further created room for targeted political advertising on telephone, SMS and social media during election periods.

The existing data protection practices, which are largely weak, have further created room for targeted political advertising on telephone, SMS and social media during election periods. This has been evident in South Africa where political parties have invested[153] in digital advertising,[154] on social media,[155] particularly on Meta and Google with an increase in influencer marketing.[156] Similar cases and occurrences were witnessed in Ghana in 2020 where many citizens reported receiving unsolicited political messages on their mobile phones, often personalised with their names. On X, these messages promoted then-candidate President Nana Akufo-Addo and aimed to influence voter choices.[157] In Rwanda, there is political advertising via SMS, telephone, and social media.[158] In Cameroon, there has been use of online platforms for political advertising since 2011.[159] In Algeria, the electoral law in its article 292 prohibits commercial advertising during the election campaign period. In Senegal, "all processing of personal data, in whatever form, must respect the fundamental rights and freedoms of individuals."[160]

The measures discussed above affect the right to privacy since there are no clear guidelines on the dissemination of unsolicited information and messages. The legislative gaps could provide room for manipulation of voters about the choice of candidates or spreading disinformation to distort voter perceptions. Regulatory and ethical challenges, including potential abuse of data, further complicate the electoral process. These challenges underscore the need for improved regulations and ethical practices in targeted advertising.

149 CIPESA, "Privacy Imperilled: Analysis of Surveillance, Encryption And Data Localization Laws in Africa, 2022," https://cipesa.org/wp-content/files/briefs/Privacy-Imperilled-Analysis-of-Surveillance-Encryption-and-Data-Localisation-Laws-in-Africa-Report.pdf

150 Law on Prevention, Suppression and Punishment of Cybercrimes https://rwandalii.org/akn/rw/act/law/2018/60/eng@2018-09-25/source.pdf

151 Freedom on the Net 2019 Rwanda https://freedomhouse.org/country/rwanda/freedom-net/2019

152 South Africa goes after social media as it cracks down on looting and protests https://qz.com/africa/2033328/south-africa-to-monitor-social-media-as-protests-rock-the-country

153 South Africa's Elections: A Call for Vigilance Amidst the Rising Tide of Disinformation https://cipesa.org/2024/05/south-africas-elections-a-call-for-vigilance-amidst-the-rising-tide-of-disinformation/

154 Elections 2024 — are you being microtargeted by political digital ads? https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2024-05-02-elections-2024-are-you-being-microtargeted-by-political-digital-ads/

155 Political Parties' campaigns bank on social media https://www.iol.co.za/mercury/news/political-parties-campaigns-bank-on-social-media-cc4ef3cb-6a4a-4b24-a6f4-b0d36a570dc5

156 Influence-for-hire trend is distorting public discourse, poses threat to foundations of democracy https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2024-05-26-influence-for-hire-distorts-public-discourse-threatens-democracy/

157 The Herald Ghana: Rebecca Akufo-Addo and unsolicited phone call https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/The-Herald-Ghana-Rebecca-Akufo-Addo-and-unsolicited-phone-call-1125590 Freedom on the Net 2018 - Rwanda https://www.refworld.org/reference/annualreport/freehou/2018/en/122222

158 Presidential campaign in Cameroon: a campaign also on social networks https://shorturl.at/rE5XM

159 Delivery Of Portee Generale N°00627/Cdp Of 22 December 2022 On The Processing Of Personal Data Implemented For The Purposes Of Political Prospecting

160 https://www.cdp.sn/content/deliberation-de-portee-generale-n%C2%B000627cdp-du-22-decembre-2022-relative-aux-traitements-de-0

2.3 The Persistent Digital Divide is Deepening Political Inequalities and Exclusion

Whereas mobile and internet penetration has increased around the continent over the years, significant disparities remain across and within many countries and regions in Africa. Only 37 per cent of Africa's population uses the internet, compared to 67 per cent of the global average.[161] The high internet subscription costs and expensive digital devices continue to exclude large segments of the population in the region from the digital society and economy, especially in rural, marginalised and underserved areas. Moreover, the poor digital infrastructure, including frequent power outages and limited network coverage, disrupts communication, thus limiting the reach of online political discourse and reducing overall civic engagement. Across the continent, about 57 per cent of urban dwellers used the internet in 2023, compared with only 23 per cent of the population in rural areas. This is far below the global average of 81 per cent usage in urban areas and 50 per cent in rural areas.[162]

According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU),[163] the data-only mobile-broadband (2GB) basket prices as a percentage of gross national income per capita in Africa, while higher than the global average of 1.3 per cent, decreased from 4.9 per cent in 2022 to 4.5 per cent in 2023. Similarly, the fixed-broadband (5GB) basket prices as a percentage of gross national income per capita, while significantly higher than the global average of 2.9 per cent, decreased from 16.3 per cent in 2022 to 14.8 per cent in 2023.

2.3.1 High Costs Limit Internet Access and Political Engagement

For many people in Africa, especially those in rural areas, high data prices and unreliable access have made it difficult to meaningfully engage in online conversations, resulting in a widening digital divide, where opportunities for education, employment, and social connectivity remain limited to those who can afford it. In addition, the current cost of internet access stifles innovation, curtails access to critical information, and locks people out of global conversations, limiting their potential to participate in the digital world. In an election year, this disconnect is profound.

While several African countries have expanded their internet infrastructure, the digital divide has not shrunk as critical obstacles to digital inclusion such as the high cost of internet subscriptions and digital devices continue to exclude large segments of the population, especially in rural, marginalised and underserved areas, including persons with disabilities and women. In 2023, Zimbabwe had the most expensive mobile internet in Africa with one gigabyte (1GB) costing on average USD 43.75, the highest worldwide. South Sudan and The Central African Republic also recorded elevated prices for mobile data, emerging among the 10 countries with the highest prices for data globally.[164]

The data-only mobile-broadband (2GB) basket prices as a **% of gross national income per capita in Africa,** decreased from 4.9% in 2022 to **4.5% in 2023.**

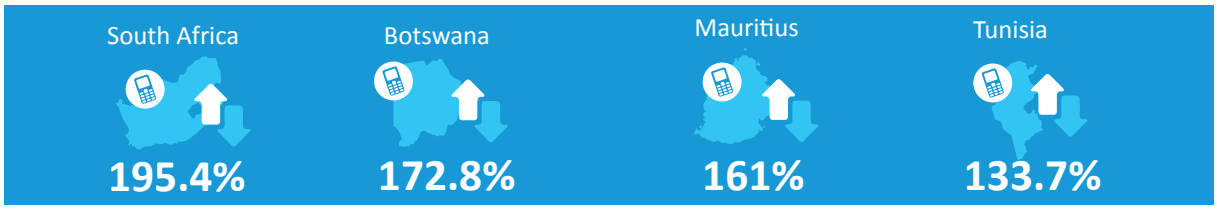
The fixed-broadband (5GB) basket prices as a **% of gross national income per capita**, decreased from 16.3% in 2022 to **14.8% in 2023.**

161 *Measuring Digital Development – Facts and Figures 2023 https://www.itu.int/hub/publication/d-ind-ict_mdd-2023-1/*
162 *Measuring digital development – ICT Development Index 2024 https://www.itu.int/hub/publication/d-ind-ict_mdd-2024-3/*
163 *Measuring digital development – ICT Development Index 2024 https://www.itu.int/hub/publication/d-ind-ict_mdd-2024-3/*
164 *Average price for 1GB of mobile data in Africa as of 2023, by country https://www.statista.com/statistics/1180939/average-price-for-mobile-data-in-africa/*

Although the cost of fixed and broadband services is increasingly becoming affordable, it is still high for the majority of the population in Sub-Saharan Africa.[165] Across the continent, the average broadband download speed increased from 2.68 megabits per second (Mbps) in 2019 to 8.18 Mbps in 2022, while the average price of one gigabyte (GB) decreased from 10.5 per cent of the monthly Gross National Income (GNI) per capita in 2019 to five per cent in 2021.[166] In Mozambique, for example, while internet services are relatively affordable, the high costs of gadgets, particularly smartphones, a low literacy rate of 48%, and low digital skills all represent significant impediments to internet access.

In Namibia, data bundles are expensive compared to other parts of the world.[167] While the country ranks above the African average in terms of internet penetration and cellular mobile connectivity, the cost of connectivity remains relatively high and in parts of the country, infrastructure remains lacking, meaning that roughly a third of Namibians still do not have access to an affordable and stable internet.

In Tunisia, internet prices have increased in recent years, partly driven by an 18% excise duty charge. For example, in 2022, subscribers spent An average of 9.30 Tunisian dinars (USD 3.20) per month and 21.6 Tunisian dinars (USD 6.80) per month on 3G and 4G data packages for smartphones and key subscriptions, respectively.[168]



Mobile penetration growth in select African Countries

While recent figures show exponential growth in mobile penetration in countries like South Africa (195.4%),[169] Botswana (172.8%),[170] Mauritius (161%),[171] and Tunisia (133.7%).[172] These figures mask the hard reality on the ground, especially the digital disparities between genders. For example, the 2024 ICT Development Index (IDI), which measures the ability for everyone to go online under optimal conditions, at an affordable cost, anywhere and anytime they need, shows that the average IDI score[174] in Africa was 50.3 out of 100, the lowest compared to other regions and below the global average (75 out of 100). The highest-rated countries among those included in this study were Libya (88.1), Mauritius (84.2), South Africa (83.6), Algeria (80.9), Botswana (78.7), Tunisia (77.2) and Gabon (74.7). Those that had the lowest ratings were Chad (21.3), Burkina Faso (30.1), and Mozambique (32). As of January 2024, the countries with the lowest mobile penetration rates were South Sudan (35.5%), Madagascar (44.9%), Somalia (54.8%), Mozambique (55%), Malawi (55.5%) and Ethiopia (60.4%).[175]

2.3.2 Poor Digital Infrastructure Widening the Digital Divide

According to a 2023 Brookings report, digital infrastructure is a critical requirement that connects people and businesses globally and ensures that citizens have better access to information.[176] The situation in many countries has been exacerbated by the poor supportive digital infrastructure, including the lack of access to electricity for an estimated 560 million people in Sub-Saharan Africa. The most affected countries are the Democratic Republic of Congo, Madagascar, Malawi, Niger, Nigeria, Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda, which together represent almost half of the global population that will be without access to electricity in 2030.[177] In Cameroon, while there has been some progress in enhancing digital infrastructure in urban centres such as Yaoundé and Douala, rural regions continue to face inadequate connectivity, creating a significant urban-rural divide. Government initiatives, such as the National Broadband Plan, aim to improve connectivity, though challenges persist in remote areas, affecting both digital access and literacy development.[178]

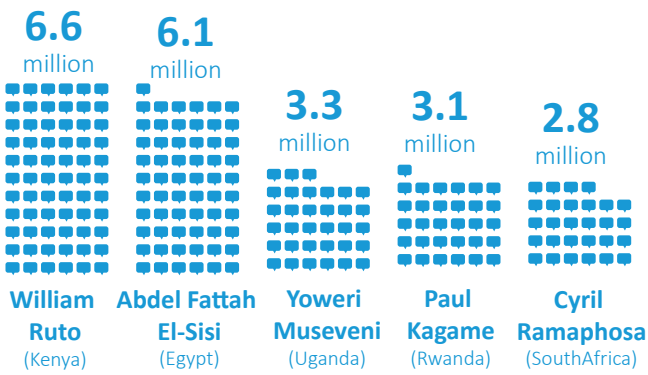
165 *Poverty overview 2024 https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/overview*
166 *From Connectivity to Services: Digital Transformation in Africa https://www.worldbank.org/en/results/2023/06/26/from-connectivity-to-services-digital-transformation-in-africa*
167 *Average price for 1GB of mobile data in Africa as of 2023, by country https://www.statista.com/statistics/1180939/average-price-for-mobile-data-in-africa/*
168 *Freedom on the Net 2023 https://freedomhouse.org/country/tunisia/freedom-net/2023*
169 *Digital 2024: South Africa https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-south-africa*
170 *Digital 2024: Botswana https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-botswana*
171 *Digital 2024: Mauritius https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-mauritius*
172 *Digital 2024: Tunisia https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-tunisia*
173 *Measures the ability for everyone to go online under optimal conditions, at an affordable cost, anywhere and anytime they need*
174 *Measuring digital development – ICT Development Index 2024 https://www.itu.int/hub/publication/d-ind-ict_mdd-2024-3/*
175 *Digital 2024: https://datareportal.com/reports/*
176 *Digitalization and Digital skills gaps in Africa https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Bhorat-et.-al-May-2023-Digitalization-and-digital-skills-in-Africa-2.pdf*
177 *Access to electricity https://www.iea.org/reports/sdg7-data-and-projections/access-to-electricity*
178 *Digital economy: a priority for Cameroon https://actucameroun.com/2021/01/22/economie-numerique-une-priorite-pour-le-cameroun/; 4G Internet: difficult access in some regions https://fr.journalducameroun.com/internet-4g-un-acces-difficile-dans-certaines-regions/*

In Chad, the country's digital infrastructure faces challenges including high electricity costs, expensive bandwidth, and heavy taxation, limiting internet access for most citizens, especially outside the capital, N'Djamena.[179] In Senegal, several cases of cyber attacks have undermined efforts to improve the country's digital infrastructure.[180] And like other countries, Namibia's digital infrastructure falls below global and regional averages, according to the national digital strategy for 2024 to 2028. This poor infrastructure, especially in the rural areas where most Namibians still reside, is contributing to a rural-urban digital divide in terms of access to digital communication technologies and services, from quality internet connectivity to financial services.[181]

Frequent power outages in countries such as South Africa[182] and limited network coverage in many others, result in disrupted communication, thus limiting the reach of online political discourse. In Rwanda, although significant progress has been registered in developing internet infrastructure, the majority of rural areas lack fibre backbone, with only 15% of the rural population within 10 km of fibre backbone.[183] As of 2019, only 37% of households had electricity access, limiting the use of digital devices.[184]

In Ghana, the government has continued to invest in fibre optics, mobile networks, and undersea cables, as well as in rural connectivity through the Ghana Rural Telephony and Digital Inclusion project. However, this progress is uneven. While cities enjoy strong network coverage, many rural regions continue to grapple with limited broadband access, unreliable network quality, and inconsistent electricity supply. The combination of expensive and unreliable internet access limits opportunities for education, e-commerce, and broader digital participation.[185]

The impact of this disparity has been significant during elections. Over the last decade, major actors in electoral processes, including Election Management Bodies (EMBs) and political parties and their candidates have adopted digital technologies, especially social media, to campaign, mobilise and share election-related information with their audiences. Several African leaders and politicians have embraced social media, especially X (Twitter), where some have built a mass following and regularly engage their followers. For example, Kenyan President William Ruto has 6.6 million followers, followed by the Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi with 6.1 million followers while Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni comes in third with 3.3 million. The others include Rwandan President Paul Kagame (3.1 million) and South African President Cyril Ramaphosa (2.8 million).[186] The digital divide hampers citizens' ability to access election and political information, thus undermining their ability to engage in online political discussions and perpetuating inequality in increasingly digital democratic processes. Moreover, it hinders EMBs from developing and deploying election technologies to manage elections and limits the reach of their online voter education initiatives.



African leaders X (Twitter) Follwers numbers

179 Chad: digital economy, impacts and obstacles https://tchadinfos.com/tchad-economie-numerique-impacts-et-obstacles

180 Security of Critical Infrastructure in Senegal : Challenges and Solutions in the context of Cybersecurity in Africa https://lemondedunumerique.com/2023/10/08/securite-des-infrastructures-critiques-au-senegal-defis-et-solutions-dans-le-contexte-de-la-cybersecurite-en-afrique/

181 Namibia lacking in digital infrastructure https://www.namibian.com.na/namibia-lacking-in-digital-infrastructure/#:~:text=Namibia%20falls%20below%20global%20and,to%202028%20draft%20policy%20shows.&text=Another%20challenge%2C%20according%20to%20the,are%20crucial%20for%20digital%20transformation

182 Amid looming protest, telcos insist they've reduced data costs https://www.itweb.co.za/article/amid-looming-protest-telcos-insist-theyve-reduced-data-costs/KBpdgvpmEgo7LEew

183 Rwanda Digital Economy Assessment Report https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/08165a76ca0f1ef688d2782dfaab3406-0400072022/related/Rwanda-DE4A-Summary-Report-final-for-feedback.pdf

184 Local Digital Content Promotion Strategy https://www.minict.gov.rw/fileadmin/user_upload/minict_user_upload/Documents/Strategies/Draft_-_Local_Digital_Content_Promotion_strategy_.pdf

185 Ongoing projects https://moc.gov.gh/projects/#1719867475818-42b9cc1c-5e0a; 1,000 rural telephony sites completed, https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/general-news/ghana-news-1-000-rural-telephony-sites-completed.html#:~:text=The%20Ministry%20of%20Communications%20and,connectivity%20to%20unconnected%20rural%20communities

186 African Presidents on X (formerly Twitter) and their followers https://x.com/Cassim_Abdi/status/1794851157862482152

2.3.3 Low Digital Literacy Undermines Meaningful Participation

Related to the above issues, the low levels of digital literacy, including how to navigate online gender-based violence, have greatly hindered the meaningful participation of women, the elderly and persons with disabilities in electoral processes in Africa.

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Among the study countries, digital literacy rates vary, with studies from The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) suggesting that in some African countries, less than 30 per cent of the population have digital proficiency. According to the 2022 Digital Skills Gap Index, which assesses people's ability to access, manage, understand, integrate, communicate, evaluate and create information safely and appropriately through digital technologies for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship, African countries scored between 1.8 and 5, which is below the global average of 6.[187] Further, Africa will encompass about 625 million people who require digital skills by 2030.[188] Globally, 79 per cent of people aged between 15 and 24 use the internet, compared to 65 per cent of the rest of the population. According to the GSMA,[189] the mobile internet gender gap in Sub-Saharan Africa in 2023 stood at 32 per cent, while the gender gap in mobile ownership was 13 per cent. The GSMA also notes that 60% of women who are not using mobile internet are in Sub-Saharan Africa and attributes this to those living in underserved areas, low digital literacy, unemployment, old age and disability.

In Ghana, and like in many other African countries, the majority of the population, particularly in rural areas, struggle to navigate online platforms or assess the credibility of information due to low digital literacy. In addition, many individuals lack basic computer skills, which limits their ability to engage meaningfully in the digital economy. This digital divide is also evident in schools, where urban students often have better access to technology compared to their rural counterparts.[190] This often results in vulnerability to misinformation, scams, and limited engagement in the digital economy. In Cameroon, urban schools often integrate digital skills more effectively, benefiting students, and younger generations tend to be more digitally literate compared to older generations and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.[191] In Chad, poor infrastructure, limited access to modern technology tools and knowledge, and low internet penetration hamper digital literacy. As a result, these challenges thwart the development of essential digital skills, such as navigating online platforms, using digital tools effectively, communicating through digital tools and channels, and critically evaluating online information which is critical during election periods.

A recent study conducted in Rwanda, South Africa and Uganda, among other countries, has shown that women are 25% less likely than men to know how to use digital technology for basic purposes like sending text messages.[192] In addition, women politicians and leaders have particularly become vulnerable to online violence and cyber misogyny against them as they try to engage their audiences online, with many of them opting out of online spaces and being denied an opportunity to compete equally with their male counterparts.[193] Over the last few years, women politicians in countries such as Kenya[194] and Uganda,[195] have reported being targets of online trolls because of their political positions. In South Africa for example, "misogynistic actors tend to attack women based on their physical attributes, intelligence and ability to lead. They also objectify and sexualise women of all ages in politics; in public spaces, this often occurs in the comment sections of content that do not address their personal lives."[196]

187 *Digital Skills to Accelerate Human Capital for Youth in Africa https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/3eb99d2c0a89888a7d1292898cce4651-0010012023/original/004-Digital-Skills-to-Accelerate-Human-Capital-for-Youth-in-Africa.pdf; The index rates countries on a scale of 0-10, where A higher score generally indicates a stronger digital skills ecosystem.*

188 *Ibid*

189 *The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2024 https://www.gsma.com/r/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-Report-2024.pdf?utm_source=website&utm_medium=button&utm_campaign=gender-gap-2024*

190 *Evaluating the Digital Divide of Ghana's Growing Data Landscape https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4685401; Unraveling the Digital Literacy Skills and Knowledge Gap in Ghana's Higher Education: Listening to Undergraduate Students' Voices https://www.ukfiet.org/2023/unraveling-the-digital-literacy-skills-and-knowledge-gap-in-ghanas-higher-education-listening-to-undergraduate-students-voices/; Unraveling the attributions of digital literacy skills and knowledge gap in Ghana's higher education: Undergraduate students voices in a phenomenological study https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10639-024-12483-8*

191 *Media and information education in Cameroon: the example of Eduk-Media https://shorturl.at/i5gsT; Digital: 2G networks cover 95% of the population, compared to 60% for 4G https://shorturl.at/pLf4b*

192 *Report finds that technology boom fuels online abuse of women and girls https://mg.co.za/crime/2024-06-27-report-finds-that-technology-boom-fuels-online-abuse-of-women-and-girls/*

193 *Women's Political Participation: Africa Barometer 2024 https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/2024-07/womens-political-participation-africa-barometer-2024.pdf*

194 *Online gender-based political violence in Kenya: The road towards a code of conduct for digital behaviour https://www.kofiannanfoundation.org/news/online-gender-based-political-violence-kenya/*

195 *'People find us easy targets': Women politicians face a torrent of online abuse but say they won't stop their work https://www.cnn.com/2023/05/25/africa/uganda-women-politicians-online-abuse-as-equals-intl-cmd/index.html*

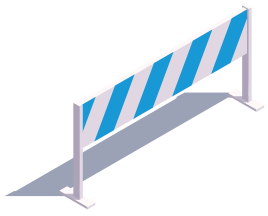
196 *Online Gendered Abuse and Disinformation During the 2024 South African Elections https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Online-Gendered-Abuse-and-Disinformation-During-the-2024-South-African-Elections.pdf*

2.3.4 Key Barriers to the Adoption and Deployment of Election Technologies

African countries face critical barriers to effectively implementing election technologies. The main challenges include technical failures and poor deployment, inadequate public education and awareness, cybersecurity and data integrity, and the risks of manipulation and interference.

The countries that have implemented election technology have encountered technical failures and device malfunctions. In May, South Africa encountered technical glitches during elections, leading to delays and public distrust. South Africa's technical failures, particularly during the results announcement, raised fear over possible manipulation.[197] Repeated technical glitches have raised doubts about the capacity of the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) to secure election data. In Ghana's 2020 election, failures in biometric devices resulted in delays that prevented some people from voting forcing the Electoral Commission (EC) to revert to a fully manual process, raising concerns about transparency.[198]

Given the context in various countries, challenges associated with deployment such as limited digital infrastructure and capacity gaps hinder the effective use of election technologies. Cameroon struggles with poor connectivity and a lack of technical support, especially in rural areas. During its May elections, South Africa experienced delays in voter management due to load shedding affecting the efficiency of election operations. In Chad, the outdated biometric systems, frequent power outages and inadequate training have previously disrupted electoral processes and raised the potential for errors. Limited transparency and public trust are concerns in countries like Algeria and Tunisia, where legal obligations for auditing election technologies are not guaranteed.



The lack of comprehensive voter education is a challenge in election technology use. For example, Ghana's introduction of biometric voter registration in 2012 lacked adequate public education, resulting in mistrust, data protection concerns, and delays in voting. This contributed to the disenfranchisement of voters around election technology as falling back on manual or paper-based systems risks introducing errors and opportunities for manipulation. Chad grapples with challenges of political influence, low internet access, weak cybersecurity measures, outdated systems and insufficient training which hinder oversight and transparency. Cameroon has experienced system malfunctions and user errors that threaten election accuracy, particularly since the 2018 presidential election.

Cybersecurity threats and data breaches are an increasing concern for digitised systems. In Cameroon, cyber attacks have caused system malfunctions resulting in delays in voting. In South Africa, leaked party lists ahead of the elections highlighted the risks posed by data breaches. This prompted the Information Regulator to issue an enforcement notice to the IEC, noting that the electoral body did not have adequate access control measures to protect the confidentiality of personal information in its possession.[199] In Tunisia, there have been cyber attacks targeting government websites. In Ghana, following cyberattacks on the Electoral Commission's website in 2016, robust cybersecurity measures were implemented during the 2020 elections.[200] Also, the increasing use of targeted political advertising through SMS, telephone, and social media platforms raises concern over the irregular access to voters' personal data and its use in manipulating voter opinions.

Other challenges include growing disinformation and misinformation during elections, the lack of transparency and accountability by election bodies over their choices and decisions around election technologies, and their preparedness to engage with stakeholders to confront new risks and threats from the adoption of technology. The failure to proactively address these challenges can significantly undermine public trust in the electoral process and reduce confidence in the use of technologies during elections.

197 *Late night voting chaos as thousands vote into Thursday after IEC voter devices glitch https://www.iol.co.za/news/politics/late-night-voting-chaos-as-thousands-vote-into-thursday-after-iec-voter-devices-glitch-d7684657-425e-47ea-b32e-abb0048c71c2*

198 *Biometric Election Technology, Voter Experience And Turnout In Ghana https://www.eisa.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/2019-journal-of-african-elections-v18n1-biometric-election-technology-voter-experience-turnout-ghana-eisa.pdf; EC to use manual system for transmission of election results https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/politics/ec-to-use-manual-system-for-transmission-of-election-results.html/;*

199 *Regulator issues enforcement notices to IEC, WhatsApp for breach of Popia https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2024-09-11-regulator-issued-enforcement-notices-to-iec-whatsapp-for-breach-of-popia/*

200 *Parliament of Ghana: https://www.parliament.gh/*

2.4 The Rise of AI-Enabled Disinformation Narratives

Across the study countries, the spread of misinformation and disinformation is a significant problem, particularly during elections and periods of political instability. The proliferation of misinformation and disinformation which can be AI-enabled, undermines political participation especially where there are gaps in digital literacy and media and information literacy. In particular, they distort public perception and undermine informed decision-making, adding a barrier to the public from accessing credible information given the limited skills of many in discerning and fact-checking misleading content.

2.4.1 Potential of AI-Generated Content

Artificial intelligence enables the swift production of sophisticated disinformation which many actors in the region may not be able to identify. Ahead of the 2024 election year, there was apprehension about how AI could harm the polls. For instance, there were fears that AI-generated disinformation could delegitimise electoral institutions and processes;[201] political actors could exploit generative AI to impersonate election officials and clone election results management processes;[202] and citizens' privacy rights would be undermined through access to voters' data. The lack of regulation of the use of AI - and generally low awareness about AI by state actors and ordinary citizens alike - also presented fears that AI could be deployed to undermine elections. There was also fear that a lot of election-related disinformation could go unnoticed and unchallenged during 2024, particularly in electoral contexts where digital literacy rates are low, and content regulation and moderation are ineffective. Moreover, some observers argued that the effects of AI on electoral democracy in Africa would depend on popular trust in AI and the capability of African states to regulate and enforce oversight on the use of AI by all political stakeholders, including ruling and opposition parties.[204]

Synthetic media, including deep fakes, were evident in many elections, taking some new forms from previous polls - such as allowing easy translation of information, swift generation of fake videos, manipulation of images, and arming of bots. Notably, the ease with which this content was created and spread and how convincing some of the content is emphasised the significant impact AI-generated media can have on society, especially in politically charged environments.[205]

> Synthetic media refers to content that is artificially created or manipulated using digital technologies, often leveraging AI.[206] Synthetic media includes deep fakes that are highly realistic but fake portrayals of famous people, making them appear to say or do things they never did. It also encompasses cheap fakes, which are low-quality forgeries, edits, manipulations or mislabeled pieces of media that are produced without using advanced AI, which aim to spread disinformation.

In various countries' elections, there were various examples of deep fakes and cheap fakes from all sides of the political divide. In Rwanda, a report by Clemson University's Media Forensics Hub uncovered a coordinated pro-Rwanda government online propaganda campaign using Large Language Models (LLMs) including ChatGPT and related Artificial Intelligence tools to mass-produce messages designed to simulate authentic support on X (formerly Twitter).[207] The research analysed 464 accounts that posted 650,000 messages, demonstrating the scale of AI-driven political manipulation. The campaign flooded X with attacks on Rwanda's critics and crowded out, by sheer numbers, messages from those critical of the Rwandan government. The campaign also used visual imagery, including of Victoire Ingabire, a Rwandan presidential candidate whose face was superimposed on that of a militia fighter shouldering a machine gun. Another image of anti-Rwanda activists was automatically generated by AI and included ChatGPT commands.

201 *Samson Itodo, Artificial Intelligence and the integrity of African elections, https://www.idea.int/news/artificial-intelligence-and-integrity-african-elections*
202 *Itodo as ibid*
203 *A tapestry of actors, attitudes, and impact: Countering disinformation in Africa, https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en/publications/publication/did/a-tapestry-of-actors-attitudes-and-impact-countering-disinformation-in-africa*
204 *Shamira Ahmed and Mehari Taddele Maru, AI can make African elections more efficient – but trust must be built and proper rules put in place, ttps://theconversation.com/ai-can-make-african-elections-more-efficient-but-trust-must-be-built-and-proper-rules-put-in-place-229841*
205 *Richard Ngamita, Synthetic Media in Rwanda's 2024 Elections, https://thraets.org/synthetic-media-in-rwandas-2024-elections/*
206 *The spread of synthetic media on X, https://misinforeview.hks.harvard.edu/article/the-spread-of-synthetic-media-on-x/*
207 *Pro-Kigali propagandists caught using Artificial Intelligence tools https://www.africa-confidential.com/article/id/15040/Pro-Kigali_propagandists_caught_using_Artificial_Intelligence_tools*

Ahead of South Africa's May 2024 election, AI-generated disinformation targeting prominent personalities such as politicians, leveraged racial and xenophobic undertones to spread hate and mislead voters. AI-generated content aimed to manipulate and influence the public was recorded, alongside false claims, some of which bordered on incitement.[208] The AU election observation mission documented heightened tensions ahead of the elections and cited increasing sophistication of AI tools and deep fakes which could be misused to spread disinformation, incite violence and consequently undermine democracy.[209]

Several examples of deep fakes were observed. A deep fake published on TikTok and X in March 2024, depicted former president Donald Trump endorsing the new uMkhonto weSizwe (MK) party, but the 30-second video was debunked as being an altered clip of a 2017 NBC interview with Trump. Another AI-generated video shared on Facebook and X depicted President Joe Biden warning of sanctions against South Africa if the ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC), won the election. Yet another manipulated video of a 2009 interview with US rapper Eminem was circulated widely on social media, purporting to show the rapper endorsing the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) party.

Deployment of deep fakes came alongside propaganda and doctored news stories, deployment of coordinated trolls, troops and bots of online influencers as part of smear campaigns and the weaponisation of disinformation campaigns for political purposes.[210] According to Africa Check, AI-manipulated videos shared during the South African election were few and did not need to appear real to reach wide audiences.[211] Most of the false information was real images and videos shared out of context, content related to fabricated events with poorly executed photo and video edits such as leaked memos and correspondence, fabricated news headlines and audiovisual content with outright misleading captions, descriptions and narratives.[212]

Synthetic media also encompasses generative media, such as AI-generated text, images, music, or video. In Rwanda's election, much of the synthetic media which researchers unearthed "was of very low quality, involving simple manipulations, such as face swaps and face enlargement using basic tools like Photoshop".[213] It is worth noting that disinformation in text form is prevalent on social media across Africa, with narratives often packaged in memes, infographics, screenshots, and posters.[214] Such visual content has great appeal and is often understandable by even individuals with low levels of literacy. However, AI now makes it easier and quicker to produce such content - and brings along other "benefits" for disinformation instigators and agents.

208 *AI and the 2024 South African Elections, https://www.eisa.org/ai-and-the-2024-south-african-elections/*

209 *Preliminary Statement: African Union Election Observation Mission to the 29 May 2024 General Elections - Johannesburg, 31 May 2024 https://www.peaceau.org/en/article/preliminary-statement-african-union-election-observation-mission-to-the-29-may-2024-general-elections-johannesburg-31-may-2024-preliminary-statement*

210 *Victor Kapiyo, South Africa's Elections: A Call for Vigilance Amidst the Rising Tide of Disinformation, https://cipesa.org/2024/05/south-africas-elections-a-call-for-vigilance-amidst-the-rising-tide-of-disinformation/ Expectations versus reality: The use of generative AI in South Africa's 2024 election https://africacheck.org/fact-checks/blog/expectations-versus-reality-use-generative-ai-south-africas-2024-election*

211 *Expectations versus reality: The use of generative AI in South Africa's 2024 election https://africacheck.org/fact-checks/blog/expectations-versus-reality-use-generative-ai-south-africas-2024-election*

212 *Ngmita ibid*

213 *CIPESA, "Disinformation Pathways and Effects: Case Studies from Five African Countries,2022"*

214 *https://cipesa.org/wp-content/files/briefs/Disinformation_Pathways_and_Effects_Case_Studies_from_Five_African_Countries_Report.pdf*

Another key ingredient of coordinated influence operations is the use of bots - which are software applications that run automated tasks on the internet, usually with the intent to imitate human activity such as messaging, but faster than human users and on a large scale. Whereas bots have been used for decades in elections, advances in AI have made them a more potent weapon for use in disinformation campaigns. Producing a variety of information and translating content have all become easier and swifter, making the bot accounts, therefore, harder to detect. Bots are popular in spreading disinformation at election times and AI has made it easier to deploy them - often in consort with troops of online "influencers for hire" that engage in coordinated trolling and spread of disinformation. Tactics such as the use of bots, hashtags, fake online identities, sock puppet accounts, astroturfing, hashjacking, troll farms, and follow trains have been documented across several countries.

In electoral contexts, coordinated influence operations rely on paid influencers to push their propaganda[215] leading to a phenomenon known as the "commodification of influence" or "influence as a service"[216] which is common in countries such as Kenya, Nigeria, and Uganda. Authoritarian regimes in Cameroon, Ethiopia, Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea and Uganda have in recent years been in the spotlight as leading instigators of disinformation.[217] Such operations also referred to by platforms as Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour (CIB), delegitimise mainstream media as credible sources and make inauthentic content look genuine by amplifying material aligned with their interest and trying to "demote" other discussions by flooding them with unrelated content.[218]

Authoritarian regimes in Cameroon, Ethiopia, Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea and Uganda have in recent years been in the spotlight as leading instigators of disinformation.

In Rwanda, pro-Kagame networks reproduced text word-for-word, in the 2024 elections, various associated accounts used the AI chatbot ChatGPT to create content with similar topics and targets, then posted it alongside various hashtags, in the process flooding legitimate discussions with unrelated or pro-government content.[219] Similarly, this research identified "a high level of AI-augmented coordination among pro-government social media accounts, suggesting an organised distributed disinformation effort to manipulate public perception and stifle dissent."[220] The networks were able to produce a higher volume of varied content in comparison to solely human-operated campaigns, which could make it harder to detect disinformation networks and inauthentic online discussions.

Notably, findings of this research show that while AI played a role in the propagation of disinformation, it was not to the level widely feared - although this comes with the caveat that the full extent of the AI-enabled disinformation and the effects it had on elections remains not fully known. Moreover, the ease of access and simplicity of AI tools for content production could in the future create a significant volume of manipulated media that can be used to undermine access to impartial and pluralistic information, create confusion among voters, and affect electoral integrity and legitimacy.

215 *The influencers rallying South Africa's youth to vote https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c51151lykzlo*

216 *Risks of digital influence: lessons for South Africa's 2024 election https://issafrica.org/iss-today/risks-of-digital-influence-lessons-for-south-africas-2024-election*

217 *CIPESA, "Disinformation Pathways and Effects: Case Studies from Five African Countries,2022" https://cipesa.org/wp-content/files/briefs/Disinformation_Pathways_and_Effects_Case_Studies_from_Five_African_Countries_Report.pdf*

218 *Ditto (Wack)*

219 *Morgan Wack, Darren Linvill and Patrick Warren, Old Despots, New Tricks - An AI-Empowered Pro-Kagame/RPF Coordinated Influence Network on X, https://open.clemson.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1004&context=mfh_reports*

220 *Morgan Wack, AI propaganda campaign in Rwanda has been pushing pro-Kagame messages – a dangerous new trend in Africa, https://theconversation.com/ai-propaganda-campaign-in-rwanda-has-been-pushing-pro-kagame-messages-a-dangerous-new-trend-in-africa-234296*

2.4.2 Failure to Stem Rampant Disinformation

Social media platforms such as Facebook and X are often accused of deploying minuscule resources and measures in content moderation in Africa, relative to investments in the US and Europe. The platforms often heavily rely on algorithms for content moderation and fail to hire sufficient numbers of African content moderators and take a long time to respond to reported harmful content. Accordingly, stakeholders from the continent have called for more timely interventions and investments by social media companies to address information integrity in Africa. The challenges in the continent include slow responses and poor enforcement of policies and community standards to address harmful content on platforms such as online gender-based violence.[221] Also, whereas platforms indicate that they set up election centres in African countries to address information integrity, this is not done for all countries.

The challenges in the continent include slow responses and poor enforcement of policies and community standards to address harmful content on platforms such as online gender-based violence.

Disinformation narratives are largely driven by political actors who through coordinated approaches manipulate narratives online, leveraging fault lines in society along social ethnic, political, and religious grounds, thus drowning out credible information and consequently reducing the plurality of information. Moreover, the failure of key institutions such as the media and election management bodies to debunk and swiftly clarify such disinformation narratives perpetuates the information asymmetry which has an impact on electoral outcomes and political stability.

Following the postponement of the Senegalese elections in February 2024, spontaneous protests occurred in various Senegalese cities. However, there were misleading photos and videos of the protests on social media. For example, a 16-second viral video circulated on the Facebook page RT France purporting to show widespread protests was found to be from the March 2023 protests in Dakar following the conviction of the opposition leader Ousmane Sonko.[222] Another video depicting the same protests was circulated on the Facebook page Dior Media Zone in February, yet it related to student protests in Dakar in June 2023.[223] Another video shared on the Facebook account of Anita Diop during the period falsely claimed that a regional express train (TER) with broken window glass was from Belgium yet the damage was caused during the protests.[224]

An image shared on PrestigeThies Facebook page depicting burning tyres in the middle of a road in Ziguinchor was found to be from an incident in Dakar in March 2021.[225] Also, images on the Facebook pages of Soldat Des Ancêtres (Soldier of Ancestors) and Le Miroir de l'Ader (The Mirror of the'Ader) depicting protesters waving Senegalese flags were also confirmed to be from March 2021 protests and not 2024 protests.[226] In March, polls results attributed to polling organisations showing different outcomes of the popularity of presidential candidates were widely disseminated on Facebook pages and X accounts, but these were repudiated by the Centre d'etudes politiques international,[227] Senegal Vote,[228] and Opinionway as false.[229] Another infographic of the number of people on the electoral roll from the region was published widely showing misleading data.[230] Also, a local newspaper wrongly claimed that Khalifa Sall, a presidential candidate, was still French, despite renouncing his French citizenship in October 2015.[231]

221 *Will 2024 be the big test of integrity for global tech platform companies https://researchictafrica.net/2024/04/05/will-2024-be-the-big-test-of-integrity-for-global-tech-platform-companies/*

222 *Attention, this video does not show demonstrations following the postponement of the presidential election of February 2024 in Senegal https://africacheck.org/fr/fact-checks/meta-programme-fact-checks/video-hors-contexte-manifestations-report-election-presidentielle-fevrier-2024-senegal*

223 *Senegal: this image dates from June 2023 and therefore does not show the demonstrations due to the postponement of the presidential election of February 2024 https://africacheck.org/fr/fact-checks/meta-programme-fact-checks/senegal-manifestations-report-election-presidentielle-fevrier-2024-photo-hors-contexte*

224 *This video was not filmed in Belgium but in Senegal during the demonstrations that followed the postponement of the presidential election in February 2024 https://africacheck.org/fr/fact-checks/meta-programme-fact-checks/video-hors-contexte-manifestations-report-election-presidentielle-fevrier-2024-senegal-ter-train-violences*

225 *Senegal: this image was not taken during the demonstrations against the postponement of the presidential election scheduled for February 2024 https://africacheck.org/fr/fact-checks/meta-programme-fact-checks/senegal-cette-image-na-pas-ete-prise-lors-des-manifestations*

226 *Senegal: this image that has no link with the political demonstrations of February 2024 https://africacheck.org/fr/fact-checks/meta-programme-fact-checks/photo-image-hors-contexte-manifestations-report-election-presidentielle-fevrier-2024-senegal; Presidential in Senegal: this photo does not show « of » events in Dakar between 3 and 4 February 2024, it dates from March 2021 https://africacheck.org/fr/fact-checks/meta-programme-fact-checks/senegal-politique-election-presidentielle-fevrier-2024-manifestations-violences-photo-trompeuse-mars-2021*

227 *Presidential of 2024 in Senegal: attention, this so-called poll broadcast on social networks is not authenticated' https://africacheck.org/fr/fact-checks/articles/senegal-election-presidentielle-mars-2024-bassirou-diomaye-faye-faux-sondage-desinformation-manipulation-20240322*

228 *Senegal: a false poll on the presidential election scheduled for March 24, 2024 https://africacheck.org/fr/fact-checks/meta-programme-fact-checks/presidentielle-mars-2024-senegal-faux-sondage-amadou-ba-diomaye-faye-pape-djibril-fall-desinformation-20240320*

229 *Presidential vote of 2024 in Senegal: a false poll gives Amadou Ba at the top of the voting intentions https://africacheck.org/fr/fact-checks/meta-programme-fact-checks/presidentielle-mars-2024-senegal-faux-sondage-amadou-ba-desinformation-20240320*

230 *2024 Presidential election in Senegal: verified allegations on the electoral map of the Matam region https://africacheck.org/fr/fact-checks/articles/presidentielle-senegal-2024-carte-electorale-electeurs-matam-ranerou-pikine-dakar-desinformation*

231 *Khalifa Sall, a 2024 presidential candidate in Senegal, has not been French since the end of October 2015 https://africacheck.org/fr/fact-checks/articles/senegal-election-presidentielle-2024-candidat-khalifa-sall-nationalite-francaise-retiree-en-octobre-2015*

Some statements made by politicians were found to be false. For example, Serigne Mboup, a candidate in the election, claimed that 80% of Senegal's economy was concentrated in Dakar, which was not true.[232] Another, Mahammed Boun Abdallah Dionne, a former prime minister, claimed that 600,000 people (17% of the population) made a living from fishing despite statistics showing that 103,000 persons were employed in the sector.[233] During the period, unsubstantiated rumours were spread by the Senegalese Democratic Party (PDS) and the then-ruling Benno Bok Yakkar (BBY), accusing two of the seven judges of the Constitutional Council of receiving bribes to eliminate Senegalese Democratic Party (PDS) candidate, Karim Wade, from the race.[234] These were used as a pretext by the lawmakers from both parties to introduce a resolution to investigate the court and by the then president Macky Sall on February 3 to unilaterally postpone the election scheduled for February 25 to December 15, 2024, hours before the start of the campaign season. The court on February 15 annulled the decree and the resolution following legal challenges by opposition candidates.[235]

After the election of the new president, there were claims on social media that the Senegalese government had announced that it was abandoning French and adopting Arabic as its official language.[236] However, this was debunked as no such announcement was made by the government. Also, a false list of appointments to the government was widely circulated online on April 1, well before the official list was made public on April 5.[237] Thereafter, there were false reports that the president had broken relations with France and established closer relations with Russia[238] and that subsidiaries of French companies did not pay tax in Senegal.[239]

In Ghana, after the demonstrations against power blackouts in Accra in June 2024, a post on the Facebook page Exterior, used images from economic protests in September 2023 demonstrations calling for the exit of the Ghanaian Central Bank Governor in October 2023, and demonstrations against power blackouts in May 2016.[240] Disinformation in Burkina Faso and Mali has targeted the ongoing conflicts in the countries, using images from unrelated events and attributing them to current events. In February 2024, an image posted on the Facebook page of Kora Media depicting Malian soldiers neutralising terrorists in N'Dola was found to be from a joint operation with French armed forces in July 2018.[241] A similar photo showing Malian soldiers fighting a terrorist group posted on social media in August 2023, was found to be from an incident in February 2013.[242]

Also, an image of a Malian warship posted in August 2024 on the Facebook account Karim Traore was found to be a manipulated image of a Russian marine warship.[243] During the same month, an image of a drone was shared on the Facebook page Hope Info, claiming it was from the Malian military despite being Turkish.[244] A similar image claiming Malian terrorists were trained in Ukraine and Poland to use suicide drones was found to be from the Ukrainian forces taken in March 2015.[245] Another image on a post claiming that Russian cargo planes delivering weapons at the Bamako airport was found to be of a US plane delivering military cargo in 2022 in Arizona.[246]

232 *Presidential of 2024 in Senegal: according to a candidate, the Dakar region concentrates 80% of the country's economy, but nothing proves it https://africacheck.org/fr/fact-checks/sur-le-vif/senegal-politique-election-presidentielle-economie-region-dakar-verification-declaration-serigne-mboup-spot-check*

233 *Senegalese presidential election of 2024: two verified claims by candidate Mahammed Boun Abdallah Dionne on fishing https://africacheck.org/fr/fact-checks/articles/election-presidentielle-senegal-2024-mahammed-boun-abdallah-dionne-affirmations-p%C3%AAche-economie-*

234 *The Demise of Senegalese Democracy https://www.journalofdemocracy.com/online-exclusive/the-demise-of-senegalese-democracy/*

235 *Senegal election: Court blocks President Macky Sall's bid to delay poll https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-68310131*

236 *Senegal has not officially adopted Arabic as its official language https://africacheck.org/fr/fact-checks/meta-programme-fact-checks/faux-le-senegal-na-pas-adopte-officiellement-larabe-comme-langue-officielle*

237 *Senegal: attention to these publications that claim to show the list of the first government of the' Bassirou Diomaye Faye https://africacheck.org/fr/fact-checks/meta-programme-fact-checks/senegal-fausse-liste-gouvernement-diomaye-sonko*

238 *BLOG - Who is Jackson Hinkle, the American influencer who links the new Senegalese president to Russia? https://africacheck.org/fr/fact-checks/blog/jackson-hinkle-bassirou-diomaye-faye-russie-france-desinformation-*

239 *Do French companies based in Senegal pay their taxes in France rather than from the Senegalese public treasury? https://africacheck.org/fr/fact-checks/articles/france-senegal-economie-entreprises-impots-bassirou-diomaye-faye*

240 *Ghana: these images do not show the demonstrations that took place in the country against power cuts, on June 8, 2024 https://africacheck.org/fr/fact-checks/meta-programme-fact-checks/ghana-manifestations-8-juin-2024-imgaes-hors-contexte*

241 *Mali: this photo does NOT'a have any connection with the operation of the Malian'arme that led to neutralize « terrorists » in N'dola, on February 14, 2024 https://africacheck.org/fr/fact-checks/meta-programme-fact-checks/mali-armee-attaque-ndola-kolodougou-koro-terroriste-barkhane-hors-contexte*

242 *Mali: this photo was not taken during or after the deadly ambush against soldiers in August 2023 towards Menakahttps://africacheck.org/fr/fact-checks/meta-programme-fact-checks/mali-niger-terrorisme-armee-militaires-securite-attaque-menaka*

243 *False, this image does not show an anti-submarine ship belonging to the Malian armed forces https://africacheck.org/fr/fact-checks/meta-programme-fact-checks/mali-image-manipulee-navire-anti-sous-marin-Fama*

244 *Mali: false, this image does not show a drone launched by the Malian armed forces in the Tinzawaten region https://africacheck.org/fr/fact-checks/meta-programme-fact-checks/mali-faux-cette-image-ne-montre-pas-un-drone-lance-par-les*

245 *This image does not show « Malian terrorists » trained in the use of drones in Ukraine and Poland https://africacheck.org/fr/fact-checks/meta-programme-fact-checks/cette-image-ne-montre-pas-des-terroristes-maliens-formes-en-ukraine-pologne*

246 *This photo montage does not show Russian cargo ships that landed at Bamako airport in Mali in August 2024 https://africacheck.org/fr/fact-checks/meta-programme-fact-checks/ce-montage-photo-ne-montre-pas-des-cargos-russes-au-mali*

In Burkina Faso, following a bomb attack by security forces on terrorist groups in April, a report of the incident on the Facebook page Bobo Dioulasso Afferage included an image from a Turkish military plane taken in March 2023.[247] Similarly, reports of a military strike against a terrorist group in Tankoualou in February on the Facebook pages Voie d'Afrique and Le Cœur de L'Information respectively included an image of a French helicopter taken in Mali in May 2017[248] while the latter included an image of armed soldiers which was from a military simulation exercise in April 2018.[249] Again, another attack in Dori in February was reported on the Facebook page Kora Media using an image taken from an unrelated incident in March 2015.[250]

Following the South African elections, there were claims in an edited video shared on social media that South African president Cyril Ramaphosa snubbed Nigeria's President Bola Tinubu at the inauguration ceremony, despite original footage showing the contrary.[251] In July, viral screenshots of an edited Wikipedia page of Home Affairs Minister Leon Schreiber claiming that he was born in Zimbabwe, despite being a South African.[252]

During the 2019 presidential and parliamentary elections period, the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) noted an escalation of various types of election-related mis-/disinformation in the Namibian electoral information landscape especially in social media spaces.[253] The study found that most political misinformation and disinformation either emanated from groups or profiles on Facebook or WhatsApp, and there was a great deal of cross-posting of such content amongst groups on these two platforms. In Chad and Cameroon, hate speech, misinformation, and disinformation exacerbate political and ethnic tensions and distort electoral processes.[254] The key challenges include weak legal frameworks, selective enforcement of laws, resource constraints, state-controlled media dominance, and internet blackouts during elections.[255]

A recent study by Democracy Reporting International found a surge in hate speech campaigns in Tunisia against Sub-Saharan immigrants, with 4.35% of the posts monitored being categorised as containing hate speech, offensive language, or both.[256] The posts and narratives suggested that immigrants intended to claim Tunisia as their own, blaming immigrants for violence and crime, or stripping immigrants of their humanity. The ongoing conflict between Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has resulted in a surge of hate speech and disinformation on social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp.[257]

Hate speech, misinformation and disinformation hijack the political discourse and undermine elections by limiting access to credible, factual and pluralistic information about candidates, parties, and issues. Hostile rhetoric, including that of "foreign agents," is also used to stigmatize and discredit CSOs engaging in election-related activities.[258] Consequently, they erode trust in democratic institutions, limit citizens' ability to make informed decisions, and affect their right to hold individual opinions without interference.

Hate speech, misinformation and disinformation hijack the political discourse and undermine elections by limiting access to credible, factual and pluralistic information about candidates, parties, and issues.

247 *Burkina Faso : the'image of the missile appearing in this publication has no connection with the strikes of the'arme against « terrorists in Kankanmogre in April 2024 https://africacheck.org/fr/fact-checks/meta-programme-fact-checks/burkina-faso-attaque-armee-kankanmogre-terrorisme-ins%C3%A9curite-image-hors-contexte*

248 *Burkina Faso : this image does not show a helicopter of the'arme targeting terrorists https://africacheck.org/fr/fact-checks/meta-programme-fact-checks/burkina-faso-armee-helicoptere-frappes-tirs-terroristes-tankoualou-20240321*

249 *Burkina Faso : cette image ne montre pas des terroristes neutralisés à la frontière avec le Niger en février 2024 https://africacheck.org/fr/fact-checks/meta-programme-fact-checks/burkina-faso-terroristes-tankoualou-armee-attaque-frontiere-niger-20240225*

250 *Burkina Faso : this image has no connection with the attack « terrorist » perpetrated against a church in Dori, in February 2024 https://africacheck.org/fr/fact-checks/meta-programme-fact-checks/burkina-faso-attaque-terrorisme-dori-eglise-catholique-photo-hors-contexte-20240225*

251 *Posts falsely claim South African president snubbed Nigerian leader at inauguration https://factcheck.afp.com/doc.afp.com.34XZ7FM*

252 *South African minister's Wikipedia entry falsely claimed he is Zimbabwean https://factcheck.afp.com/doc.afp.com.363E8ZQ*

253 *Namibia vulnerable to election misinformation https://action-namibia.org/namibia-vulnerable-to-election-misinformation/; Fake news and Namibian elections https://ippr.org.na/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/fake-news-web.pdf; Tracking Disinformation: Social media and Namibia's 2019 elections https://ippr.org.na/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Tracking-Disinformation-web.pdf*

254 *Hate messages are worrying in Chad https://www.dw.com/fr/tchad-haine-risques-guerre-civile/a-63541872*

255 *Report on Disinformation https://adisicameroun.org/2022/12/19/rapport-sur-la-desinformation/ New Report: Disinformation Pathways and Effects on Democracy and Human Rights in Africa https://cipesa.org/2022/06/new-report-disinformation-pathways-and-effects-on-democracy-and-human-rights-in-africa/; "Desinfox Chad" mobilizes information professionals on fact-checking tools and techniques https://shorturl.at/sgUut*

256 *Online Public Discourse in the MENA Region, DRI, https://democracyreporting.s3.eu-central-1.amazonaws.com/images/65afda4aeba49.pdf*

257 *Journalists in DR Congo and Rwanda Grapple with Disinformation and Hate Speech. Here's What They Should Do https://cipesa.org/2022/09/journalists-in-dr-congo-and-rwanda-grapple-with-disinformation-and-hate-speech-heres-what-they-should-do/*

258 *Elections and Civic Space: Lessons from Africa https://www.icnl.org/post/report/elections-and-civic-space-lessons-from-africa*

Foreign influence operations such as the Wagner Group's information campaigns in Mali, Burkina Faso and Sudan also remain of concern.[259] In South Africa, analysts from the Centre for Information Resilience (CIR) found several X accounts that were praising Russia's invasion of Ukraine and also seeking to rally support for the MK party ahead of the election.[260] One of the accounts with 170,000 followers was found to consistently post endorsements of the party and its leader, former president Jacob Zuma, generating almost a million hits per publication.[261] The accounts which claim to be based in Russia and Burkina Faso were also used to retweet deep fakes of former US President Donald Trump endorsing Zuma.[262] South Africa's Media Monitoring Africa's (MMA) interim report[263] following the May elections revealed an increase in incidents of misinformation and disinformation related to voting procedures, parties and independent candidates, and the IEC's electoral management process as well as IEC officials.

In May 2023, Meta reported taking down covert influence operations from six countries, including Burkina Faso and Togo that were violating its policies on coordinated inauthentic behaviour.[264] The company removed 134 Facebook accounts, 142 Facebook Pages and 20 Instagram accounts which ran a network of 28 websites posing as independent news media outlets and grassroots groups in Burkina Faso.[265] The accounts had spent USD 500 in advertising on the platforms and posted news in French about current events in Burkina Faso, including positive commentary on Ibrahim Traoré, the military forces and the Patriotic Movement for Safeguarding and Restoration (MPSR). The company found the operation linked to a political marketing consultancy in Togo known as the Groupe Panafricain pour le Commerce et l'Investissement (GPCI).

Without robust tech accountability, African governments are likely to take advantage and enact regressive laws that purport to combat harmful online content but are in reality weaponised to curtail the digital civic space. Past experience shows that where governments in the region have unilateral power to moderate content, they mostly stifle the use of digital technologies and spaces for legitimate organising and expressing critical opinion. It is indeed telling that platforms such as Facebook, Google, Twitter, and YouTube, reject almost all requests from African governments for disclosure of users' identities - as the grounds for seeking this information are often below the threshold set by the platforms. Experiences in African countries dealing unilaterally with social media platforms have not gone well and range from temporary social media blockages in several countries, Facebook's closure in Uganda for nearly four years, Twitter's blockage in Nigeria for six months after it deleted a tweet by the country's president and Nigeria's fining Meta USD 220 million over "multiple and repeated" violations of the country's data protection and consumer rights laws on Facebook and WhatsApp.

259 *Russia's Growing Footprint in Africa's Sahel Region https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/02/russias-growing-footprint-in-africas-sahel-region?lang=en*
260 *Pro-Russia X Accounts Tout Zuma's South African Party, CIR Says https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2024-04-02-pro-russia-x-accounts-tout-zumas-mk-party-cir-says/*
261 *Russia has been accused of supporting a South African political party https://afrinz.ru/en/2024/04/russia-has-been-accused-of-supporting-a-south-african-political-party/*
262 *Russia has been accused of supporting a South African political party https://afrinz.ru/en/2024/04/russia-has-been-accused-of-supporting-a-south-african-political-party/*
263 *Impact Of Mis-and Disinformation in the 2024 National and Provincial Elections in South Africa https://www.mediamonitoringafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/240531-MMA-Real411-interim-elections-report-AS_edits-clean.pdf*
264 *Meta's Adversarial Threat Report, First Quarter 2023 https://about.fb.com/news/2023/05/metas-adversarial-threat-report-first-quarter-2023/*
265 *Quarterly Adversarial Threat Report https://about.fb.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Meta-Quarterly-Adversarial-Threat-Report-Q1-2023.pdf*

2.4.3 Restricted Access to Data Held by Social Media Platforms

Access to data held by social media platforms remains a key obstacle to promoting information and election integrity yet qualitative and quantitative data, analysed within the specific local contexts, is crucial to understanding the nuances of disinformation, as well as its manifestation. A study found that Africa's access to data from tech platforms such as for research and monitoring electoral integrity, is below that in Europe and North America.[267] Increased access to platform data for African researchers, civil society organisations, and Election Management Bodies (EMBs) would enable a deeper understanding of the harms of online content on the continent, and inform mitigation strategies.

While some companies provide public access to political advertising repositories, datasets are narrow.[268] On August 14, Meta ended access to decade-old CrowdTangle, which was a popular public insights tool to explore public content on social media and track misinformation.[269] It replaced it with the Meta Content Library and API,[270] which stakeholders claim is less transparent, restricted to academics and non-profit researchers, accessing it is cumbersome and slow and it has fewer features than CrowdTangle.[271] Stakeholders across the globe have called upon the company to extend CrowdTangle functionality but the company declined the request.[272] The closure of CrowdTangle has been cited as posing a threat to democracy.[273] Also, whereas WhatsApp remains popular in Africa, access to data about the platform remains limited.[274]

The closure of CrowdTangle has been cited as posing a threat to democracy.

In March 2023, X removed free access to the Twitter Application Programming Interface (API) which had enabled researchers to access data to study social media and misinformation. The company introduced a paywall to access the API with charges ranging between USD 42,000 and USD 210,000 per month, which is out of reach for most researchers from Africa.[275] Even after hiking the fees, access to the data remains a challenge even for those willing to pay as the company terminated the employment of its staff who were facilitating access.[276] According to a recent study, at least 100 studies on the platform have been cancelled, suspended or changed due to limitations of access to data on the platform.[277]

The YouTube Researcher programme is available to researchers at eligible academic institutions in 54 countries, including Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, Morocco, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa and Tunisia who can access its global data API.[278] Access to TikTok's API remains limited for African researchers, as access is provided to accredited academic institutions based in the US, European Economic Area (EEA), UK or Switzerland and non-profits or independent research institutions based in the EU.[279] The company has faced backlash from governments across the world, including bans in Senegal and Somalia, and calls for its ban in Egypt and Kenya, over the spread of harmful content on the platform.[280]

African researchers have pointed out that limited access to social media data makes studying information integrity issues almost impossible.[281] In December 2023, stakeholders from 11 African countries called upon social media platforms to provide equal treatment to Africans in data access as provided to those from other regions.[282] They also called upon the European Union to facilitate access to platforms' APIs and search engines' data under Article 40 of the EU Digital Service Act (DSA) which provides for access to data.[283]

267 *Towards an African alliance for meaningful access to Intermediaries' data holdings https://researchictafrica.net/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Towards_African_Alliance_Data_Access-December2023.pdf*
268 *Statement: Call for data access for researchers studying the South African elections https://researchictafrica.net/2024/05/20/statement-call-for-data-access-for-researchers-studying-the-south-african-elections/*
269 *CrowdTangle https://transparency.meta.com/en-gb/researchtools/other-datasets/crowdtangle/*
270 *Meta Content Library and API https://transparency.meta.com/en-gb/researchtools/meta-content-library/*
271 *Meta Is Getting Rid of CrowdTangle—and Its Replacement Isn't as Transparent or Accessible https://www.cjr.org/tow_center/meta-is-getting-rid-of-crowdtangle.php*
272 *Open Letter To Meta https://foundation.mozilla.org/en/campaigns/open-letter-to-meta-support-crowdtangle-through-2024-and-maintain-crowdtangle-approach/*
273 *Crowd Control: Losing Meta's transparency tool poses a threat to democracy https://www.globalwitness.org/en/blog/crowd-control-losing-metas-transparency-tool-poses-a-threat-to-democracy/*
274 *What if there were an African alliance for meaningful access to Intermediaries' data holdings? https://researchictafrica.net/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Africa-Meaningful-Access-to-Data-AfIGF.pdf*
275 *Twitter's $42,000-per-Month API Prices Out Nearly Everyone https://www.wired.com/story/twitter-data-api-prices-out-nearly-everyone/*
276 *Academic Research Access in 2023 https://devcommunity.x.com/t/academic-research-access-in-2023/202551/13*
277 *Exclusive: Elon Musk's X restructuring curtails disinformation research, spurs legal fears https://www.reuters.com/technology/elon-musks-x-restructuring-curtails-disinformation-research-spurs-legal-fears-2023-11-06/*
278 *How it works https://research.youtube/how-it-works/*
279 *Research Tools https://developers.tiktok.com/products/research-api/*
280 *The politics of Africa's TikTok bans https://restofworld.org/2023/africa-tiktok-banned-politics/*
281 *South African scientists battle to track election rumours https://www.researchprofessionalnews.com/rr-news-africa-south-2024-6-south-african-scientists-battle-to-track-election-rumours/*
282 *Statement: Content platforms urged to share data with African elections researchers https://researchictafrica.net/2023/12/18/statement-content-platforms-urged-to-share-data-with-african-elections-researchersstatement/*
283 *The final text of the Digital Services Act (DSA) https://www.eu-digital-services-act.com/Digital_Services_Act_Article_40.html*

2.5 Progress and Innovation in the Use of Technology during Elections

2.5.1 The Slow but Growing Adoption of Election Technologies

Some African countries have fully embraced technology in elections, including the adoption of innovations like biometric systems, but many others are still reluctant or slow to digitalise electoral processes. Regulatory frameworks on technology elections are also variable as they reflect the disparities in countries' level of propensity to technology. Countries that have effectively integrated technology into their electoral processes can witness improved transparency, efficiency, and security, while key challenges hindering widespread adoption include infrastructure limitations, political instability, technical issues, cybersecurity concerns, and accessibility barriers, particularly in rural areas.

Countries like Ghana, Namibia, and South Africa have made significant strides in incorporating technology into their election systems. These nations use biometric voter registration, digital identification, electronic tallying, and secure result transmission.

Ghana's main election technologies include the Biometric Voter Registration (BVR), which was introduced in 2012 and captures unique voter biometric details for identification, the Biometric Verification Devices (BVD) are used to confirm voters' identities on election day, and the Electronic Results Transmission System (ERTS) which operates alongside the manual tallying system was introduced in 2016 to facilitate rapid and transparent result transmission while acting as a check and balance mechanism. The Electoral Commission (EC) website has various sets of information for voters, including frequently asked questions, infographics and videos.[284] During the 2020 election, the EC used a mobile app "Ghana EC Voter's Information Hub" for Android users[285] and voters can check their registration details using USSD code *711*51#[286] or through an online portal (*http://registers.ec.gov.gh/*). The EC employs technology for voter education through SMS[287] services and is active on social media pages with 217,800 followers on X (Twitter), 335,000 followers on Facebook and 2,100 followers on YouTube.[288] Ahead of the 2024 election, the EC has introduced advanced encryption for sensitive voter data and a "liveness detection" system to prevent fraud, and it regularly conducts cyber security audits of its systems. Ghana's Voter Registration Drive leveraged AI to target prospective voters with messages that encourage voter registration.[289]

Ghana Electoral Commission (EC) Social Media presence

284 *Electoral Commission Ghana https://ec.gov.gh/blog/page/4/*

285 *Electoral Commission of Ghana https://x.com/ecghanaofficial/status/1335577690003353600*

286 *Advise to voters https://ec.gov.gh/election-2024-advice-to-voters/*

287 *How to check your voter ID status in Electoral Commission's voters' register using short code https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/politics/how-to-check-your-voter-id-status-in-electoral-commissions-voters-register.html; Electoral Commission on X https://ec.gov.gh/voting/; https://x.com/ecghanaofficial?lang=en; CDD-Ghana proposes transmission of election results onto EC website in real time https://www.ghanabusinessnews.com/2024/08/12/cdd-ghana-proposes-transmission-of-election-results-onto-ec-website-in-real-time/*

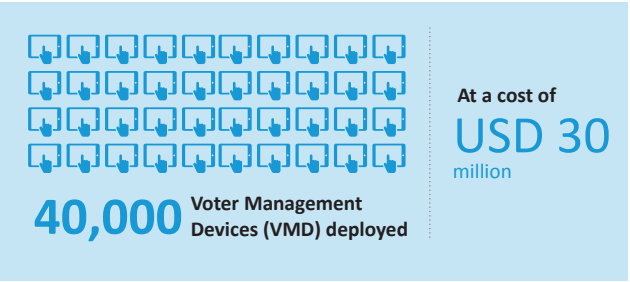
288 *Electoral Commission of Ghana https://x.com/ECGhanaOfficial; Electoral Commission of Ghana https://www.facebook.com/ECGOVGH; Electoral Commission of Ghana https://www.youtube.com/@ElectoralCommissionOfGhana/videos*

289 *Empowering Fair And Inclusive Elections: How AI Is Shaping The Future Of Democracy In Africa https://www.nepad.org/blog/empowering-fair-and-inclusive-elections-how-ai-shaping-future-of-democracy-africa#_ftn15*

Namibia uses a "tailor-made" biometric voter registration system called the Integrated Mobile Voters Register System (IMVRS).[290] The system has enabled the Electoral Commission of Namibia (ECN) to maintain a credible national voters' register, manage electoral processes including voter registration, identification and verification of voters on polling day, collation and transmission of election results, nomination of candidates and political parties and registration of political parties. Voter cards contain biometric data accessible via a QR code and are required for identification at polling stations. The updated system for use in the 2024 elections is a tablet-based system, with features such as instant voter statistical reports per registration station, including demographics of People with Disabilities; and enhanced security features, remote management and application management. The country was the first in Africa to use electronic voting machines (EVMs) in its 2014 and 2019 elections. However, their use was discontinued in 2019[291] after the Supreme Court declared them unconstitutional in 2020 due to the lack of a paper trail.[292]

Rwanda's National Electoral Commission (NEC) used the Rwanda Election Management Information System for the first time in the 2024 election.[293] The biometric system facilitates the verification of registration details of voters and candidates from the national ID database, updating identification details and the transfer of voters to different polling stations.[294] It also allows voters to register and update their details remotely, essential for diaspora voters, which development resulted in the tripling of diaspora voters to 62,000 in 2024.[295] It also has an online system for accrediting local and foreign observers and managing election volunteers, including tracking their locations on election day. Prior to the election, the Commission modernised its election management ICT infrastructure, established offsite disaster recovery for the security of the election database, adopted data entry through a fibre optic network at the district level, automated the synchronisation of data with the National Identification Agency (NIDA) citizen registry, and electronic election results management through creating profiles and database of candidates.[296] In its 2022-2027 Plan, NEC prioritises the integration of ICT in election management, including developing platforms for electronic voting and e-learning and a policy on electoral technology use. It also aims to strengthen voter education through innovative approaches on mainstream and social media.[297]

The Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) of South Africa has adopted a robust technological approach to election management, which has strengthened the integrity and efficiency of its electoral processes. Following concerns[298] about double voting during the 2019 national and provincial elections, the IEC upgraded its portable bar-code scanners[299] and deployed 40,000 Voter Management Devices (VMD) procured in 2021 at a cost of USD 30 million. These devices serve as the primary devices to electronically capture voter information and provide real-time administrative tools for the management of the electronic voters' roll. The VMDs are built on a mobile framework which enables them to capture transactions in real-time and upload them to a central database.[300] They also provide information on voting stations using Geographic Information Systems (GIS),[301] tracking of voter turnout, staff attendance,[302] movement of ballot papers and can support the calculation of results.[303]



290 Overview of the Integrated Mobile Voter Registration System (IMVRS) https://www.ecn.na/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Overview-of-the-Integrated-Mobile-Voter-Registration-System.pdf
291 Electoral Commission shuns EVM usage citing time challenge and costs https://economist.com.na/87394/extra/electoral-commission-shuns-evm-usage-citing-time-challenge-and-costs/; Electronic voting machines and paper trails https://www.lac.org.na/news/probono/ProBono_31-PAPER_TRAILS.pdf
292 Court scraps EVMs without trail https://www.namibiansun.com/news/court-scraps-evms-without-trail2020-02-06; Democracy Report https://ippr.org.na/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/TECH_Elections2019_WEB.pdf
293 Rwanda embraces technology in elections https://www.newtimes.co.rw/article/17830/news/elections/rwanda-embraces-technology-in-elections
294 The Electoral Framework and Election Administration https://www.thecommonwealth-ilibrary.org/index.php/comsec/catalog/download/288/285/2284?inline=1
295 Rwanda embraces technology in elections https://www.newtimes.co.rw/article/17830/news/elections/rwanda-embraces-technology-in-elections
296 NEC 2022-2027 Strategic Plan https://nec.gov.rw/fileadmin/user_upload/2022-_2027_NEC_STRATEGIC_PLAN_-Final.pdf
297 NEC 2022-2027 Strategic Plan https://nec.gov.rw/fileadmin/user_upload/2022-_2027_NEC_STRATEGIC_PLAN_-Final.pdf
298 'Double voting' raised as political parties question IEC: https://www.sowetanlive.co.za/news/south-africa/2019-05-09-double-voting-raised-as-political-parties-question-iec/#google_vignette
299 Electoral commission of South Africa: https://www.elections.org.za/content/Documents/Voter-education/2021-Municipal-Elections/IEC-Voter-Management-Device-(VMD)-Factsheet/
300 2022 IEC Annual Report https://www.elections.org.za/content/Documents/Annual-reports,-reports-and-strategic-documents/Annual-reports---IEC/2022-IEC-Annual-Report/
301 2023 IEC Annual Report https://www.elections.org.za/content/Documents/Annual-reports,-reports-and-strategic-documents/Annual-reports---IEC/2023-IEC-Annual-Report-(Single-Pages)/
302 2022 IEC Annual Report https://www.elections.org.za/content/Documents/Annual-reports,-reports-and-strategic-documents/Annual-reports---IEC/2022-IEC-Annual-Report/
303 IEC puts tech to work to counter double voting https://www.itweb.co.za/article/iec-puts-tech-to-work-to-counter-double-voting/Gb3BwMWaXelv2k6V

In addition, the IEC co-developed the Real411 digital disinformation public reporting tool, an online e-learning portal for election officials, an e-recruitment platform, an online candidate nomination system, an online accreditation system for election observers, and an online results reporting portal.[304] Its results portal also allows accredited stakeholders, including the media, to download election data and enables them to generate their own visualisations. The IEC also utilises various communication channels for voter education and outreach, including its website, social media platforms, and SMS/call-back features.[305] It also runs the "IEC South Africa app" which enables voters to view, and manage their registration information, check their special vote application status, and view lists of political parties, candidates, election results and local IEC offices and voting stations.[306] The IEC also conducts regular audits, monitors its ICT infrastructure, and employs measures like encryption, Distributed Denial-of-Service (DDoS) mitigation, and intrusion detection systems. The IEC undertook three independent ICT audits in 2021, leading to enhanced security upgrades, including firewalls and virtual server management.

Other countries continue to use manual systems or hybrid systems with minimal technology use. Algeria's National Independent Electoral Authority (ANIE) has developed online services for candidates and voters, including a dedicated platform for registration and candidacy processes. Despite varying levels of adoption, the trend toward digital tools in election processes is clear, though obstacles such as security concerns and resource limitations persist. Although online services have improved aspects of voter registration and polling information in countries like Cameroon and Algeria, challenges remain in fully utilising technology due to limited transparency and delayed publication of election reports.

2.5.2 Evolving Legal Frameworks to Facilitate the Use of Election Technology

African countries have made varied improvements to their legal frameworks to govern the use of technology in elections, reflecting different levels of regulation, implementation, and oversight.

African countries have made varied improvements to their legal frameworks to govern the use of technology in elections

Currently, at least 36 out of 55 African countries have privacy and data protection laws.[307] Out of the countries under review, only the Comoros, Gabon, Guinea Bissau, Libya, Mali, Mauritania, Madagascar, Somalia, and South Sudan do not have data protection laws. Mauritius and Tunisia were among the first African countries to develop data protection laws two decades ago and to appoint data protection authorities, and are keen to update their laws to reflect recent developments.[308] Ethiopia is the most recent adopter of a data protection law, with its Personal Data Protection Proclamation No. 1321/2024 coming into effect in August 2024.[309] On May 14, South Africa's Information Regulator published a guidance note on how political parties and candidates could use the personal information of voters ahead of the elections.[310] The note outlines the conditions for the lawful processing of personal data, the manner of obtaining consent and the obligations of political parties and candidates when seeking political donations, conducting direct marketing, sending unsolicited communication, and mitigating misinformation and disinformation.

Namibia's Electoral Act 5 of 2014 includes provisions for using electronic voting machines and biometric voter registration. In Rwanda, Law No. 31/2005 empowers the National Electoral Commission (NEC) to utilise appropriate technologies for organising elections.[311] The framework allows the NEC to maintain an electronic voter register linked to the National ID database, enabling biometric voter registration. The updated electoral laws[312] permit the electronic transmission of provisional results, enhancing the transparency and speed of the election results process. The ICT Policy developed by NEC outlines guidelines for creating comprehensive election management systems,[313] while Law No. 24/2016 has provisions on cybersecurity and data protection.

304 *Sixth Parliament Committee Legacy Report; Committee Programme https://pmg.org.za/committee-meeting/39174/*
305 *2023 IEC ANnual Presentation https://pmg.org.za/files/231010IEC_Annual_Report_Presentation_to_PCHA_2023_CEO_20231010.pdf#page=15*
306 *IEC South Africa https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=za.org.elections.iecapp&hl=en&pli=1*
307 *Data Protection Africa https://dataprotection.africa/*
308 *Tunisia Data Protection Fact Sheet https://dataprotection.africa/tunisia/*
309 *Ethiopia: Personal data protection law published in official gazette https://www.dataguidance.com/news/ethiopia-personal-data-protection-law-published*
310 *Guidance Note on the Processing of Personal Information of Voters and the Countering of Misinformation and Disinformation during Elections https://inforegulator.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/FINAL-GUIDANCE-NOTE-ON-THE-PROCESSING-OF-PERSONAL-INFORMATION-OF-VOTERS-AND-THE-COUNTERING-OF-MISINFORMATION-AND-DISINFORMATION-DURING-ELECTIONS.pdf*
311 *The National Electoral Commission https://nec.gov.rw/fileadmin/user_upload/2022-_2027_NEC_STRATEGIC_PLAN_-Final.pdf*
312 *International Foundation for Electoral Systems: https://www.ifes.org/our-expertise/election-integrity/electoral-legal-regulatory-frameworks*
313 *Rwanda Presidential Elections https://www.thecommonwealth-ilibrary.org/index.php/comsec/catalog/download/288/285/2280?inline=1*

Ghana's Representation of the People Act, 1992, and Public Elections (Registration of Voters) Regulations, 2016, authorise biometric technology for voter registration to capture unique identifiers to reduce fraud. The Biometric Voter Management System introduced in the 2020 elections resulted in faster verification. The Electronic Communications Act, of 2008, allows for the electronic transmission of results. The Cybersecurity Act, of 2020, ensures protection against threats to election technology, while the Data Protection Act, of 2012, mandates safeguarding voters' personal information, thus enhancing voter confidence in the electoral process.

Tunisia's Electoral Code outlines procedures such as voter registration, appointment of electoral officials, and vote counting, but does not detail technology use. A significant amendment in September 2022, through Decree Law 2022-55, introduced criminal penalties for candidates undermining others' dignity through any speech. The law encourages adopting modern technologies for voter registration and mandates the protection of personal data in compliance with existing legislation. Despite its significant use of technology, South Africa's Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) operates under a broad mandate without specific guidelines for technological deployment.

Cameroon's Electoral Code requires every registered voter to receive a biometric electoral card with personal details. This law facilitates the identification and management of voters through technology.[314] Cameroon has implemented cybersecurity laws that address threats and protect critical infrastructure, but enforcement of these laws remains limited. Algeria's electoral law delineates the responsibilities of the National Independent Electoral Authority (ANIE) in overseeing elections, promoting voter turnout, and protecting personal data. The law also imposes restrictions on candidates' publicity and outlines penalties for undermining electoral processes.

In Senegal, the Personal Data Protection Act regulates political canvassing, emphasising that personal data collected for one purpose cannot be reused for another. The Penal Code also includes provisions for using technology during elections and punishes those who incite criminal acts via technical means. Its Law N° 2016-29 enhances the security of electoral systems by tasking the Directorate of File Automation (Direction de l'Automatisation du Fichier – DAF) with securing voters' personal data, particularly for national identification and voter cards. Chad's Fight Against Cybercrime Act of 2015, while not specific to elections, emphasises the security of digital transactions and personal data protection, supporting secure electoral processes by preventing fraud and ensuring data integrity. Its Cybersecurity Acts of 2015 and 2022 safeguard electoral systems and critical information infrastructure.

Only about **six African countries** have developed strategies or policies on AI and none has passed legislation to govern it.

Only about six African countries have developed strategies or policies on AI and none has passed legislation to govern it. While many countries are eager to develop such policies or strategies, there are few context-relevant examples to learn from. Accordingly, it is crucial to inform the development of an ethical regulatory framework for AI in Africa that upholds human rights and prevents the misuse of AI technologies to compromise fundamental rights and freedoms, including expression, access to information, and privacy. It is also essential to engender policy conversations on key impediments to ethical AI regulation and innovation in Africa and to offer guidance to actors such as policymakers, regulators, the private sector and innovators on how to promote human rights in AI development and deployment.

314 *Elections Cameroon (ELECAM): https://www.elecam.cm/sites/default/files/Code_Electoral.pdf*

In March 2024, the African Commission adopted a Resolution on Internet Shutdowns and Elections in Africa, and noted the importance of the internet and social media platforms for the dissemination of information to voters, election observers, election management bodies and other stakeholders, particularly during elections.[315] It called on State Parties to comply with international human rights standards, ensure open and secure internet access, and refrain from disrupting telecommunications services during elections. Additionally, the Commission required telecommunications providers to inform users of potential disruptions and address them promptly.

Moreover, global initiatives at the United Nations such as the recent adoption of the Pact for the Future and the Global Digital Compact[316] and the UNESCO Guidelines for the Governance of Digital Platforms[317] present valuable opportunities to address the digital divide and promote platform accountability.

2.5.3 Emergence of Collaborative Initiatives to Address Disinformation and Promote Democracy

A key development in recent elections has been the collaborative development of measures to combat disinformation online. Some notable measures implemented in South Africa to combat hate speech, misinformation and disinformation ahead of the elections include the Real411 election reporting portal,[318] various fact-checking initiatives by the media[319] and independent fact-checkers such as Africa Check[320] and AFP.[321] In addition, the IEC signed a framework of cooperation with the major social media platforms on electoral integrity.[322] Social media influencers in the country also acted as political mobilisers on various social networks such as TikTok[323] to target young people, provide them with information and encourage them to get out and vote.[324] TikTok and Instagram have an estimated 11.83 million and 5.65 million subscribers respectively in the country as of 2023. Grassroots movements and online communities are also leveraging social media to amplify marginalised voices, advocate for social change, and hold political leaders accountable.[325]

Grassroots movements and online communities are also leveraging social media to amplify marginalised voices, advocate for social change, and hold political leaders accountable.

Unlike Europe, or the US, or Australia where regulators have tested powers to impose a fine on the platforms, such leverage is slowly developing across African countries, suggesting that regional and continental mechanisms might provide a good entry point to African countries' engagement with social media companies. Examples that could provide learning blocks include the Protocole d'engagement volontaire avec les grandes plateformes en ligne (Voluntary commitment protocol with major online platforms)[326] spearheaded by the Réseau francophone des régulateurs des médias (the French-speaking network of media regulators), which was signed in April 2024, with Meta, TikTok and X and covered various commitments such as transparency for users, moderation of content, multi-sector regulation, and paves the way for strengthened dialogue between regulators and platform companies.[327]

315 *Resolution on Internet Shutdowns and Elections in Africa - ACHPR.Res.580 (LXXVIII)2024 https://achpr.au.int/index.php/en/adopted-resolutions/580-internet-shutdowns-elections-africa-achprres580-lxxvii*
316 *Pact for the Future https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sotf-the-pact-for-the-future.pdf*
317 *Guidelines for the Governance of Digital Platforms https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000387339*
318 *Welcome to Real411: Keeping It Real in Digital Media https://www.real411.org/*
319 *FACT CHECK | False victories and offline VMDs' impact on voting. More election claims to be aware of https://www.news24.com/news24/opinions/analysis/fact-check-false-victories-and-offline-vmds-impact-on-voting-more-election-claims-to-be-aware-of-20240529*
320 *Reports, Africa Check, https://africacheck.org/fact-checks/reports*
321 *Footage shows boxes containing ballots accounted for by SA electoral body https://factcheck.afp.com/doc.afp.com.34W942T*
322 *Electoral Commission partners with social media giants to combat disinformation in 2024 National and Provincial Elections https://www.elections.org.za/content/About-Us/News/Electoral-Commission-partners-with-social-media-giants-to-combat-disinformation-in-2024-National-and-Provincial-Elections/*
323 *Influencers are using TikTok to encourage voting in South Africa https://restofworld.org/2024/south-africa-tiktok-elections/*
324 *The influencers rallying South Africa's youth to vote https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c51151lykzlo*
325 *How AI, social media, and internet shape Elections 2024 https://www.hindustantimes.com/ht-insight/future-tech/how-ai-social-media-and-internet-shape-elections-2024-101715321970067.html*
326 *Signature of'a Voluntary commitment protocol with major online platforms https://www.refram.org/Evenements/Conference-d-Abidjan-2024/Signature-d-un-Protocole-d-engagement-volontaire-avec-les-grandes-plateformes-en-ligne*
327 *AI, media and disinformation in Morocco, https://www.africanobservatory.ai/social/ai-media-disinformation-morocco*

Also, the adoption of the Principles and Guidelines for the Use of Digital and Social Media in African Elections, launched in February 2024 by the Association of African Election Authorities (AAEA), will be instrumental in providing a framework and principles for social media use ahead of the election.[328] These Guidelines could help to stem the growing use of social media "paid influencers" to sow disinformation and undermine electoral integrity.[329] The Guidelines could prompt platforms to do more to moderate harmful content, paving the way for regulating political advertising, hopefully, deter such antics as Cambridge Analytica played in elections in Kenya and Nigeria,[330] and discourage internet disruptions that create an information vacuum and undermine electoral credibility.[331] Those Guidelines place several responsibilities on social media companies (see box below), and it is evident that the companies have a long way to go in fulfilling these obligations.

Obligations of Social Media Companies During Elections

Social media operators should provide information that is clear, understandable and accessible during the entire electoral cycle regarding the following:

- Political advertising, including information relating to the political advertisements themselves, the origin and the funding of such advertisements and a repository of such advertisements
- Measures to protect users from any malicious or harmful use of the applicable technologies to target users with, for instance, misinformation, disinformation, mal-information and hate speech, as well as the measures to be established to respond accordingly
- Specific measures to protect marginalised persons, including candidates who are female or who belong to ethnic, religious, sexual or gender minorities
- The criteria to be applied when implementing such measures, including in respect to the removal or down-ranking of content, application of labels, demonetisation or other restrictions on content
- The applicable algorithms, including access to the back-end architecture, to allow regulatory bodies to conduct audits
- Access to curated relevant data, including by means of application programme interfaces, to enable the independent monitoring of content and networks that may harm election integrity
- Social media operators should institute mechanisms and employ sufficient numbers of human content moderators who are knowledgeable about local contexts, languages, slang and sensitivities to enable them to conduct timely identification, and transparent curation and moderation. *Extract from the Principles and Guidelines for the Use of Digital and Social Media in Elections in Africa, 2024*

328 *Principles and Guidelines for the Use of Digital and Social Media in Elections in Africa https://www.elections.org.za/pw/Elections-And-Results/Principles-and-Guidelines-for-the-use-of-the-Digital-and-Social-Media-in-Elections-in-Africa*

329 *Disinformation Pathways and Effects: Case Studies from Five African Countries https://cipesa.org/wp-content/files/briefs/report/Disinformation-Pathways-and-Effects-Case-Studies-from-Five-African-Countries-Report-2.pdf*

330 *"We'd stage the whole thing": Cambridge Analytica was filmed boasting of its role in Kenya's polls https://qz.com/africa/1233084/channel-4-news-films-cambridge-analytica-execs-saying-they-staged-kenya-uhuru-kenyatta-elections/*

331 *2024 the Year of Democracy: African Electoral Authorities Release Guidelines for Social Media Use, https://cipesa.org/2024/03/2024-the-year-of-democracy-african-electoral-authorities-release-guidelines-for-social-media-use/*

As a result of these initiatives, as witnessed from the Kenyan and South African elections, social media platforms such as Google, Meta, and TikTok are starting to put in place various measures to promote election integrity, including working with fact-checkers, conducting content moderation and labelling, supporting media information literacy, raising transparency on political advertising and directing users to reliable and trustworthy information. In August, TikTok announced the formation of its first Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) Safety Advisory Council, coming almost four years after the first was established in 2020.[332] The Council comprises eight independent experts from across the region to work closely with the platform to develop policies and processes to tackle safety concerns on TikTok.

Another key development has been the emergence of fact-checking initiatives. In Ghana, a collaboration of Dubawa and Africa Check ahead of the election, and capacity-building initiatives by civil society organisations such as the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA), have been critical in protecting digital rights.[333] Commitments and actions by government agencies have been progressive. In February 2023, Ghana's National Peace Council (NPC) launched Guidelines on Hate Speech and other forms of Indecent Expressions, aimed at curbing tribal, ethnic, and religion-based discrimination.[334] Also, Ghana's Cyber Security Authority pledged to work with tech providers to mitigate the distribution of misinformation and disinformation on social media platforms.[335]

Another key development has been the emergence of fact-checking initiatives.

In Senegal, the civic tech website SenegalVote.org provided awareness of the electoral process, and credible information about the candidates and the results.[336] In November 2023, media and civil society actors led by Africa Check, The House of Reporters, Metal Media, Ouestaf News, EnQuest, the Higher School of Journalism, Professions of the Internet and Communication (E-jicom), Divan Citizen and Senegal Vote joined forces and set up an alliance of fact-checkers (#SaytuSEN2024) to stem the spread of disinformation ahead of the 2024 elections.[337] Also, officials from TikTok held a meeting in October 2023 with the Personal Data Protection Commission (CDP) to address challenges and concerns faced by users of the platform in the country.[338]

Ahead of Rwanda's July 2024 elections, a coalition of local media organisations and Africa Check partnered to fact-check information to ensure voters got accurate information to make informed decisions.[339] In Chad, Meta held a workshop in April 2023 aimed to improve awareness about its community standards on disinformation management.[340] Moreover, fact-checking partnerships, such as Facebook's and Twitter's collaboration with Africa Check, AFP and PesaCheck during Kenya's 2022 elections, and the formation of election information centres in countries like Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya and Nigeria in previous elections, have offered useful opportunities to provide authoritative information about elections.[341] Unfortunately, such positive initiatives by platforms, while progressive, are selectively and not replicated across the continent. They therefore do not go far in addressing the deep-seated content moderation challenges the region faces.

332 *Introducing TikTok's Sub-Saharan African Safety Advisory Council https://newsroom.tiktok.com/en-africa/ssa-safety-advisory-council*

333 *Dubawa Fact Check https://ghana.dubawa.org/category/fact-check/; Election 2024: MFWA train journalists on hate speech and political propaganda https://www.modernghana.com/news/1314504/election-2024-mfwa-train-journalists-on-hate-spee.html Social Media and Electoral Disagreements in Ghana's 2020 Election https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-031-42771-8_6*

334 *Peace Council launches guidelines on hate speech https://www.mint.gov.gh/peace-council-launches-guidelines-on-hate-speech/*

335 *Election 2024: Cyber Security Authority vows to fight fake news ahead of December 7 https://citinewsroom.com/2024/05/election-2024-cyber-security-authority-vows-to-fight-fake-news-ahead-of-december-7/*

336 *Senagal Vote https://senegalvote.org/#*

337 *PRESS RELEASE - Senegal : launch of #SaytuSEN2024, fact-checking alliance around the 2024 presidential election https://africacheck.org/fr/fact-checks/blog/communique-de-presse-saytuSEN2024-election-presidentielle-senegal-alliance-verification-factchecking-medias-contre-desinformation*

338 *Protection Of Personal Data: The TikTok platform explains its policy to Senegalese digital actors https://www.cdp.sn/content/protection-des-donnees-personnelles-la-plateforme-tiktok-explique-sa-politique-aux-acteurs; Senegal Elections: CIPESA and AfricTivistes Engage Key Stakeholders on Content Moderation https://cipesa.org/2024/02/senegal-elections-cipesa-and-africtivistes-engage-key-stakeholders-on-content-moderation/*

339 *Rwandan media stakeholders join hands to promote credible information ahead of July 2024 election https://africacheck.org/fact-checks/blog/rwandan-media-stakeholders-join-hands-promote-credible-information-ahead-july-2024*

340 *Chad: Moderation of content to combat disinformation at the centre of'a workshop https://www.toumaiwebmedias.com/tchad-la-moderation-des-contenus-pour-lutter-contre-la-desinformation-au-centre-dun-atelier/*

341 *How Meta's Preparing for Kenya's 2022 General Election. (2022, July). Meta. https://about.fb.com/news/2022/07/how-metas-preparing-for-kenyas-2022-general-election/; The 2022 Kenyan General Election is Happening on Twitter. (2022). Twitter Blog. https://blog.x.com/en_us/topics/company/2022/the-2022-kenyan-general-election-is-happening-on-twitter; Removing More Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior From Russia. (2019, October)*

Another useful development has been the rise of hashtag resistance movements on social media. Viral hashtags such as #FreeStellaNyanzi and #FreeBobiWine were used to advocate for the release of the two activists after their arrest by the Ugandan government.[342] Following the postponement of the Senegalese election in February, the hashtag #FreeSenegal was used to mobilise support and pushback agaisnt the decision.[343] In Kenya, the #RejectFinanceBill2024 hashtag was used in June to mobilise resistance and coordinate protests against the then proposed 2024 Finance Bill2024, that among other sought to hike taxes internet data bundles and mobile money transfers.[344] Hashtags have also been used during the election period to mobilise voters such as by South Africa's MK Party and EFF through hashtags #votemk2024 and #registertovoteeff respectively.[345]

Lastly, Meta indicates that it has around 40,000 people working on safety and security and has invested USD 20 billion in its teams and technology since 2016.[346] Some of the initiatives by the company include collaborating with industry partners on common technical standards for identifying AI content, and labelling images on its applications with standard indicators in languages supported by their applications.[347] The company is training AI tools such as its Large Language Models (LLMs) to enforce its policies and community standards. From September 2024, the company has started rolling out a new feature to add "AI info" labels on AI-generated content based on industry-standard indicators.[348] The company is also working with independent third-party fact-checking organisations to identify viral information, review content, label content and take action against repeat offenders.[349] The challenge is that these labelling features or warnings have not been activated or rolled out on the continent to enable users to distinguish between AI-generated content and real content.

342 *African online civic space threatened https://www.news.uct.ac.za/article/-2021-03-25-african-online-civic-space-threatened*
343 *#FreeSenegal https://x.com/hashtag/FreeSenegal?src=hashtag_click*
344 *#RejectFinanceBill2024 https://x.com/search?q=%23rejectfinancebill2024&src=typeahead_click*
345 *List of the Most Trending Hashtags in South Africa https://www.meltwater.com/en/blog/trending-hashtags-south-africa*
346 *Meta policies and safeguards for elections around the world https://about.meta.com/actions/preparing-for-elections-with-meta/?utm_source=about.facebook.com&utm_medium=redirect&_ga=2.82540246.1159535773.1726336159-1175882759.1726336159*
347 *Labeling AI-Generated Images on Facebook, Instagram and Threads https://about.fb.com/news/2024/02/labeling-ai-generated-images-on-facebook-instagram-and-threads/*
348 *Our Approach to Labeling AI-Generated Content and Manipulated Media https://about.fb.com/news/2024/04/metas-approach-to-labeling-ai-generated-content-and-manipulated-media/*
349 *About fact-checking on Facebook, Instagram and Threads https://www.facebook.com/business/help/259358671757194O?id=673052479947730*

3.0 Impact on the Future of Elections in Africa

This section provides a summary and trend analysis including lessons learnt from the findings. It presents the emerging patterns (positive and negative) concerning technology, digital rights and elections and their net effect on the future of elections in Africa. Among the trends explored are the erosion of public confidence in elections, growing restrictions on the digital space, how disinformation is driving political polarisation, the expanding digital divide and its exclusion of large sections of society from democratic participation, and the transformative potential of AI and technology in future elections.

3.1 Erosion of the Integrity, Credibility and Public Confidence in Elections

The manipulation of electoral processes, lack of accountability, and absence of robust regulatory frameworks create an environment where technology and democratic processes can be exploited to undermine democracy rather than strengthen it. The levels of democracy and political participation vary across the study countries. However, what is notable has been the growth of military and authoritarian regimes and hereditary presidencies in several countries, with coups and unconstitutional changes in government recorded in several countries. Such countries have low rankings across major indices due to their weak governance structures and lack of independent oversight bodies such as judiciaries, parliaments and electoral management bodies. Also, there have been breaches of constitutional norms such as the elimination of term limits and the introduction of rule by decree.

The 2024 election year followed a wave of coups d'état, leaders prolonging their stay in power, a clampdown on civil liberties and growing digital repression in numerous countries. The unconstitutional changes in government and overall democratic regression[350] were also characterised by growing executive supremacy, weak oversight institutions, and increasing barriers to political participation. Since 2020, there have been military coups in seven African countries - Gabon, Niger, Burkina Faso, Sudan, Guinea, Mali, and Chad. Some coups were framed as intended to protect democracy from long-serving autocrats but the putschists have hardly advanced the cause for democracy. Today, one in five African presidents has been in power for longer than 13 years, with six of those leaders having been in power for over than 30 years.

1 in 5 African presidents has been in power for longer than **13 years**

with **six** of those leaders having been in power for over than **30** years

This is in the world's youngest continent where about 60% of the population is under 25. As authoritarianism and military rule expand, governments have adopted myriad tactics to undermine democracy. Censorship, network disruptions, state surveillance, disinformation campaigns, and enactment of regressive laws are among the key weapons deployed against digital democracy.

These governments have regularly clamped down on dissent and criticism by key stakeholders, such as opposition political parties, civil society organisations, and the media. More recently, the emergence of foreign interference in elections and the prominence of such interests in governance have become a growing concern in some countries. These factors, coupled with high levels of corruption, weak oversight institutions, lack of adherence to the rule of law, and the manipulation of information through online disinformation campaigns, stifle citizen engagement and political participation online, erode citizens' trust in democratic processes and undermine their confidence in the integrity of election outcomes.

350 *The state of democracy in Africa, https://www.idea.int/gsod/2023/chapters/africa/*

3.2 Increased Digital Repression and Restrictions on Civic Space

Digital authoritarianism is growing while democracy is declining across the continent as autocratic governments seek to consolidate and maintain their grip on political power. Several governments routinely deploy a combination of tools and tactics such as internet shutdowns, censorship of news outlets, targeted surveillance and weaponisation of laws to limit civic participation and suppress dissent. As this study shows, such measures as witnessed in Algeria, Burkina Faso, Chad, Ethiopia, Gabon, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique and Senegal restrict voters' access to diverse information on democratic processes, stifle public debate on important issues and make it difficult for opposition candidates to compete fairly.

.....authoritarian and military regimes have normalised deploying surveillance technologies as a means to target, monitor, intimidate and weaken the opposition, human rights defenders, the media, and activists.

Moreover, authoritarian and military regimes have normalised deploying surveillance technologies as a means to target, monitor, intimidate and weaken the opposition, human rights defenders, the media, and activists. As has been witnessed in Rwanda, these tactics create a chilling environment that silences the public from speaking out against the government and discourages citizens' participation in political activities due to fear of reprisal. This is aggravated by the state capture of critical oversight bodies such as national legislatures, judiciaries and election management bodies as seen in Burkina Faso, Gabon, Mali and Niger, further weakening these statutory bodies' capacity to protect digital rights and check the adoption of repressive laws that legitimise internet controls and restrict civic space.

As shown in the study, deploying internet controls and restrictions on civic space could lead to citizen apathy towards elections and widespread discontent with governance. This could foment political instability, unrest and conflict, especially where citizens view elections or governments as illegitimate. Overall, the sum effect of the continued implementation of these practices is their potential to undermine democracy, the rule of law, human rights, political participation, and the conduct of free, fair and credible elections. Addressing digital repression and restrictions of civic space will require robust and collaborative responses from civil society, media, the private sector and regional and international bodies, to guarantee future democratic elections.

3.3 The Proliferation of Disinformation and Political Polarisation

The proliferation of misinformation and disinformation, including using AI-generated content, is on the rise and if not adequately addressed, poses an enormous threat to the future of democratic and electoral processes in Africa. As highlighted in the study, political actors have used manipulated content to spread false narratives that discredit mainstream media, delegitimise electoral bodies and manipulate voters by creating confusion and reducing trust in election outcomes. These coordinated disinformation campaigns often ride on and amplify existing and historical social, ethnic, and political divisions by polarising conversations in ways that undermine peaceful elections and increase the risk of conflict.

In future election periods, the increasing sophistication of AI-driven disinformation and the pervasiveness of manipulated content could further blur the distinction between genuine and fake information, and lead to a situation where manipulated narratives overshadow genuine political discourse online. By flooding online platforms with false and misleading content, disinformation campaigns can make it difficult for voters to access credible information and make informed decisions about elections and candidates. Such acts therefore compromise the effectiveness of democratic participation online.

Digital platforms have become the primary habitat for disinformation, allowing political actors to leverage them at scale to influence public opinion and manipulate voters.

Digital platforms have become the primary habitat for disinformation, allowing political actors to leverage them at scale to influence public opinion and manipulate voters. The lack of effective content moderation amidst increasing internet access and use allows misinformation and disinformation to spread rapidly, thereby poisoning the electoral environment. Moreover, vulnerable and marginalised communities, particularly those with limited access to the internet and low media information and digital literacy, are most affected. Such groups are likely to remain susceptible to false information, further excluding them from meaningful participation.

Notably, government efforts to stem misinformation and disinformation online have often been counter-productive. Measures such as censorship, internet disruptions and regressive laws suppress legitimate speech, limit access to credible information and stifle democratic participation. Meanwhile, discriminatory access to social media data hinders African researchers from conducting evidence-based research to inform policy-making. Addressing the challenge posed by disinformation will require concerted efforts to address the capacity gaps among EMBs to rein in political actors, strengthen regulatory frameworks to hold platforms accountable, enhance stakeholder collaboration in developing programmes to counter disinformation and promote digital and media information literacy to safeguard election integrity and protect future elections in Africa.

3.4 Widening Digital Exclusion Gap

The growing digital divide across the continent, characterised by limited access to reliable and affordable internet, unequal access to digital technologies, low digital literacy and skills, and inadequate infrastructure, excludes and restricts marginalised and rural communities from digital electoral processes. This divide has greatly dampened the hopes of many optimists about the role technology could play in elections. As shown in the study, low levels of infrastructure development and low levels of affordability hinder access to ICT for many individuals in Africa, particularly for women, the elderly, persons with disabilities and young people based in low-income, marginalised, under-served and rural areas.

These groups are systematically excluded from accessing election information and meaningful engagement in public discourse due to the digital divide, which is exacerbated by poor digital infrastructure, an escalation of online gender-based violence and the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation. Such exclusion could deepen existing social and economic inequalities and deny the groups opportunities and platforms to advocate for their needs, rights and issues of concern. Also, compared to their counterparts in urban areas, these groups are often forgotten when countries implement digital identity programmes and biometric technologies for election management, which fail to take into consideration the specific needs and challenges of people living in low-income, marginalised, underserved and rural areas.

From the foregoing, it is evident that sections of these groups remain disconnected from the electoral process, further undermining democracy and introducing a two-tiered electoral system where only the digitally connected can fully participate. This trend could result in lower turnout and reduce participation of these groups in future elections, as their exclusion is likely to be compounded the more electoral processes become digital. Without targeted efforts to bridge the digital divide, the introduction of election technologies, online platforms and other technological innovations intended to enhance election integrity could further exclude already marginalised voters. Digital inclusion must therefore remain at the heart of electoral reforms. Otherwise, future elections risk being divided along digital lines, consequently undermining public trust in electoral systems and the values of democracy, such as universal suffrage, equal representation, and citizen participation.

3.5 The Significant Economic and Social Cost of Digital Repression

Internet shutdowns and other forms of digital repression have significant economic and social costs and present profound challenges to the future of elections in Africa. These repressive actions not only disrupt access to information, communication and political participation, but also impede economic activities such as trade, investment and financial transactions, and the delivery of essential services such as health and education that rely on the internet and digital platforms.

Also, historical and post-colonial concerns around religion, ethnicity, and political and economic marginalisation continue to influence political discourse and conflict across countries. While some countries have found ways to navigate the delicate relationships, others continue to grapple with these unresolved issues whose undertones remain points of friction and define political arrangements and contestations for power. In the digital arena, armed conflict often targets and destroys digital infrastructure and thus deters online engagement; while religious, ethnic and racial tensions fuel online hate and disinformation narratives that fuel conflict. Likewise, high poverty and high unemployment rates limit purchasing power and hinder access to ICT, particularly for young people.

Few of the countries under study have succeeded in addressing historical concerns and issues such as poverty, unemployment, economic development, ethnicity, conflict, insecurity and environmental crises.

Few of the countries under study have succeeded in addressing historical concerns and issues such as poverty, unemployment, economic development, ethnicity, conflict, insecurity and environmental crises. Repressive environments and unstable democracies are generally unfavourable for foreign direct investment which deny countries much-needed tax revenue and capital to expand their economies, develop infrastructure, deliver public services, address social grievances and invest in electoral reforms.

Resource-constrained countries are likely to struggle to invest in robust electoral systems, thereby resulting in poorly managed elections, which further erode public confidence and participation. Also, continued digital repression in environments where citizens are already facing economic hardship is likely to result in political instability, strikes and protests as was witnessed in Senegal. Such instability increases the risk of cycles of violence and threatens the integrity of elections. This could further alienate citizens from participating in the electoral process due to disillusionment with the political system, as elections and other forms of democratic participation can be perceived as incapable of bringing meaningful change.

The resulting social fragmentation from repressive activities fosters mistrust, fear and suspicion, and therefore undermines cohesion and collective action which are essential for democracy. While economic and social factors vary across countries, when viewed collectively, their net effect is that they increase the cost of online participation. The continued use of digital repression is likely to cripple societies, damage economies and erode democracy. Consequently, safeguarding future elections will require policy reforms, investment in digital infrastructure, and protection of digital rights.

3.6 Transformative Potential of AI and Technology in Future Elections

Despite the challenges, there remains significant potential for technology to positively transform elections and democratic participation in Africa. African countries need to invest in digital and media information literacy programmes, expand digital infrastructure, strengthen policies and legislative and institutional frameworks, and implement robust protections for digital rights. Adoption and proper use and deployment of digital technologies can enhance electoral integrity, transparency, efficiency, and voter engagement. Positive uses of AI are crucial to ensure that technology supports, rather than undermines, the future of democratic governance in Africa.

By automating key election administration tasks like voter registration and ballot tallying, AI can elevate efficiency in electoral processes.[351] It is also widely believed that AI can address the challenges of human interference and inefficiency in elections by facilitating oversight and accelerated decision-making, such as detecting anomalies and inaccuracies in election data to avert election manipulation.[352] The use of biometric systems, such as facial recognition and fingerprint scanning, could also improve efficiency in voter registration and verification processes.[353] Additionally, AI technologies have previously been utilised to monitor and observe elections in real-time by analysing social media, news reports, and other online sources for indicators of electoral malpractice, in ways that could enhance transparency and accountability in the electoral process.[354] For instance, In South Africa's 2024 elections, AI-powered bots were used to mitigate the spread of disinformation,[355] similar to how in 2022 in Kenya Umati monitored social media for hate speech[356] and, iVerify employed AI to fight election-related misinformation in Nigeria.[357]

While technology has played a central role in the 2024 elections in several countries, one of the highlights has been the use of AI in ways that illuminate both its promises and dangers for electoral integrity and democracy. Clearly, few African countries have adopted the use of AI in elections and this holds true for various election stakeholders, such as election observers, political parties, candidates, and EMBs. Nonetheless, in the few countries studied where AI was adopted, some positive results could be discerned. Still, even in those countries where elements of AI were adopted, they were small-scale and did not fully exploit the promise that AI holds for enhancing the efficiency and transparency of elections.

The development of guidelines for AI use in elections could be guided by regional bodies and entities such as the African Union and the AAEA. The experience in developing the Guidelines and Principles for Social Media Use in Elections in Africa can provide a benchmark for developing the prospective AI and elections guidelines for the continent. Regarding the regulation of AI in wider democratic and societal aspects, there is a need for African countries to establish a regulatory framework to ensure fair and transparent AI use and to educate the public about AI's role in elections to build trust;[358] with the key pillars for deploying AI including accountability, inclusivity, safety and reliability, fairness, transparency, and privacy and security;[359] and African states seek to exercise sovereignty on AI systems, meaning the need to develop their own systems that are fit for local purposes, rather than just importing systems from elsewhere." [360]

351 *Empowering Fair And Inclusive Elections: How AI Is Shaping The Future Of Democracy In Africa, https://www.nepad.org/blog/empowering-fair-and-inclusive-elections-how-ai-shaping-future-of-democracy-africa#_ftn19*

352 *Samson Itodo, Artificial Intelligence and the integrity of African elections, https://www.idea.int/news/artificial-intelligence-and-integrity-african-elections*

353 *Tendai Mbanje, The role of artificial intelligence in African elections, https://www.chr.up.ac.za/opinion-pieces/3807-op-ed-the-role-of-artificial-intelligence-in-african-elections*

354 *Empowering Fair And Inclusive Elections: How AI Is Shaping The Future Of Democracy In Africa , https://www.nepad.org/blog/empowering-fair-and-inclusive-elections-how-ai-shaping-future-of-democracy-africa*

355 *Melody Emmett, Welcome to South Africa's first AI election, https://www.businesslive.co.za/fm/fm-fox/2024-05-09-welcome-to-south-africas-first-ai-election/#google_vignette*

356 *Umati: Monitoring online dangerous speech https://dangerousspeech.org/umati-monitoring-online-dangerous-speech/*

357 *Neil Ford, AI offers hope against political disinformation, https://africainfact.com/ai-offers-hope-against-political-disinformation/*

358 *Empowering Fair And Inclusive Elections: How AI Is Shaping The Future Of Democracy In Africa, https://www.nepad.org/blog/empowering-fair-and-inclusive-elections-how-ai-shaping-future-of-democracy-africa*

359 *https://cipesa.org/2024/05/towards-a-regulatory-framework-for-ethical-artificial-intelligence-in-south-africa/*

360 *(Shamira ibid)*

4.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

4.1 Conclusion

In the so-called Year of Democracy, when about 20 African countries were going to the polls, it was prudent to examine the role technology would play in this key democratic process. The promise was high, as technology could help mitigate some of the challenges that bedevil elections in many countries in the region, including by enhancing the efficiency and integrity of elections. Increased internet and phone penetration rates, and digitalisation programmes implemented by different governments, including in areas of governance and public participation, raised the prospects for greater usage of technology during the 2024 polls. Concomitantly, technology usage comes with threats that could undermine electoral democracy, such as disinformation and internet disruptions, which were a key interest of the study, as was an examination of how different countries were adopting AI in electoral processes.

This study has documented some of the promises and pitfalls of technology use in elections in Africa,

This study has documented some of the promises and pitfalls of technology use in elections in Africa, citing examples from various countries. On the whole, the continent is at a crossroads as the promises remain largely untapped with a majority of countries yet to deploy technology in their electoral processes. On the other hand, the pitfalls are pronounced as juntas and other authoritarians are antithetical to the principles of good governance. Consequently, in authoritarian countries, the degree of technological adoption in elections remains low and is limited to mundane functions such as voter registration.

Indeed, judging from the countries that held elections during 2023 and 2024, those with stronger democratic credentials employed technology more deliberately and in a larger number of processes as compared to authoritarian states. Besides the observed low usage of technology in elections, doubts were cast on the credibility of elections in various authoritarian countries, an example being Rwanda where incumbent Paul Kagame bagged 99.18% of the vote in an election where eight of his opponents were disqualified from running. Indeed, the pitfalls are clear and present in most countries: disinformation is rife, online content is not adequately moderated, tech platforms are not held accountable nor are they sufficiently transparent, and governments and opposition groups are engaging bots and influencers for hire to dominate online discourse with disinformation. In the meantime, AI is enabling the generation of deep fakes and the operations of bots in ways that could make disinformation harder to detect and fight.

Technology adoption varies significantly, with some countries embracing biometric systems and electronic voting, and others maintaining manual processes, or hybrid systems. Only a few countries like Ghana, Namibia, and South Africa have employed technology beyond basic processes such as voter registration and results transmission, which reflects the low level of digitalisation and inadequate investments in electoral processes. However, many others continue to rely on manual systems or use technology minimally, often due to challenges such as limited infrastructure, political instability, and resource constraints.

The persistent digital divide is exacerbating inequalities in political participation, as the high internet usage costs, expensive digital devices, and poor digital infrastructure continue to exclude large segments of the population and limit overall civic engagement. The growing trend of internet shutdowns, including at election times, has exacerbated the problem. Worryingly, while authoritarian countries were previously the champions of such disruptions, in 2024 some of the countries that score high on democracy in Africa, such as Kenya, Nigeria, and Tanzania also ordered shutdowns. That sets a bad example and could result in normalising such unwarranted disruptions to digital communications to the detriment of democratic participation. The internet disruptions underpin the rising digital authoritarianism, as various governments steadily appropriate technology to entrench themselves in power, monitor the activities of their opponents and clamp controls on critical and oppositional online narratives and activities.

AI no doubt could have enabled the generation of large volumes of disinformation that is often harder to detect and the amplification of digital harms on social media platforms. However, more work remains to be done to understand the extent and effect of disinformation in general and AI-enabled disinformation in particular, on electoral processes. These studies also need to delve deeper into how generative AI is changing the landscape and its extent, nature and effects. The anticipated explosion in AI-enabled disinformation was not recorded during 2024, but that could be explained by a lack of skills by disinformation instigators to utilise AI and the shortage of skills by stakeholders in the region to detect sophisticated disinformation. Yet, from the examples seen with deep fakes, it is clear that AI-enabled disinformation could have profound effects on elections.

While the full impact of AI-enabled disinformation is still unfolding, its potential to disrupt electoral processes is evident especially since its regulation hangs in the balance.

While the full impact of AI-enabled disinformation is still unfolding, its potential to disrupt electoral processes is evident especially since its regulation hangs in the balance. Disinformation poses a severe threat to democratic elections in Africa and has the potential to disrupt electoral processes. In tandem, national laws related to content controls are often not in conformity with international standards on free expression, while others are regularly weaponised to silence critics and opponents. Addressing this challenge requires a comprehensive strategy focused on fostering media literacy, enhancing tech accountability, and promoting collaborative action among stakeholders.

Whereas some platforms indicate that they set up election centres in African countries to address information integrity, together with initiatives to collaborate with fact-checkers, improvements in content moderation and labelling, media information literacy programmes, transparency on political advertising and directing users to reliable and trustworthy information, are useful developments but were not done for all countries. Notably, platforms should give equal prominence and urgency to complaints from Africa as they do those from the US and Europe, and should be more transparent and accountable about their practices on the continent. Also, there is currently little communication between the platforms and African regulators. Access to data held by social media platforms remains a key obstacle to promoting information and election integrity. Moreover, more actors should hold platforms accountable, and send referrals to the Meta Oversight Board - although this requires that awareness should be created about the existence, mandate and processes of the Board.

4.2 Recommendations

The Governments

- Promote digital rights and freedoms including expression, access to information, assembly and association by strengthening legal frameworks to protect these rights, and ensure that any restrictions imposed meet the internationally prescribed three-part test of legality, necessity and proportionality, with robust judicial oversight.
- Invest in resilient digital infrastructure to promote access to the internet and guard against potential cyber attacks as opposed to resorting to repressive actions such as shutting down the internet.
- Encourage multistakeholder initiatives and consult the private sector, civil society, development partners, academia and the media to develop and adopt rights-respecting measures to maintain public order that do not restrict the digital civic space.
- Promote public awareness of their citizens on the importance of internet access, digital rights and responsible use of digital technologies especially during elections.
- Promote compliance with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights by stakeholders involved in the electoral processes.
- Enhance the transparency and accountability in AI use in the electoral processes, including by conducting regular audits and impact assessments and publishing AI-related decisions that affect the electoral process.

The Parliaments

- Repeal or amend outdated and regressive laws that curtail digital rights and include robust provisions that strengthen transparency and accountability measures by state and non-state actors involved in electoral processes and enhance independent judicial oversight over executive powers in the digital realm.
- Enhance their oversight role by regularly reviewing and holding their governments accountable for decisions taken that adversely affect access to the internet, enjoyment of digital rights and election integrity, or implemented in ways that circumvent judicial oversight.
- Develop and enact laws to govern the use of technologies, including artificial intelligence, in elections. In particular, these laws should promote simple and cost-effective technologies, transparency and accountability in decision-making, strengthen data protection and ethics, and promote due diligence by platforms, intermediaries and service providers of technologies used during elections, and elaborate on measures to promote trust and safety of users in line with emerging best practice.

The Judiciary

- Actively promote and protect digital rights by checking government actions that threaten or restrict digital rights and which fail to comply with the rule of law and conform to constitutional and international human rights standards.
- Provide robust, efficient and effective avenues to facilitate the judicial review mechanisms for litigants to challenge orders and actions of government officials, particularly those related to surveillance, internet disruptions and repressive laws.
- Conduct judicial education programmes, including bar-bench dialogues to enhance the understanding of judicial officers and lawyers of the emerging jurisprudential issues and developments surrounding technology and their impact on electoral processes, digital rights and civic space.

Election Management Bodies (EMBs)

- Adopt transparent processes in the design, development and deployment of election technologies, including disclosing independent audit and impact assessment reports, facilitating election observation and independent monitoring of election technologies to promote and maintain public trust.
- Implement national public awareness programmes that also target marginalised groups and communities on how election technologies work and publish user-friendly information on how the systems work and the safeguards in place to protect voters' privacy.
- Engage in multi-stakeholder collaboration to co-create and innovate simple, cost-effective, efficient and robust election technologies and systems that harness the power of technology, in ways that are relevant to the African context and are responsive to the needs and challenges in the continent such as the digital divide and infrastructure gaps.

Civil Society Organisations

- Collaborate with other stakeholders including the private sector, development partners, academia and the media to monitor, document and report violations of digital rights, and share findings widely including with international bodies.
- Advocate for the development of rights-respecting measures and guidelines to safeguard internet freedom and the digital civic space and, promote responsible use of AI to ensure election integrity.
- Educate and raise awareness of the citizens on the importance of internet freedoms, data privacy, AI governance and their role in elections to enable them to demand accountability from platforms and governments.
- Collaborate with legal experts, the tech community and other allies in the technical community to challenge digital repression, and to develop and disseminate tools and resources that help citizens stay connected such as VPNs.

The Media

- Dedicate resources to investigate and expose digital repression tactics including internet disruptions and surveillance practices, gaps in content moderation and new trends such as the misuse of AI in elections to promote accountability by platforms, governments, political parties and candidates.
- Engage in multi-stakeholder collaboration to raise awareness about the adverse impacts of digital repression and authoritarianism on electoral democracy, and the implementation of technology during elections and promote the coverage and visibility of stakeholder initiatives and best practices that aim to defend and promote digital rights.
- Integrate and invest in fact-checking initiatives, including utilising AI tools to verify information, ensure the accuracy of reports and counter the spread of misinformation and disinformation.

The Private Sector

- Adhere to the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, be vigilant and resist any government directives to unlawfully disrupt internet access or restrict access to content, and implement effective redress mechanisms to address violations of digital rights within their services, especially during electoral periods.
- Prioritise investments to expand internet access and improve digital infrastructure in underserved areas, particularly rural regions, to help close the digital divide and facilitate digitally enabled civic engagement and democratic participation.
- Engage in multi-stakeholder collaboration to co-create and develop initiatives, technologies and tools that promote election integrity, including facilitating the deployment of open-source technologies to ensure accuracy, simplicity, transparency and accountability of election processes; enabling circumvention of internet disruptions; promoting robust cybersecurity and resilience of election technology systems, while utilising cutting edge technologies such as AI; and support advocacy, research and awareness initiatives to promote internet freedom and address the emerging impacts of technologies during elections.
- Promote industry compliance with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights by taking measures to promote transparency and accountability such as regularly publishing transparency reports, adopting responsible practices and industry standards around AI use and development, implementing comprehensive due diligence practices and availing effective redress mechanisms during elections.

Development Partners

- Using diplomatic and consular channels advocate against digital repression by among others working with sitting governments while emphasising to them the need to ensure that they do not shut down the internet during elections.
- Fund civil society initiatives that promote innovation, capacity building, advocacy, research and awareness in areas such as cybersecurity, digital rights, democratic participation, digital inclusion and election monitoring.
- Support global cooperation in the development of ethical guidelines and standards for the responsible use of AI in elections.
- Prioritise investments in expanding digital infrastructure in underserved areas to enable fair access to election technologies across African countries.

Academia

- Conduct evidence-based research on the impact of digital repression, AI and technology on internet freedom, election integrity and democratic processes.
- Engage in multi-stakeholder collaboration with CSOs, media and other stakeholders and develop evidence-based recommendations to inform the development and deployment of technologies that promote election integrity and internet freedom in Africa.
- Develop curricula that educate students and the wider public on internet freedoms, media and digital and media information literacy, and AI and its potential effects on electoral democracy.

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