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JOURNALISM AND ELECTIONS IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

LOCATING THE DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT

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It is axiomatic in conversations about democracy that elections are the quintessential gateway through which to induct members of a defined society into active citizenship. Free, fair and inclusive elections endow citizens with the power to decide the kind of future they want across social, economic, political and cultural dimensions.

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Patently, also, journalism is the oxygen of democratic processes and institutions in modern society as it is news media that provide citizens with the necessary information to make informed choices during elections, a platform to deliberate on pressing issues of common interest, provide oversight on public institutions and authorities, and that prompt citizens to collectively formulate solutions to contemporary and future challenges.

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Given a plethora of extant threats to democracy on the continent, Africa is arguably at the crossroads, where she has to choose between accountable leadership, inclusive representation as well as democratic governance, and authoritarianism, economic decay and death. A redemptive departure point is the creation of political conditions that enable and enhance informed citizen participation through free, fair and credible elections as this can provide a definitive rupture between the two, in favour of the former, as this article argues.

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JOURNALISM AND ELECTIONS IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

LOCATING THE DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT

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INTRODUCTION

To understand the role of news media in creating and sustaining democratic societies, it is imperative to be clear about the characteristics and demands of a democracy. While there are many conceptions of democracy, they all share common features and emphasise values such as freedom, "equality and liberty".[1] Democracy as a system that relies on the participation and sovereignty of the people requires us to consider the conditions and processes that make it possible for citizens to be active claimants of and stakeholders in constituting a democratic society. For instance, citizens must have "identical or substantively similar opportunities to participate in the decision-making processes through which the people rule themselves—everyone gets to vote",[2] and every vote holds equal value. This is complemented by fundamental freedoms, including freedom of speech, expression, and association.

Citizens can assert themselves and influence the direction of society through participating in elections. Through this, they can choose their leaders and, by extension, shape the direction of economic development, social policy, environmental policy, communication policy, and so on. Therefore, citizens' participation in elections makes a difference in society, but it begs the following questions: Are citizens knowledgeable about events and issues that concern them? Do they have easy access to the information they need? Through what channels can they easily access such information? Do citizens have platforms to engage one another equally about issues of mutual concern? Is such engagement civil and accommodative of all perspectives? Are available communication channels inclusive of all the voices and interests in society? Is there open interaction between citizens and those in positions of authority, and so on? It is these issues that Sub-Saharan Africa must ponder as it reflects on recent extraordinary developments and takes stock of the achievements made thus far in pursuit of democracy.

This paper thus, analyses the nexus between political conditions and the news media's coverage of elections in Sub-Saharan African countries using three instructive situations. It does so by analysing countries where democratic conditions are non-existent and elections unlikely (Mali and Burkina Faso), countries that have just conducted elections but also happen to have limited democratic credentials (the Democratic Republic of Congo and Zimbabwe) and those with a significant democratic profile (South Africa) as well as Namibia whose elections are scheduled for the 27th of November 2024, to establish the nature of both the democratic subsidy and deficit in these contexts. Given the limited empirical data on the actual coverage of the preceding and proceeding election periods in these countries, the paper takes a macro-perspective which shows how their extant political conditions constrict or open up their respective communicative spaces, the forms of mediation available notwithstanding.

It is the view of this paper that all the forms of mediation available in any country, traditional or digital, are significantly constrained or enabled in various ways by the political conditions therein. The article commences with a brief discussion on the context informing the analysis, which is the 2024 election season. Thereafter, it presents an analytical juxtaposition of the ideal conditions and opportunities for building democratic societies in Sub-Saharan Africa as expressed through international instruments ratified by most countries on the continent and the actual conditions which characterise the democratic deficit[3] on the continent in contemporary times. This is followed by a more focused discussion on the democratic deficit or subsidy as manifested in specific countries referred to above, albeit through a macro-analytic lens.

1. Christians, C. G., Glasser, T. L., McQuail, D., Nordenstreng, K., & White, R. A. (2009). *Normative Theories of the Media: Journalism in Democratic Societies*. University of Illinois Press.
    Held, D. (2006). *Models of Democracy*. (3rd. Ed.) Polity Press.
2. Christians, C. G., Glasser, T. L., McQuail, D., Nordenstreng, K., & White, R. A. (2009). *Normative Theories of the Media: Journalism in Democratic Societies*. University of Illinois Press.
3. Faulkner, C., Johnson, J., & Powell, J. (2023). Revisiting Coup Contagion. Foreign Policy Research Institute. https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/12/revisiting-coup-contagion/

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THE 2024 CONJUNCTURE

It is not an exaggeration to suggest that 2024 is globally momentous, as about half the world's population is set to go for elections with potentially consequential outcomes on democracy. More than 50 countries, 19 of which are in Africa, are holding presidential or general elections this year. Decades into post-colonial self-government, most African countries have still not matured into stable democracies. Despite regular national elections by these countries, developments in the recent past are a cause for concern.

First, some previous elections have been criticised internally and externally for various irregularities, which puts the electoral processes and the legitimacy of the chosen leaders and parliamentary representatives into question. Zimbabwe, Gabon, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) are cases in point here.

Secondly, Africa has experienced about 9 coups and 13 coup attempts since 2020, which arguably implies democracy in Sub-Saharan Africa is under assault and rapidly eroding.[4] Successful coups were recently executed in Burkina Faso, Chad, Gabon, Guinea, Mali, and Niger.[5] The frequency with which military coups occur raises questions about democracy, especially where coups seem to align with citizen aspirations and concerns as in Gabon, Guinea and Zimbabwe.[6] It also raises befuddling questions about the future of democracy in Africa, given the reluctance of some military regimes to expedite democratisation processes, the constant spectre of random future military interventions and the influence of the military on the operations of elected civilian governments.[7]

Thirdly, global events seem to set a discordant tone regarding sustaining democratic values globally. Not only is there an evident rise in right-wing populist and intolerant political movements and governments, there also seems to be a willingness to disregard international laws and democratic principles when it is expedient to do so, even by the most powerful and enduring democracies. Competition for access to resources in Africa has also meant that global powers will support regimes willing to open up access to such resources, their democratic credentials notwithstanding. This arguably creates a global political ecosystem that could undermine African democratic governance.

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4. Faulkner, C., Johnson, J., & Powell, J. (2023). Revisiting Coup Contagion. Foreign Policy Research Institute. https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/12/revisiting-coup-contagion/

5. Abramovitz, M. (2023). Reflecting on 2023: Our Journey Toward a Freer World. Freedom House. https://freedomhouse.org/article/reflecting-2023-our-journey-towards-freer-world

6. Onubogu, O. (2023). *Africans' Reactions to Disputed Elections and Coups Show Discontent with Democracy*. Wilson Center. https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/africans-reactions-disputed-elections-and-coups-show-discontent-democracy

7. Siegle, J. & Cook, C. (2024). *Africa's 2024 Elections: Challenges and Opportunities to Regain Democratic Momentum*. Africa Center for Strategic Studies. https://africacenter.org/spotlight/2024-elections/

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THE MEDIA, DEMOCRACY AND ELECTIONS

Democratic societies rely on the administration of democratic elections within a context of guaranteed fundamental freedoms and free, independent, diverse and plural media. It is also important that this happens in an unfettered environment that enables critical and open deliberation among citizens, on the horizontal plane, and between citizens and those in positions of authority, on the vertical plane. The importance of these factors is amplified in election periods during which deliberative activity and informational needs are more critical. Free, fair and democratic elections are arguably the quintessential channel through which citizens can genuinely exercise their agency and sovereignty, hence the importance of the media in enabling and capacitating active citizen participation in electoral and broader socio-political and economic processes.

In addition, a free and independent media undermines any attempts to manipulate elections, and provides citizens, civil society, contesting political entities, as well as observer missions an alternative channel through which to vent their concerns over the electoral process. As such, news media as well as established and nascent digital communicative spaces are an imperative element of any electoral process, the latter of which is important for citizen participation in shaping how they are governed and also in affording the elected authorities legitimacy in the eyes of voters and the international community of nations. The media's ability to perform its role during elections is threatened by dysfunctions and restrictions such as overbearing and undemocratic media control, the proliferation of mis- and disinformation, racial and other hoaxes, misogynism, and the digital divide. In Africa, the efficacy of the media in reporting elections is checked and context-dependent, as shown in this paper.

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OPPORTUNITIES FOR AND CAVEATS TO DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA

FOUNDATIONS ON WHICH TO BUILD DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA

Opportunities for creating and enhancing democratic governance and political systems in Africa abound, as reflected in the provisions of international instruments ratified by most African countries. At a global level, the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) provides the standard benchmark by which other instruments, national laws and political systems are modelled. Key aspects of this instrument are its provisions on freedom of expression in Article 19 and those on elections in Article 21. The latter provides that:

> Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives.
>
> Everyone has the right to equal access to public service in his country.
>
> The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.

This foundation for building democratic societies is reinforced by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (CCPR) (1976), which also provides for freedom of expression in its Article 19 and political rights through Article 1, which provides that:

> All peoples have the right of self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.

To bring the discussion home, the African Charter on Human and People's Rights (1981) provides for freedom of expression and the right to receive information through Article 9, and Article 13, which focuses on elections, provides that:

> [E]very citizen shall have the right to participate freely in the government of his country, either directly or through freely chosen representatives in accordance with the provisions of the law". In addition, the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance of 2007, emphasises, in Article 2:10 that "(State parties shall) (p)romote the establishment of the necessary conditions to foster citizen participation, transparency, access to information, freedom of the press and accountability in the management of public affairs.

Cognate to this, also, is Article 17:3, which provides that "State parties shall … ensure fair and equitable access to contesting parties to state controlled media during elections."

Other relevant instruments, guidelines and declarations that reinforce the vitality of freedom of expression include the Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression in Africa of 2002, the African Union Election Monitoring Guidelines, and at a sub-regional level, the SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections. The African Union's Agenda 2063 "emphasises the pivotal role of democracy as a fundamental prerequisite for sustainable human development across the continent".[8] Lastly, as indicated by Fesmedia's African Media Barometer country reports, most national constitutions in Sub-Saharan African countries reflect the spirit set by these international instruments through provisions on freedom of expression, the media/press and association, among others.

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8.   African Union Development Agency (2023). *Empowering Fair and Inclusive Elections: How AI is Shaping the Future of Democracy in Africa*. AUDA-NEPAD. https://www.nepad.org/blog/empowering-fair-and-inclusive-elections-how-ai-shaping-future-of-democracy-africa

These instruments, constitutional provisions, and guidelines show that the normative infrastructure for building and sustaining democratic socio-political systems in Africa is in place, although questions have to be raised about the disjuncture between such ideas and practice.

CONTEMPORARY THREATS TO DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA

1. Artificial intelligence

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has emerged as a potent force for good and bad. The African Union High Level Panel on Emerging Technologies (APET) has recognised the potential of AI in engaging "voters and enhance voter participation in democratic elections" through "personalised outreach, predictive analysis of voter behaviour, real-time information dissemination, social media sentiment monitoring, targeted voter registration efforts, and the combating of voter suppression".[9] AI has also been noted for its potential to undermine democracy because of its ability to "produce disinformation and misinformation" at a large scale which "threatens to interfere with democratic representation, undermine democratic accountability, and corrode social and political trust".[10] The corrosive impact of AI could be made worse in authoritarian states and those which have clientelist relations with developed countries interested in pillaging natural resources from the African continent.

2. Restrictions in access to information

Limitations in terms of access to information remain a major filter in achieving unfettered citizen participation in public life, as only 27 countries have enacted Access to Information Laws on the African continent. This undermines the agency and sovereignty of African citizens in the run-up to, during and after election periods. A counterpoint to achievements regarding access to information is the simultaneous proliferation of surveillance legislation and activities. Several African countries have legislation that facilitates the state's surveillance of citizens. This has a chilling effect on access to information and can lead to outright harassment, arrest and even murder of citizens seen as not toeing the line or threatening state security, which is usually a euphemism for the narrow interests of powerful individuals, interests and institutions.

3. Threat of military coups

The constant spectre of terror and military coups in some African states have limited the establishment and operation of democratic institutions. Coups undermine the agency of citizens by forfeiting their right to select their leaders and representatives through presidential and general elections. In Mali, for example, the reigning military government has postponed elections indefinitely.[11] These conditions are not significantly different from the situation in Burkina Faso, where both the ruling Junta and terrorist activities dominate the country's political space.

4. The resource curse

The global competition for natural resources in many African countries has led to proxy wars and geopolitical tensions. The idea of a 'resource curse' captures the challenges faced by African countries endowed with key natural resources across all spheres of public life: politics, the economy, and the cultural sphere. For instance, the presence of the French and Russia's Wagner Group in the Sahel region reflects this reality.

5. Judicialisation of elections

Another challenge that has emerged in the recent past is the tendency of the judiciary to settle electoral disputes. While the judiciary would ideally counterbalance the other arms of the state in a democracy, it is evident that in some African countries, the judiciary is weaponised by the executive to serve the latter's interests. As some have observed, "when elections are judicialised in Africa, national courts overwhelmingly legitimise incumbent electoral victories" and "when opposition candidates lose in high stakes presidential and gubernatorial elections, they seldom concede defeat without legal challenges".[12] The cases of Mozambique and Zimbabwe are emblematic of this feature. The impact of settling election disputes in courts is that it co-opts and neutralises citizen power and sovereignty.

6. Reluctance to honour presidential term limits

Another prevalent feature of contemporary African politics is the reluctance of some African leaders to honour constitutional term limits. For instance, Rwanda amended its constitution in 2015 to allow President Paul Kagame to evade a 7-year, 2-term limit and run for 2 more 5-year terms.[13] Some have noted that implementing electoral laws is not impartial and "Rwanda elections routinely feature unfair barriers to registration, campaigning, poll monitoring, and media access for opposition parties and candidates, among other problems".[14] This shows the direct connection between term extensions and an undemocratic environment and practices. In South Sudan, President Salva Kiir has been in office since 2005, and since then has "navigated extensions

9.   African Union Development Agency (2023). Empowering Fair and Inclusive Elections: How AI is Shaping the Future of Democracy in Africa. AUDA-NEPAD. https://www.nepad.org/blog/empowering-fair-and-inclusive-elections-how-ai-shaping-future-of-democracy-africa

10.   Kreps, S. & Kriner, D. (2023). How AI Threatens Democracy. Journal of Democracy, 34(4), pp. 122-131.

11.   Siegle, J. & Cook, C. (2024). Africa's 2024 Elections: Challenges and Opportunities to Regain Democratic Momentum. Africa Center for Strategic Studies. https://africacenter.org/spotlight/2024-elections/

12.   Gathii, J. T. & Akinkugbe, O. D. (2021). Judicialisation of Election Disputes in Africa's International Courts. L & Contemporary Problems, 84(4).

13.   Siegle, J. & Cook, C. (2024). Africa's 2024 Elections: Challenges and Opportunities to Regain Democratic Momentum. Africa Center for Strategic Studies. https://africacenter.org/spotlight/2024-elections/

14.   Freedom House. (2013). Rwanda. https://freedomhouse.org/country/rwanda/freedom-world/2023

in 2015, 2018, 2020, and 2022".[15] In Guinea, the military executed a coup in response to President Alpha Conde's intention to extend his term and the former has set elections for December 2024.

7. Trans-national tensions

The political volatility, historical injustices and shifting alliances in the Great Lakes Region promote and normalise forms of 'authoritarianism', benevolent or otherwise, which are often justified based on security threats posed by legacies of historical events such as the Rwandan genocide. Also, because of the cross-border dynamics of military alliances, tensions reflect this trans-territorial dynamic, meaning that threats to democracy affect several countries at once. A case in point is Rwanda's maintenance of "influence in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)" where it is "intent on preventing the Hutu nationalist Democratic forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) from regaining a footing".[16] Part of this strategy involves Rwanda's support for the M23 rebels, "a key destabilising force in the eastern DRC", which situation can quickly suck in other regional actors, thereby constricting the development of democracy in that sub-region.[17]

8. Dominant party system

In the Southern African region, the dominant party system threatens the development of plural democracies. The control such parties maintain over state media and the political narratives therein is conspicuous, a tendency highlighted by many African Media Barometer (AMB) reports produced for the sub-region by Fesmedia Africa. The most dominant parties in the region are those that spearheaded the struggles against colonialism in their respective countries. In Mozambique, for instance, the ruling party, FRELIMO, has been described as having a "growing sense of entitlement and impunity" by the American sponsored Africa Center for Strategic Studies.[18] This nominalises elections as election outcomes are almost always predictably favouring the dominant party.

9. Internecine conflicts

Internecine conflicts that emerge due to skewed ethnic relations in African countries pose a threat to democracy on the continent in several ways. First, they promote tribalism and patrimonial politics, which disenfranchises those considered not to belong to the dominant ingroup(s). Second, ethnic

conflict can escalate to violence, which paralyses democratic politics and threatens citizens' safety and even existence, as is the case with South Sudan and the Darfur region of Sudan. Third, there is a lack of independent oversight bodies/democratic institutions, as in countries such as Zimbabwe, South Sudan, and Rwanda. Given this context, the role of the media in supporting democratic processes such as elections cannot be overemphasised. In view of the elections scheduled for 2024, the snapshot analysis presented below appraises the complicated role of the media and political actors during elections, and the position of ordinary citizens in this situation.

15. Siegle, J. & Cook, C. (2024). *Africa's 2024 Elections: Challenges and Opportunities to Regain Democratic Momentum*. Africa Center for Strategic Studies. https://africacenter.org/spotlight/2024-elections/
16. Africa Center for Strategic Studies. https://africacenter.org/spotlight/2024-elections/rwanda/
17. Africa Center for Strategic Studies. https://africacenter.org/spotlight/2024-elections/rwanda/
18. Africa Center for Strategic Studies. https://africacenter.org/spotlight/2024-elections/mozambique/

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POLITICS, ELECTIONS AND NEWS MEDIA IN DEMOCRATIC AND NOT SO DEMOCRATIC COUNTRIES

The 2024 elections theatre is fraught with many challenges which can potentially limit or inhibit citizens' ability to participate in this fundamental democratic process. Therefore, it is crucial to have a free, independent, well-resourced, plural and diverse news media to circulate key information and provide a platform for civic engagement.

The analysis below examines the media's election coverage in selected Sub-Saharan African countries. The discussion compares the socio-political conditions and their implications on democratic politics and the operations of news media in three different scenarios: where elections are unlikely to take place (Mali and Burkina Faso), where they have already taken place (DRC, Zimbabwe and South Africa) and where they are still to take place (Namibia). This macro-level analysis uses these specific cases to show how the socio-political conditions and events unfolding in each of these countries either proscribe or enable the media to facilitate free, fair and independent elections, which are the cornerstone of a democratic society.

MALI

Mali is a crisis-ridden country. It has experienced 3 coups in 2012, 2020 and 2021. During the 2012 coup, there was also a rebellion in Northern Mali. These events made it difficult for the country to hold elections and have also created conditions which undermine the safety of journalists, foster self-censorship by both the media and citizens, limit access to conflict zones in the North and promote an uncritical form of journalism described by Reporters Without Borders as 'patriotic news coverage'.[19] This is consistent with observations in the 2021 AMB for Mali, which noted how "the deterioration of the security situation, which impacts all aspects of national life, causes a climate of self-censorship, especially among media professionals, especially in the countryside."[20] Several other developments also narrowed the operational space of journalists in Mali following the 2020 and 2021 military coups. For instance, defamation is still an enforced criminal offence, the accreditation of journalists has been suspended, international journalists are vulnerable to arrests, French broadcasting entities have been suspended after reporting abuses by Malian security forces in the country's northern conflict zone and a local television channel, Joliba TV News was suspended for two years for criticising the Junta. The Malian case shows how, despite progressive provisions in the national constitution, a hostile and undemocratic political environment can strip citizens of any real participatory agency and render news media's normative status impotent.

BURKINA FASO

Burkina Faso had an 8-year political reform plan that was not implemented due to the 2020 and 2021 military coups. As a direct result of these two coups, the country's democratic space has since contracted, and the security situation has deteriorated. Democratic institutions such as parliament, the transitional bodies put in place by the first Junta (led by Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba) and the judiciary were disbanded and reorganised by the second Junta of 2021 (led by Captain Ibrahim Traore). Laws regulating political parties as well as political and civic society activities were suspended, leaving the Junta as the dominant political actor. There is no legal framework for elections.

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19. Reporters Without Borders (2023). *2023 World Press Freedom Index – Journalism Threatened by Fake Content Industry - Mali.* Reporters Without Borders. https://rsf.org/en/country/mali

20. Fesmedia Africa. (2021). *African Media Barometer: Mali.* Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung-Fesmedia Africa

The Constitution of Burkina Faso provides for freedom of expression, which is further supported by specific laws for the print, digital and broadcast media.[21] Although the media sector is large and has been significantly free, widespread insecurity limits the mobility of journalists, leaving many peripheral geographies and communities beyond the reach of the media. In addition, as noted in the 2024 country report on Burkina Faso by Freedom House, journalists have been "threatened, abducted, and killed in recent years".[22] The report also noted how the Traore-led Junta passed a law giving the Superior Council for Communication (CSC) "the power to review social media accounts with at least 5000 online followers or subscribers, shut media outlets, seize equipment, and rescind press cards". These developments reveal clear and calculated efforts to restrict the communicative space in Burkina Faso, both online and offline. As is the case with the situation in Mali, the implications of this situation on electoral processes are dire. Not only were elections themselves a remote possibility at the time of writing, but the media and citizen agencies were severely rendered impotent. Effectively, the political and media situations in the country remain decidedly undemocratic.

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

As a major host to the largest portion of Africa's rainforest and endowed with abundant and key natural resources, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is arguably one of the most important countries in Africa and the world. Nonetheless, these endowments have, in large part, negatively shaped the socio-political and economic fabric of the country. Freedom House sees the DRC's political and electoral systems as organised around the interests of political elites who manipulate these systems for their own benefit.[23] Among other notable concerns are restricted civic liberties, high levels of corruption across a range of public services and institutions, the constant threat of violence, and rights abuses by government forces, militias and other armed groups. Although the constitution provides for a 2-term limit, Joseph Kabila extended his 2-term limit by two years by delaying the polls that eventually brought Felix Tshisekedi into office.

However, the same elections were criticised because of voter suppression and electoral fraud, including the barring of opposition candidates from running in the election. The electoral framework and the electoral body, the Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI), have been criticised for their inability to ensure transparent elections, and

the constitutional court, which ordinarily is expected to arbitrate electoral disputes, has been criticised for lacking independence. Although people can organise political associations, many factors constrict political space and citizen rights. For instance, most parties are organised ethnically and regionally and, therefore, lack national reach; opposition leaders and supporters are often restricted from moving across the country and from campaigning and organising public events.

This situation shows both the importance of elections and free media. Not only is it imperative for citizens to have a voice in selecting representatives that will serve their interests, but it is equally paramount that they also have access to news media to receive important information, interact and deliberate on issues of mutual concern. They also need discursive spaces for them to vent their pressing issues to public authorities that must be accountable for their decisions and policies. The 2024 Freedom House Country Report[24] and the 2012 African Media Barometer Report[25] for the DRC have shown that, although media freedom is guaranteed in the Constitution, journalists often face criminal defamation lawsuits, threats, detentions, arbitrary arrests, physical attacks and even assassinations. Nonetheless, news media in the DRC were credited for highlighting the use of hate speech, electoral violence, the partisanship of the electoral body, CENI, and other anomalies in the 2023 election.[26]

ZIMBABWE

Zimbabweans went for elections on the 23rd of August 2023. The Zimbabwean political landscape is characterised by a dominant party system without the democratic conditions found in similar polities such as Namibia and South Africa. Zimbabwean political elites are also closely intertwined with the military, which, among other security arms, creates a repressive and hostile environment that emasculates opposition political actors and critical non-state media.[27] The credibility of the electoral process in Zimbabwe, including during the latest election, has been consistently questioned by various opposition political actors, citizens, the media, scholars and international election observer groups.[28] Some of the issues raised by election observer groups revolve around pre-election violence against opposition supporters, the conduct and integrity of Zimbabwean elections—highlighting the secrecy around the voters' roll, which is usually fraught with problems, the disenfranchisement of the diasporic vote, vote tallying irregularities and late publication of results, *inter alia*.

21. Fesmedia. (2019). *African Media Barometer: Burkina Faso*. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.
22. Freedom House. (2024). Burkina Faso. Freedom House. https://freedomhouse.org/country/burkina-faso/freedom-world/2024
23. Freedom House. (2024). Democratic Republic of Congo. Freedom House. https://freedomhouse.org/country/democratic-republic-congo/freedom-world/2024
24. Freedom House. (2024). Democratic Republic of Congo. Freedom House. https://freedomhouse.org/country/democratic-republic-congo/freedom-world/2024
25. Fesmedia Africa. (2012). *African Media Barometer: Democratic Republic of Congo*. Fesmedia Africa. https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/africa-media/09426.pdf
26. Insecurity Insights, Mercy Corps. (2023). DRC Election Analysis FM Radio + Social Media: Analysis of Key Issues, Threats, INGOs and Public Perception: November 1 – 30, 2023.
27. Maringira, G. & Masiya, T. (2017). When the Military Become a Security and Political Threat: Zimbabwean Army Generals in Electoral Politics. *African Security Review*, 26(4), 399-412.
28. Makonye, F. & Rukema, J. R. (2019). Elections in Zimbabwe: The Mugabe Years. *The Journal of Social, Political, and Economic Studies, 44*(3/4), 298-317.

Zimbabwe's electoral body, the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), is also seen as lacking independence from the ruling ZANU PF party and the military, some of whose retired officers are members of the former. Although political parties can be established with little hindrance in Zimbabwe, the activities of opposition parties tend to be hampered through the harassment, arrest, detention and beating of their supporters as well as leaders. Considering the gravity of these caveats to democratic electoral processes in Zimbabwe, the oversight role of the media, in whatever form, cannot be over-emphasised.

Although the constitution provides for both freedom of expression and the media, in practice, these affordances remain largely nominal. The media landscape is hyper-polarised, with state media generally operating as an extension of the ruling party. In contrast, corporate media align themselves with the main opposition party, the Citizens' Coalition for Change (CCC), which has since started disintegrating following the recalling of several of its elected members of parliament by the Party's Secretary General Sengezo Tshabangu and the consequent departure of its popular leader, Nelson Chamisa. Community and commercial broadcasters are dominated by forces pliant to the ruling elite. In the 2023 election, state media's predilection for the ruling ZANU PF was evident in the topics that it gave prominence and salience. For instance, it focused on the infrastructural projects spearheaded by the government, government efforts at controlling the runaway increase in commodity prices, ZANU PF political rallies, formal election processes such as the nomination of candidates by the Nomination Court and defended ZEC whose handling of the voters' roll was a matter of contention. According to Media Monitors, the activities of the main opposition party were either ignored or pilloried by state media.

Meanwhile, privately owned print media focused on issues that affect an ordinary person on a daily basis such as low standards of living, unemployment, poor governance, imbalances in resource allocation, and labour strikes, among others. This line of coverage was also replicated by online media. By and large, commentary was generally sought from elite voices although citizen voices were also incorporated on their preparedness and desire to vote. Privately owned news media and online media were noted for their critical commentary on the electoral process, highlighting in particular the issues of concern regarding the electoral body ZEC such as delays in the nomination process, challenges faced by candidates especially the cost of nomination, and intra party tension arising from the questionable selection of candidates by political parties.

Female candidates and sources were not adequately represented in the coverage in comparison to their male counterparts, more so, by state media, in particular broadcast media. The Media Monitors also highlighted how lower-level governance structures were neglected by news media in preference of issues pertaining the presidential election, despite the former's significance to local communities. News about the ruling ZANU PF party dominated coverage in comparison to other parties including the main opposition, CCC. The discrepancies highlighted in the foregoing discussion

imply that the voter remains under and/or misinformed about pressing issues and the dysfunctions of the electoral process, thereby undermining their full informed participation therein.

Furthermore, violence and threats against journalists persist, and restrictive laws limit freedom of the press, expression and access to public information. During the elections, international journalists were restricted from covering the poll. Critical political discourse was also limited by the signing into law of the Patriotic Bill, which imposes severe penalties on Zimbabweans who are perceived as working against the country's interests. There were also cases of journalists being beaten by ZANU PF supporters.

NAMIBIA

Famed for its sound democratic credentials, Namibia presents various indicators of a bona fide democracy. It has been characterised as a functioning multi-party democracy with a robust framework for protecting civil liberties enshrined in the constitution. However, discontent has been raised in terms of ethnic inclusivity. Elections in Namibia are generally considered peaceful, their outcomes as credible, and they are implemented fairly and competently. The last election in 2019 was declared free and fair by observers, albeit, with a few reservations.

Nonetheless, according to the 2023 Freedom House Report on Namibia, opposition parties objected to the appointment of the head of the Electoral Commission of Namibia (ECN), who they argued is associated with the ruling South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) party. Political parties form and operate freely. Parties receive fiscal support corresponding to their representation in parliament. Citizens are free to express themselves. The judiciary is independent, although it has limited financial resources. Women's participation in public life is significant, and the elected government is seen as driving policy-making activities. However, concerns have been raised about the growing influence of the Chinese Communist Party and the inability of parliament to timeously pass key legislation aimed at expanding the democratic space.

Regarding the state of the media, Namibia's constitution guarantees media freedom and freedom of expression. Journalists face few legal restrictions and work in a relatively safe environment. The judiciary protects media freedom. Outside economic limitations, Namibian citizens have unfettered access to international media, which widens the breadth of information sources available to them.

Nonetheless, there have been occasions where the police have harassed journalists using rubber bullets. Furthermore, the 2022 African Media Barometer (AMB) report for Namibia highlighted several concerning issues regarding media freedom, plurality and diversity.[29] For instance, it highlighted that there were reservations about the editorial independence of the national broadcaster, the Namibia Broadcasting Corporation, the Namibian Press Agency and the New Era, a state-owned newspaper. The Namibian media sector is also concentrated around two major proprietors, the Government and a private conglomerate, Namibia Media Holdings (NMH).

The 2022 AMB for Namibia also highlights concerns about the media's privileged treatment of the country's dominant ethnic group at the expense of minority groups. Indigenous communities such as the OvaHimba and the San, as well as persons with disabilities, have also been noted for their exclusion from public discourse, especially as this pertains to their experience of marginalisation. Also, because of shrinking revenues, it has been highlighted that Namibian news media are susceptible to control and influence by large institutions and corporations with consequential impact on their content.

Nonetheless, Namibian news media are expected to live up to the country's ranking as the freest media space on the continent and provide significantly useful coverage of the country's election process. What may differ from one media house to another is the editorial emphasis on particular issues depending on ownership patterns and ideological orientation.

SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa is a constitutional democracy known for venerating human rights and promoting multi-party democracy through free and fair elections. The Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) is considered independent, and the electoral framework is fair.[30] Nonetheless, concerns have been raised about corruption in government and the integrity of the IEC's leadership as it is associated with the ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC). The South African political environment is largely free from constraints and opposition parties are flourishing, although some incidents of violence limit citizen participation in politics. Moreover, the decline of the ANC's support affirms South Africa's status as a multi-party democracy. People's political choices are free, the military stays out of politics, adults are accorded full rights, and women are well represented in government structures. In addition, the 2024 post-election coalition arrangements that brought the Democratic Alliance and the ANC together in government also evinces the versatility of South African democracy. The judiciary is also largely independent. However, some have argued that the legacy of apartheid places South Africa in the category of a transitional society[31], which is the context within which the country's political-economic and media landscape must be understood and analysed. In South Africa, as some have argued, the structuring effects of the colonial and apartheid systems continue to shape social arrangements in contemporary times. This implies that despite the progress made in South Africa's transition to democracy, its socio-political, economic and civic arrangements reflect and, in some cases, amplify patterns of social injustice therein.[32]

Freedom of expression and the media are provided for in the constitution and South Africa has an expansive, vibrant and adversarial media landscape as well as active and independent civic organisations.[33] The South African media landscape is organised in a three-tier system with public, commercial and community media operating in complement and counterbalance of each other. Public and community media focus on those issues and social groups that are not appealing to the advertiser predilections evident in South Africa's expansive commercial media.[34] The Media Development and Diversity Agency (MDDA), a partnership between the South African government and corporate media established in 2003 to capacitate community media that cater to the interests of historically marginalised communities as well as language and cultural groups that are under threat of effacement evinces the democratic and inclusive orientation of South African media.[35] This is a unique intervention to remedying South Africa's "highly concentrated and conglomerated" media ecology.[36]

It is also important to note that despite the democratic transformation that has happened to the media sector in South Africa, there have been a few cases of concern. For instance, political interference and intolerance of media criticism, especially regarding the South African Broadcasting Corporation, were noted during the Jacob Zuma presidency.[37] In addition, South African media have been criticised for their orientation towards the social elite and apathy towards those in the lower rungs of society. Nonetheless, the country's media has also been lauded for facilitating robust citizen engagement and playing the watchdog role. This has kept powerful political actors and institutions in check and enabled the media to investigate and reveal cases of grand corruption in South Africa. The enabling structural conditions hinted to above thus, portend that South African media would competently perform the monitorial and facilitative roles vigorously in the run up to the 2024 national elections. For instance, pre-election media monitoring showed that South African media covered critical issues regarding the elections. These include, among other things, political party manifestos, incidents of political violence and intimidation, political party campaigning, political party politics, and election logistics.[38] Arguably the political conditions and will to promote and sustain democracy in South Africa provide the necessary framework and conditions for the media to perform a more functional role in reporting elections despite some attempts to subvert these roles.

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CONCLUDING REMARKS: PATHWAYS TOWARDS A DEMOCRATIC AFRICA

From the discussion above, a few conclusive points can be delineated. To begin with, the paper shows that the democratic deficit in Africa is manifested in the interplay between political conditions and civic conditions, wherein the latter is contingent on the former. In other words, undemocratic political systems preclude both democratic elections and a free, independent, diverse and plural media ecology. More specifically, the paper shows how military regimes that usurp power through coups and are less open to handing over power to democratically elected administrations proscribe democratic processes such as elections and free media operations, which are key vectors in democratic polities. To nip the challenges that come with authoritarian regimes in the bud, the African Union and regional bodies must enforce the observation of democratic principles and practices by member states to preclude military takeovers, which are often executed in the name of citizen interests and response to the failures of 'elected' civilian governments. It is also evident that the resilience of a dominant party system in countries like Zimbabwe and Mozambique is sustained by somewhat repressive political systems. Such political arrangements foster social polarisation at the political and media levels, making it difficult to nurture a culture of political compromise and tolerance. For the media to transcend this political dynamic, such countries must embrace genuine multi-party democratic systems. Conversely, the cases of Namibia and South Africa show a steady decline in fortunes for the dominant parties, indicating that these countries are functioning multi-party democracies. This diversity of political association is also reflected in their media landscape, which is expansive, generally free, and independent. Lastly, the cases above show that military coups paralyse democratic processes and practices in the political and media spheres. To make matters worse, democratic institutions also become paralysed, exposing ordinary people to abuses without proper recourse to the judiciary system. Ultimately, therefore, the democratic deficit in Africa is manifested, for better or worse, in the dialectical relationship between the political and civic spheres with direct implications on the nature and conduct of elections.

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ABOUT THIS PROJECT

Fesmedia Africa is the regional media project of the Friedrich Ebert-Stiftung (FES) in Africa. Its work promotes a free, open, liberal and democratic media landscape that enables ordinary citizens to actively influence and improve their lives, as well as those of the communities and societies they live in. Fesmedia Africa believes that in order to participate in public life and decision-making, people need to have the means, skills and opportunities to access, exchange and use information and knowledge. They need to be able to communicate and exchange ideas, opinions, data, facts and figures about issues that affect them and their communities.

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JOURNALISM AND ELECTIONS IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA
LOCATING THE DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT

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It is axiomatic in conversations about democracy that elections are the quintessential gateway through which to induct members of a defined society into active citizenship. Free, fair and inclusive elections endow citizens with the power to decide the kind of future they want across social, economic, political and cultural dimensions.

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Patently, also, journalism is the oxygen of democratic processes and institutions in modern society as it is news media that provide citizens with the necessary information to make informed choices during elections, a platform to deliberate on pressing issues of common interest, provide oversight on public institutions and authorities, and that prompt citizens to collectively formulate solutions to contemporary and future challenges.

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Given a plethora of extant threats to democracy on the continent, Africa is arguably at the crossroads, where she has to choose between accountable leadership, inclusive representation as well as democratic governance, and authoritarianism, economic decay and death. A redemptive departure point is the creation of political conditions that enable and enhance informed citizen participation through free, fair and credible elections as this can provide a definitive rupture between the two, in favour of the former, as this article argues.

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