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# PROSPECTS FOR DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE IN AFRICA DURING UNCERTAIN TIMES

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# Introduction

Democratization in Africa is at a crossroads. On the one hand, there have been impressive strides in democratic deepening in recent years. For instance, after more than 60 years in power, the Botswana Democratic Party peacefully transferred power to the Umbrella for Democratic Change in 2024 (Dube, 2024). In the same year in Ghana, Mahamudu Bawumia, presidential candidate of the incumbent New Patriotic Party, graciously conceded defeat even before the official electoral results had been announced. Equally key have been moments when democratic crises have been averted via judicial efforts—such as in Kenya in 2017 (Freytas-Tamura, 2017) and Malawi in 2020 (Jegwa, 2020)—or through long-standing efforts of civil society activists, including in Zambia in 2021 (Resnick, 2022) and Senegal in 2024 (Yabi & Holman, 2024).

On the other hand, scholars have noted a more long-standing pattern of constitutional coups in the region, whereby leaders alter constitutions to change term limit, age, or nationality requirements to entrench their incumbent advantage (Mbaku, 2018). This is one tool of the broader phenomenon of democratic backsliding, where democratic systems are slowly hollowed out by manipulating elections, repressing opposition parties and media, and weakening the checks and balances that should be provided by legislatures and the judiciary (Bermeo, 2016; Cheeseman & Klaas, 2018; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Benin represents a quintessential example of this trend; once lauded as a forerunner of Africa’s democratic reforms in the 1990s, the country has experienced a precipitous democratic decline since 2016 due to repression of the media through disinformation laws, the use of the courts to target opposition parties, and amendments to electoral laws that reduce the scope of contestation at local, parliamentary, and presidential elections (Koter, 2024). Most worryingly, military coups—which plagued the continent prior to the 1990s—have made a resurgence. Since 2020, there have been 13 total coup attempts, eight of which succeeded (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2023), and these have truncated fragile democratic openings, especially across the Sahel region.

Based on these divergent trends, the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project estimates that democracy levels in Africa have reverted back to their 2000 level (Nord et al., 2025a: 11). More specifically, of the 46 sub-Saharan African countries with data from V-Dem, the number of electoral democracies in 2024—15 countries—is equivalent to the number in 2004. During that 20-year period, however, only seven countries consistently retained their democratic status, while 27 countries remained autocracies. Of the remaining countries, five countries that were democracies in 2004 reverted to autocracies by 2024, while seven additional countries graduated to become electoral democracies.<sup>1</sup> In sum, while overall levels of democracy on the continent appear stagnant, the region is experiencing vastly different regime trajectories. Moreover, within disparate regime types, there are multiple and simultaneous pressures to either facilitate or avert democratic backsliding in different domains. Free and fair elections may still be marred by a lack of party institutionalization, judicial independence may flourish even when legislatures remain rubber stamps, and, as argued by Rakner and van de Walle (2022), norms upholding gender equality might be espoused in political systems otherwise hostile to broader civil liberties.

What explains these different trajectories? What are the main contributors to democratic resilience? What are some of the tipping points that foster democratic resilience or entrench autocracy? And when does resilience morph into stagnation, failing to lead to more transformative political change? This paper addresses these questions by summarizing the findings from a Brookings Institution project on “The state of

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1 These trends are based on V-Dem’s Regimes of the World Index (which includes closed autocracies, electoral autocracies, electoral democracies, and liberal democracies) and more specifically, V-Dem’s polyarchy metric of electoral democracy. Typically, V-Dem considers a country an electoral democracy if the country scores 0.5 to 1 on its polyarchy index and has free and fair elections. The number of electoral democracies also encompasses liberal democracies (i.e. if a country is a liberal democracy, is by default also an electoral democracy but not vice versa). As of 2024, only Seychelles and South Africa were classified as liberal democracies.

democracy in Africa: Pathways towards resilience and transformation.” The project focused on five country case studies to better understand how distinct regime pathways emerge and why some countries—both authoritarian and democratic—remain relatively stable over time while others experience incremental improvements or deteriorations in specific political domains.

Specifically, we focus on three domains that are proxies for democratic resilience: vertical, horizontal, and diagonal accountability. Vertical accountability captures the mechanisms that allows citizens to hold leaders accountable, particularly through free, fair, and meaningful elections or political parties (Signé, 2018; Walsh, 2020; Lührmann, Marquardt, and Mechkova, 2020). Horizontal accountability refers to the ability of other branches of government institutions to hold governments responsive via checks and balances (Signé, 2018; O'Donnell, 1998; Walsh, 2020). The concept implies that government institutions are independent, and no agency or branch becomes too powerful compared to the others (Signé, 2018). Diagonal accountability captures the ability of non-state actors, including media or civil society, to hold governments accountable, connecting and enhancing horizontal and vertical accountability (Signé, 2018; Walsh, 2020). Such non-state actors promote the responsiveness of government by “educating citizens, denouncing wrongdoing, and providing innovative policy, societal, and business solutions” (Signé, 2018) and by organizing protests, information campaigns, and other forms of engagement (Walsh, 2020).

Across these three domains, we summarize how Ghana steadfastly remained an electoral democracy for the last two decades while Zimbabwe consistently has remained an electoral autocracy during the same period. Between these two extremes, other countries have experienced more movement. Most dramatically, Mali moved from being an electoral democracy to a closed autocracy in the wake of its 2021 coup. Throughout the last 20 years, Kenya has shifted multiple times between electoral autocracy and electoral democracy. The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) moved from being a closed autocracy without any elections to an electoral autocracy with flawed multipartyism during

the same period. By using these five countries as archetypes of different trends—progression, stagnation, or decline—we can elucidate the binding constraints to, and enablers of, democratic resilience within Africa.

The following section elaborates on why a concentration on African democracy is warranted even though the issues and dynamics are relevant across the world. Subsequently, other recent literature on democratic resilience is examined. This is then followed by a description of the case study methodology and the reason for focusing on these particular five countries. Comparative lessons across our case studies are then presented, drawing on analyses from Batumike, Bauma, and Stearns (2025), Bleck and Soumano (2025), Ofosu et al. (2025), Otele, Kanyinga, and Mitullah (2025, forthcoming), and Tendi and Dendere (2025). Collectively, these studies highlight several key factors, including the importance of professional civil-military relations, the role of party structures, and the impacts of inequality, corruption, and security threats on citizens' trust in democracy. The final section concludes by discussing avenues for additional research, including the legitimacy of Africa's regional institutions in promoting good governance, the long-term impacts of civil society on democratic backsliding, and the shifting environment for democracy in the face of technological advances that can promote digital repression.

## African democracy in global perspective

While democracy is increasingly under threat globally (Boese et al., 2021; EIU, 2025; IDEA, 2024; Nord, Altman, et al., 2025), the structural factors exacerbating the risks of backsliding are particularly high in Africa. Specifically, between 2013 and 2023, the number of conflicts in Africa almost doubled, from 15 to 28 (Rustad, 2024). This diverts scarce resources to military rather than development expenditures, enables leaders to use diversionary war tactics to stay in office well after constitutional constraints would allow, and provides a justification for digital repression and surveillance of opponents. In addition, more than one-half of African countries are at high risk or already

in debt distress (Afreximbank, 2024). The way in which resources have either been mishandled for nonproductive purposes, and/or the need to implement economic austerity and tax increases to address debt restructuring demands has been highly unpopular. Protests over spending, tax, and austerity reforms have erupted in many of the region’s countries in recent years—from Kenya and Nigeria to Ghana and Uganda (Najimdeen, 2024).

Such protests indicate a lack of trust by citizens in their governments’ abilities to manage such reforms in ways that support the public good. As seen in figure 1, trust in presidents, parliamentarians, electoral commissions, and the courts has declined over the last two decades—even as trust in the army has remained unaffected. In fact, as of 2023, the army is the only institution which more than 50% of the surveyed population expresses that they trust “a lot” or “some-what”, with slightly higher rates among countries in the

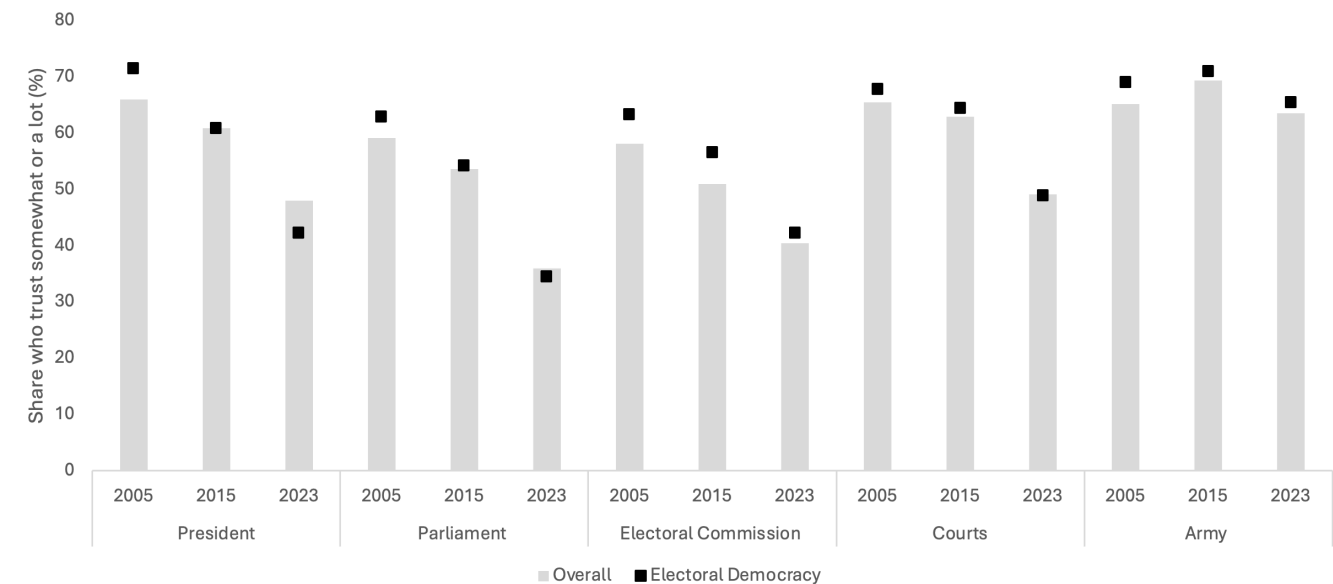
region classified as electoral democracies.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, recent aid cuts by Western donors, particularly by the U.S. government as well as the U.K. and several European actors, have particularly hit the democracy and governance sector in the region (Hourelid & Dixon, 2025), leading to less financial support in the coming years for party-strengthening activities, legislative budget offices, audit agencies, and electoral commissions.

The stakes are also high in the region for strengthening democratic resilience. Decentralization and devolution initiatives have multiplied the number of local, state, and provincial elections that are conducted across the region (Resnick, 2021). In addition, Africa remains the youngest continent, but young people are

2 Countries that were identified in the sample as electoral democracies were those that receive a 0.5 or higher on V-Dem’s electoral democracy index for the year in which the survey round was conducted. Based on this index, the number of electoral democracies has fallen over time, rising from 15 to 21 countries between 2005 and 2015 but then dropping to 16 by 2023.

**FIGURE 1**

### Trust in selected government institutions, over time and by regime type



**SOURCE:** Calculated from Rounds 3, 5, and 9 of Afrobarometer survey data. Missing data is excluded from the shares. Countries differentiated according to V-Dem’s electoral democracy index for the year in which the survey round was conducted.

found to have more dissatisfaction with democracy than their older cohorts in the region (Afrobarometer, 2024). Thus far, populist and national sovereignty discourses that dismiss democracy as a “Western construct” have been particularly embraced by the youth, especially in the Sahel region (Bøås & Haavik, 2025; LaBruto, 2023). African civil society associations have also been important watchdogs and protectors of democratic gains since the early 1990s, but their legacy of achievements is increasingly threatened by growing surveillance, internet shutdowns, arrests, and legal and financial pressures (Cheeseman & Dodsworth, 2023; Feldstein, 2021).

Because of Africa’s uniquely varied democratic trajectories, examining the institutional factors that contribute to democratic resilience or retrenchment in various African cases can help inform nuanced and context-specific discussions about global democracy trends.

## **Patterns of resilience and backsliding: A review of recent findings**

Democratic resilience, defined as “the ability of a political regime to prevent or react to challenges without losing its democratic character” (Merkel & Lührmann, 2021: 872), has been the focus of numerous publications in recent years (e.g. Arriola et al., 2022; e.g. Boese et al., 2021; Croissant & Lott, 2024; Holloway & Manwaring, 2023; Little & Meng, 2024; Merkel & Lührmann, 2021; Riedl et al., 2025; Walz et al., 2025). From the definition, resilience can only be tested in the face of either internal or external stressors. The concept can be further disaggregated into “onset resilience,” “breakdown resilience,” and “bounce back resilience.” Boese et al. (2021) define onset resilience as occurring when a democracy is able to withstand episodes of autocratization that could have led to democratic erosion. Breakdown resilience occurs when a democracy that is already backsliding resists

regime breakdown. Bounce back resilience is when a country is temporarily impacted by a shock but then is able to turn around quickly to re-establish its previous level of democracy or improve democratic qualities—even though they may still be substandard to the country’s previous level of democracy (Nord et al., 2025b).

Equally relevant, however, is authoritarian resilience. Authoritarian regimes can also adapt and innovate through a variety of mechanisms. For Gershewski (2013), three concurrent mechanisms need to be in place for authoritarian regimes to retain stability: repression, legitimation, and co-optation. Repression includes targeted coercion, harassment, and intimidation through outright violence against people or organizations and surveillance of their activities. Legitimation refers to a regime ascribing a mission to its rule that aims to discredit the opposition and generates a sense of fear of what could happen if the regime should collapse. For instance, parties born out of liberation movements may continuously conjure up their historical role to justify why they need to retain power. Alternatively, authoritarians may utilize economic programs, such as bread subsidies, to legitimize their rule and forge a social contract with the citizenry to accept limited political space in exchange for food security. Co-optation captures the notion of maintaining elite pacts, including with the business and military communities, to retain regime dominance. This is similar to Bueno de Mesquita et al.’s (2005) notion of the “selectorate” or the idea of a horizontal political settlement (Kelsall, 2018; Khan, 2010).

When stressors occur for authoritarian regimes, they may adapt these three mechanisms in new ways, including by using digital forms of repression (Feldstein, 2021; Michaelsen & Ruijgrok, 2024), drawing on networks of likeminded autocratic regimes to broaden coalitions (Koessel et al., 2020; Von Soest, 2015), and inverting norms—such as ones about preserving national sovereignty—in international fora to re-establish legitimacy (Ginsburg, 2020). In some cases, the same factors that undermine democratic resilience can do the same for its autocratic counterpart; for instance, just as Walder and Lust (2018) argue that one of the most decisive factors for democratic backsliding is often caused by shifts in elite and societal coalitions, the

same has been found for the collapse of authoritarian regimes (Geddes et al., 2014; O'Donnell et al., 1986).

The operationalization of these resilience sub-types requires focusing on a particular time period during which the dynamics of resilience are tested. We look at resilience in Africa from the mid-2000s onward. Moreover, following both Waldner and Lust (2018) and Little and Meng (2024), we argue that measuring resilience based on only one dimension—such as quality of elections or freedom of speech for civil society—is insufficient for capturing an accurate characterization of how and whether resilience has manifested. Instead, we focus on three proximate metrics of resilience: vertical, horizontal, and diagonal accountability. Case studies from different regions of the world have shown that the efficacy of these accountability mechanisms shapes resilience trajectories (Laebens & Lührmann, 2021).

## DRIVERS OF RESILIENCE

Often, work on resilience and backsliding reverts to discussing strength or degradations across one or more of these dimensions as also the cause of resilience or backsliding (Arriola et al., 2022). This can be tautological, causing the drivers to be equated with the outcomes of interest. Following Croissant and Lott (2024), we instead focus on sources of resilience capacity, identifying four interrelated factors that can undermine or strengthen these modes of accountability. These four factors are indicated on the lefthand side of figure 2 below.

The first of these factors is the nature of military-civilian relations, particularly the degree to which militaries exert disproportionate influence over civilian affairs. Historically, scholars have argued that granting the military autonomy in professional affairs mitigates its possible desire for greater political influence (Huntington, 2002). More recently, however, scholars have pointed to the importance of civilian oversight over military activities and professional education and external training to improve the transmission of norms about appropriate military behaviors (Berg, 2020; Feaver, 2005). Other research points to the intersection of resources with military influence; greater

military spending may reduce the likelihood of military elites staging coups while greater social spending could reduce rank-and file officers from engaging in coups (Albrecht & Eibl, 2018). In other cases, civilian leaders worried about their security may allocate resource rents and ownership of business enterprises to military leaders as an incentive for continued loyalty. Over time, this gives military actors off-budget revenue sources by which to sustain their power while undermining civilian oversight (Izadi, 2022). Sudan is the quintessential example of this dynamic (Resnick et al., 2025). In other cases, resource rents and economic mismanagement can reduce public support in the government, creating a more permissive environment for military intervention, especially where the public exhibits high trust in the military. Such trust can be driven by diversity in military recruitment such that the military is viewed as divorced from regional, ethnic, or political biases (Accorsi & Krebs, 2024). As seen in figure 1, trust in the military has remained relatively stable in the African context over the last twenty years. But while higher than for other institutions, trust in the military in Africa is still lower than is found elsewhere in the world (Accorsi & Krebs, 2024).

A second factor is the nature of elite coalitions and the degree to which political settlements are broadly disbursed or narrowly concentrated. While broad settlements depend on the alignment of multiple actors to move decisions forward—including unions, minority groups, and opposition parties—narrow settlements are limited to a small coterie of insider groups that control a disproportionate amount of power (Kelsall, 2018; Khan, 2010). These insiders may be from a particular region, ethnic group, religion, race, or economic class; they have more at stake from losing power, leading to potential manipulations of accountability mechanisms when excluded groups try to assert themselves. A similar concept is discussed by Croissant and Lott (2024) who refer to the distribution of power resources, noting that democracy is more resilient when a broader range of actors have the opportunity to participate, win power, and shape policy decisions. The design of political institutions can facilitate broader power distributions, including proportional representation, federalism and decentralization, and equitable campaign finance rules (Riedl et al., 2025).



A third factor we consider is the nature of party systems, which may crystallize around political settlements. The weakening of programmatic political parties, which mobilize voters based on policy programs or issue-based platforms, is often viewed as one enabling factor for democratic backsliding (Rosenbluth & Shapiro, 2018; Urbinati, 2019), mainly because it worsens ideological polarization across constituencies (Svolik, 2019). This may resonate with the reshaping of party politics and the growth of populism in Europe and North America (Mudde, 2007), but it has less explanatory appeal in Africa, where few countries have ever had programmatic parties (Van De Walle, 2007). In the African context, the importance of institutionalized parties—ones that have deep societal roots and which help stabilize competition—is more relevant. Specifically, several studies highlight that institutionalized systems better enable citizens to hold governments accountable and structure elite expectations so that democracy is viewed as a repeated game rather than a zero sum one (Lupu & Riedl, 2013; Schleiter & Voznaya, 2018). By contrast, personalized parties, which entirely revolve around one leader, can be more detached from societal roots, more dependent on leaders' charisma and networks, lack internal democracy, and lead to policy volatility based on the leaders' personal policy preferences (Rahat, 2024: 220-221).

A fourth factor considers the underlying political economy, including the degree of corruption and rent-seeking as well as the degree of inequality. Evidence of corruption and the lack of prosecution of offenders is widely linked with declining public trust in democratic institutions, even when elections perform well (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015: 32) and can undermine democratic accountability (Bauhr & Charron, 2018; Drapalova et al., 2019). Relatedly, economic inequality, especially when it manifests as intensive wealth concentration, can generate grievances and dampen political participation by the poor (Solt, 2008). Acemoglu and Robinson (2006: 1) argue that inequality reduces support for democracy among elites while Krieckhaus et al. (2014) find that sociotropic and retrospective perceptions of economic inequality reduce support for democracy by all social classes. These dynamics can be especially pronounced in parts of Africa; in fact, the gaps

between average incomes of the top decile and the bottom 50% is larger in Africa than in any other region of the world (Chancel et al., 2023). There are also vast geographical disparities, especially between rapidly growing urban areas and more remote rural locales (Chancel et al., 2023). Countries that disproportionately depend on natural resource rents, including from gold, timber, and oil often have higher levels of inequality than those with a more balanced economic profile (Tadadjeu et al., 2023).

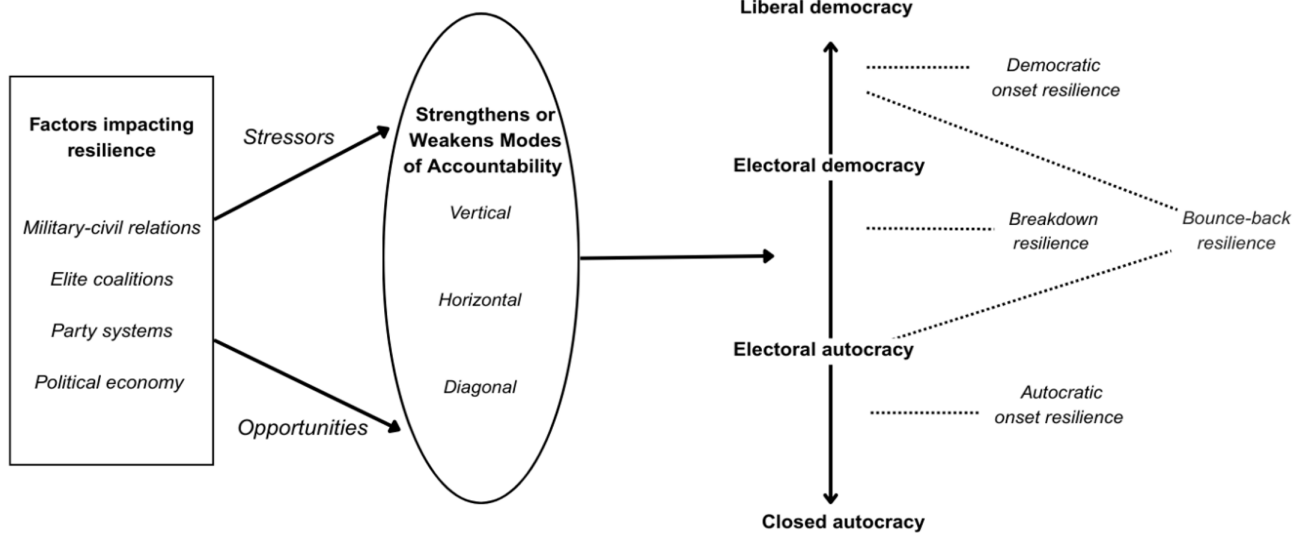
These factors can be either assets or liabilities when faced by an array of stressors or windows of opportunity, as depicted in figure 2. For instance, internal and external security threats can lead to greater executive aggrandizement to manage a real or imagined state of emergency that in turn jeopardizes horizontal accountability. The death of an autocratic leader may affect existing party systems or threaten existing elite pacts, representing a new beginning or leading to elite machinations to maintain the status quo. International sanctions may convince leaders to hold free and fair elections, supporting vertical accountability, or increase the intransigence of incumbents, causing them to repress domestic opposition to their governance.

Collectively, the combined effect of the key four factors alongside stressors or windows of opportunity can either strengthen or weaken the three modes of accountability, which in turn affect regime resilience, as shown in figure 2 below. On the right side of figure 2, we align the spectrum of political regimes with opportunities for testing resilience and the different types of resilience explained above. Following Lührmann and Tannenberg (2017), electoral democracies have free and fair multiparty elections, as well as freedom of expression and association. Liberal democracies not only possess these characteristics but also protect individual liberties and uphold the rule of law. Electoral autocracies hold elections for the chief executive but with minimal multiparty competition that is not free and fair, while closed autocracies do not hold multiparty elections for the chief executive. As noted, democratic onset resilience occurs to avoid backsliding while breakdown resilience occurs before a country stops holding free and fair multiparty elections. Bounce back resilience can occur either after



FIGURE 2

## Framework of drivers of regime resilience



SOURCE: Authors' rendition

gradual degradations from backsliding or more severe ones that almost lead to electoral autocracy. Finally, autocracies can prevent the onset of democratization through the tactics discussed earlier.

## Methodology: Comparative case studies

We apply the above framework to better understand regime resilience across Africa during the past 20 years with a deep dive analysis into five countries: the DRC, Ghana, Kenya, Mali, and Zimbabwe. Each country's democratic trajectories are explored through in-depth case studies drawing on scholarly accounts, Afrobarometer public opinion surveys, V-Dem, primary qualitative interviews, and participant observation to position each country's trajectory within its history and context to further unpack the drivers of democracy. In contrast to Arriola et al. (2022), this comparison combines anglophone and francophone countries. In doing so, the countries represent a fuller range of Africa's history and characteristics, including colonial history,

geographical location, and experience with conflict. Most importantly, they represent different experiences with democratic and autocratic resilience, helping to uncover lessons that are relevant to the broader region.

Figure 3 indicates the disparities across the five countries by plotting how African countries have fared between 2004 and 2024 based on the measure of electoral democracy used in V-Dem. This metric is an index that runs from 0 (worst) to 1 (best) and captures five components: the presence of elected officials in government, free and fair elections, freedom of expression, associational autonomy, and inclusive citizenship whereby all citizens, regardless of background, have equal access to resources, power, and freedoms (Teorell et al., 2016). Countries along the diagonal line have remained stable regimes across the twenty years. Those below the line are countries that experienced democratic declines while those above the line experienced democratic improvements. Notably, Ghana clearly demonstrates a strong degree of democratic resilience while Zimbabwe has been stubbornly autocratic during this period. Mali is clearly an outlier, along with Niger and Burkina Faso. Both the DRC and Kenya show some progress since 2014, albeit from starkly

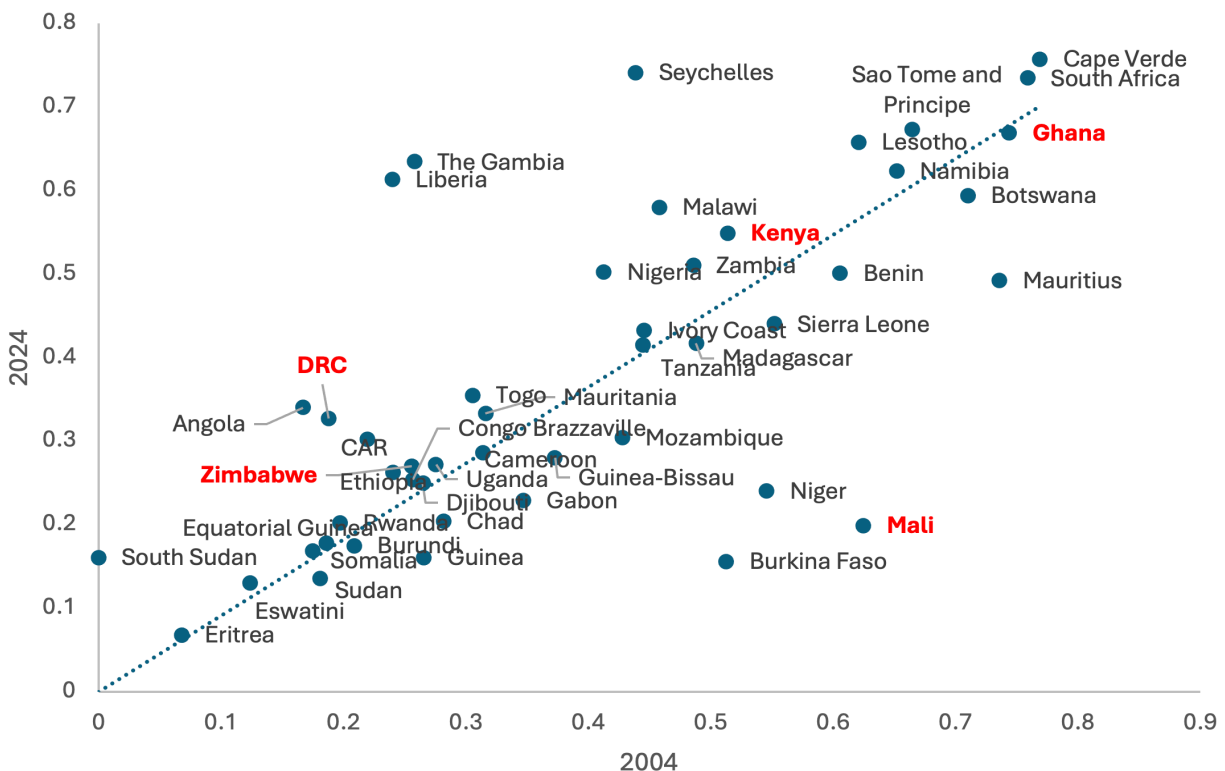
different starting points.

Figure 4 provides an alternative perspective that focuses just on the five selected case studies, drawing on V-Dem's regimes of the world index, which categorizes countries according to a four level categorization, running from closed and electoral autocracies to

electoral and liberal democracies. The figure demonstrates the number of years that a country has been categorized according to those four categories during the 2004-2024 period. This again underscores the variety of trajectory experiences that have been captured by our cases.

FIGURE 3

### African electoral democracy over time, 2004-2024



SOURCE: Calculated from V-Dem dataset by Coppedge et al. (2025) using the v2x\_polyarchy\_2004 and v2x\_polyarchy\_2024 indicators.

### DIFFERENT DIMENSIONS OF ACCOUNTABILITY

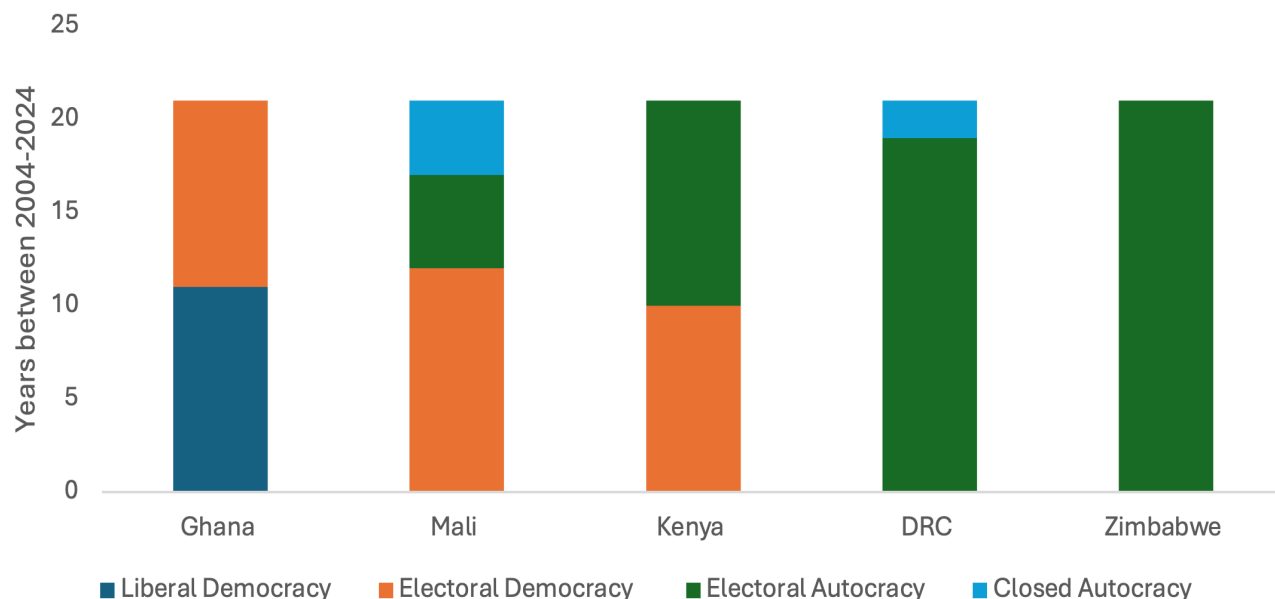
As noted earlier, we focus on the different dimensions of vertical, horizontal, and diagonal accountability to better differentiate which aspects of democratic resilience are most at threat or most robust. Figures 5 through 7 delve into these details using V-Dem's measures of those three metrics, with the x-axis referring to trends from 2004 and the y-axis capturing those 20

years later. These figures collectively reveal several trends.

First, there is a lot of movement of countries when examining the three figures collectively, highlighting the complex nature of overall resilience. Second, most of the failures of democratic resilience have occurred in the vertical accountability dimension, and the metric is capturing quality of elections, percent of enfranchised population, whether the chief executive is directly or indirectly elected, whether there are barriers to forming

FIGURE 4

## Experience with regime type over time



SOURCE: Calculated from Coppedge et al.(2025) using V-Dem's Regimes of the World Index.

FIGURE 5

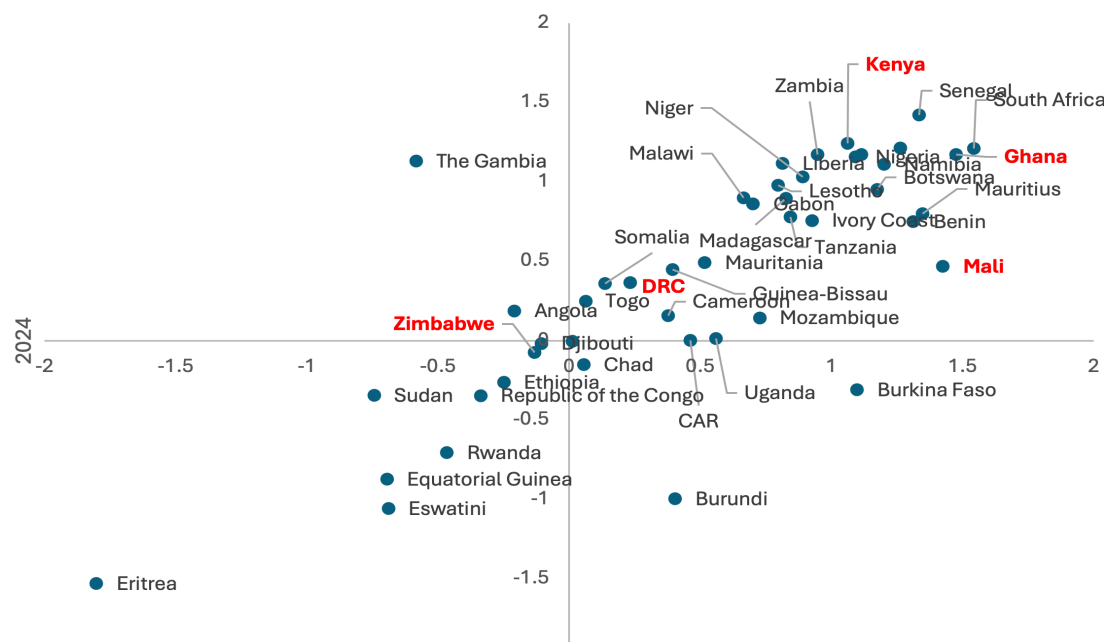
## Vertical accountability, 2004-2024



SOURCE: Calculated from Coppedge et al. (2025) using the v2x\_veracc indicators.

FIGURE 6

## Diagonal accountability, 2004-2024



a party, and the degree to which opposition parties are independent of the ruling regime. There are a sizeable number of countries in the bottom right quadrant, meaning that between 2004 and 2024, they fell from having positive scores on the vertical accountability index to negative ones. Third, there has been minimal change across the region in terms of the diagonal accountability metric, which includes media freedom, freedom of expression, the degree to which citizens are engaged in politics, and robust, self-organized, and autonomous civil society organizations; countries have stayed relatively the same over the last decade with a few notable exceptions. For instance, Gambia's impressive shifts demonstrated in Figure 3 are largely—though not exclusively—being driven by vast improvements in diagonal accountability. Finally, while horizontal accountability likewise has been relatively constant over the region, this is the dimension where

many more countries are in the bottom left-hand quadrant, suggesting that this is the metric where the least progress has been achieved. This metric captures the degree to which judiciary, legislature, and other oversight bodies (e.g. comptroller general, general prosecutor, ombudsman) hold the government to account.

Table 1 provides a comparison across our five focus countries according to not only the accountability metrics demonstrated above but also the various factors discussed in figure 2. An important takeaway from this table is that there is no one overarching factor that drives democratic resilience but rather a high level of equifinality, meaning that there are multiple routes to the same outcome (Ragin, 2000). This is often due to the dynamics of path dependence such that past choices impact future options (Pierson, 2004).

**TABLE 1**

### Comparison of country case study characteristics

Country	Ghana	Kenya	The DRC	Mali	Zimbabwe
Democratic resilience (1)	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Vertical accountability, degree of change (2004-2024) (1)	Declined	Improved	Improved	Declined	Declined
Horizontal accountability, degree of change (2004-2024) (1)	Improved	Declined	Declined	Declined	Declined
Diagonal accountability, degree of change (2004-2024) (1)	Declined	Improved	No change	Declined	Declined
Party system	Two-party	Multi-party	Multi-party, weakly institutionalized	Multi-party, weakly institutionalized	Hegemonic party
Military involvement (1)	Low, declined	Low, declined	Low, declined	High, increased	High, increased
Economic transformation (2)	Limited	Limited	Very limited	Very limited	Rudimentary
Natural resource rents as a % of GDP (average 2010-2021) (3)	11.3	2.2	23.6	9.3	5.5
Clientelism (1)	Medium, increased	Medium, increased	High, increased	Medium, decreased	High, increased

**SOURCE:** (1) Coppedge et al. (2025), (2) BTI (BTI, 2024a), (3) World Development Indicators (World Bank, 2025)

TABLE 1

Comparison of country case study characteristics

**NOTES: Democratic resilience:** Country has a 0.5 score or higher on V-Dem’s polyarchy index.  
**Military involvement:** To what extent is the power base of the chief executive determined by the military? Low = less than 0.3, medium = between 0.3 and 0.6, high = above 0.6.  
**Clientelism:** To what extent are politics based on clientelistic relationships? Low = less than 0.3, medium = between 0.3 and 0.6, high = above 0.6.  
**Economic transformation:** The degree of a country’s progress in developing a market-based, socially responsible economic system.  
**Nature resource rents:** The sum of oil, natural gas, coal, mineral, and forest rents.

Findings

Through detailed processing tracing, the in-depth country cases delve into this equifinality, helping to reveal the robustness of the framework in figure 2. Collectively, they indicate the importance of critical junctures that test resilience and capture both successful and failed cases of resilience. In addition, while not all the factors depicted in figure 2 are relevant in every case, at least one plays a strong role in each one. Below, we briefly summarize findings from the five case studies.

GHANA: SUCCESSFUL DEMOCRATIC ONSET RESILIENCE

Ghana represents a long-term stable democracy with high ratings in figures 5 to 7 for vertical, horizontal, and diagonal accountability. Multiparty elections have continued uninterrupted since the country’s transition to democracy in 1992, and the 2024 election solidified the country’s hard-won democratic credentials. Confirmed by the Coalition of Domestic Election Observers, John Dramani Mahama was declared the winner of the 2024 election and Ghana experienced its fourth successful peaceful transition of power since the beginning of the Fourth Republic. Ofosu et al. (2025) highlight that one of the main foundations of this successful transition is the country’s relatively institutionalized two-party system, supported by the National Democratic Convention (NDC) and the New Patriotic Party (NPP), which helps structure elite expectations about the rules of the game and ensures continued respect for independent oversight institutions. In the

authors’ view, the country’s long-continued traditions of democracy have contributed to a political culture that supports democratic principles. In this way, they affirm Lupu and Riedl (2013) and Bernhard et al.’s (2020) conclusion that institutionalized systems can help shape elite and public perception to view democracy as not a zero-sum game, supporting a political settlement that promotes rule enforcement.

Still, Ghana has faced several stressors that have tested this resilience. These include several electoral disputes that could have triggered constitutional crises, including most recently in 2020. According to Ofosu et al. (2025), though, such stressors have actually deepened Ghana’s democratic development, leading to reforms in electoral management, increased voter education, oversight of polls, and the use of the courts to adjudicate these disputes.

Nevertheless, resilience is transitory, and the country continues to face potential threats to its democratic credentials. Key among potential threats are the growth of electoral violence, vigilantism, and attacks on journalists (Asunka et al., 2019; Kwode et al., 2024; Owusu Kyei & Berckmoes, 2020). The authors also highlight that the country’s greatest progress really was in the first eight years of its democratic transition and there has been less progress in other domains. For instance, expensive nomination fees, the lack of clear campaign finance regulation, and minimal internal party democracy have allowed the elites of the NDC and NPP to become entrenched, limiting opportunities for smaller parties or candidates with less wealth to participate in elections on an even playing field. Forging connections with voters through



vote-buying rather than policy platforms also inhibits support for dimensions of liberal democracy, including gender equality. The extent and strength of Ghana's resilience will depend on whether these factors enable accountability during the next true test, as they did in 2020.

## **SUCCESSFUL BOUNCE BACK RESILIENCE**

Kenya represents an example of bounce back resilience. Like Ghana, the country formally transitioned to democracy in the early 1990s. Yet in contrast to Ghana, Kenya has faced greater political instability, corruption, violence, and ethnic tensions. Nevertheless, as shown by Otele, Kanyinga, and Mitullah (2025, forthcoming), the country has faced a gradual strengthening of vertical, horizontal, and diagonal accountability over time despite several stressors. The most severe stressor occurred in 2007-2008 with the electoral violence that killed more than 1,000 people. While executive dominance, massive corruption, and political exclusion along ethnic lines under Mwai Kibaki made that election especially contested, the subsequent violence resulted in a power sharing agreement with the opposition. The passage of the 2010 Constitution, resulting in greater devolution to the counties, further increased public trust in democracy while also creating more veto players in the system to mitigate its otherwise majoritarian institutional structure. Coalitions among party leaders and elites with important and numerically large voting blocs that alternate in and of out power remain a central feature to upholding the country's political settlement, while the establishment of the Supreme Court in 2013 and the maturation of the media and civil society creates further guardrails to prevent democratic erosion. In other words, and following the expectations of Riedl et al. (2025) and Croissant and Lott (2024), the 2010 Constitution helped broaden the distribution of power to reduce the zero-sum nature of electoral contestation. Like Ghana, the courts rather than the streets are increasingly being trusted to adjudicate electoral disputes, including the 2017 elections that pitted Uhuru Kenyatta against Raila Odinga and required an electoral re-run.

According to Otele, Kanyinga, and Mitullah (2025, forthcoming), Kenya's ongoing trajectory is now at

a crossroads. The 2022 elections revealed lapses in impartiality by the Independent Electoral Boundaries Commission, and under President Ruto, abuse of human rights, shrinking civic space, attacks on the judiciary, and corruption have increased. Citizens, likewise, are becoming increasingly dissatisfied with government, which was massively demonstrated during the 2024 Gen Z protests against the proposed finance bill, which sought to place new taxes on essential goods and services. The concern is whether discontent with one political administration will further undermine confidence in the country's democracy more broadly.

## **THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO: FAILED BOUNCE BACK RESILIENCE**

The DRC has experienced improvements since the early 2000s, when it was still considered a closed autocracy without even holding elections. However, today, it remains far from an electoral democracy (figure 3). Many frailties exist and in the coming decade, the country could backslide further. The DRC is a particularly interesting case because, as seen in figures 5 and 6, it performs relatively well on diagonal accountability, particularly civil society and media presence, but horizontal oversight institutions remain quite weak. Its marginal progress and many setbacks make it a compelling example of the failure of bounce back resilience as several opportunities to restore democratic qualities have not been seized.

In their case study, Batumike, Bauma, and Stearns (2025) emphasize the important role played by the country's wealthy elites—or oligarchs—who repeatedly have extracted resources from the state. In doing so, they represent a quintessential example of Kelsall's (2018) and Khan's (2010) narrow political settlement who benefit from large-scale corruption. Nevertheless, the period between the adoption of the 2003 Constitution and the 2006 elections proved an important window of opportunity for the DRC. The 2003 elections enshrined democratic principles after five years of conflict. Since then, the country has held four rounds of parliamentary and presidential elections (Batumike et al., 2025). The 2006 election, organized by the transitional government, saw the highest voter turnout

and was considered generally free and fair by official election observers (The Carter Center, 2006).

Yet after the 2006 election, democratic checks and balances began to be undermined. For example, in 2009, the National Assembly was described as an “echo chamber” or “antechamber of the executive” following the ousting of Vital Kamerhe’s as President of the chamber (Djambewa, 2017), while TV coverage of parliamentary debates declined and budgetary prerogatives were eroded (Batumike et al., 2025). The presidency also extended its influence in the judiciary through the High Council of Judges. Other independent agencies such as the media regulatory body, the human rights observatory, and the ethics and corruption commission eroded as well (Batumike et al., 2025). Since the 2006 election, the DRC has faced a steady decline in voter turnout rates with each subsequent election (Batumike et al., 2025). The continued proliferation of political parties—now numbering in the hundreds—fails to create any strong party-voter linkage that would facilitate the creation of programmatic policy orientations.

Moreover, the country’s military-civilian relations are very weak, due to successive efforts by former President Joseph Kabila to coup-proof the army by providing officers access to patronage networks, including kickback schemes, in exchange for loyalty. Declining military professionalism has hindered the army’s efforts at addressing various rebellions and armed conflicts in the eastern part of the country. The most recent intervention into eastern DRC by the M23 group will continue to serve as a stressor for the country’s resilience.

In sum, although the post-constitutional period offered a window of opportunity, the country has been in constant flux between democratic and autocratic impulses. The case reinforces how selective examples of accountability, such as those in the civil society sphere, are insufficient for improving resilience in a context of fragmented political parties, unbalanced military-civilian relations, and an exclusionary political settlement.

## **MALI: FAILED BREAKDOWN RESILIENCE**

Of all the cases, Mali demonstrates most clearly when and why breakdown resilience fails. After more than 30 years of military rule, Mali transitioned to a multi-party democracy in 1991 with two turnovers of presidential power before the country entered a volatile period of coups and counter-coups from 2012 onwards. Bleck and Soumano (2025) delve into the microfoundations of this breakdown by drawing on a mixed methods approach that includes focus group data from 66 informal tea-drinking groups in Bamako and Mopti along with detailed monitoring of political events in Mali over the last 30 years. The authors analyze the key issues and provide illustrative quotes from the focus groups that emerged from open-ended questions.

They find that the roots of Mali’s democratic breakdown originate in the public’s perception of a non-responsive, corrupt political elite, even at the local level, who competed via hundreds of weakly institutionalized political parties. Such perceptions were exacerbated by the vast inequality between Bamako and the country’s vast rural periphery. Consequently, instead of using multi-party institutions to resolve political conflict, Malians often relied on extra-institutional channels such as protests and lobbying, which ultimately led to institutional slack across horizontal institutions that were unable to check disproportionate presidential power. Given this context, security threats from various terrorist and rebel insurgent groups in the north since 2012 proved to be the major stressor for this country’s fragile democracy, continuously giving the military more primacy despite the institution’s weak tradition of transparency and internal disunity (Trapnell et al., 2024) and eroding public trust in civilian governance. The fact that the military has long been the most trusted public institution in the country further facilitated widespread support for the country’s various coups.

The findings from Bleck and Soumano’s (2025) analysis also helps explain more recent events in the country. Similar to the dynamics discussed by Arriola et al. (2022: 16-17), whereby autocratic leaders can legitimize their rule by mobilizing sovereignty discourses to discredit Western countries, the junta demanded

in 2021 the departure of “neo-colonial” French troops combatting insurgents under Operation Barkhane (France 24, 2022) as well as the U.N. mission known as MINUSMA. This resonated with the public given that Malians had not perceived substantial security improvements during the tenure of the Barkhane and MINUSMA missions. Since then, under Assimi Goïta, the junta has continued to entrench its rule by dismissing the censure of multilateral bodies and eliminating political parties, enabling Goïta to rule until 2030 (Njie, 2025). In sum, Mali suffered from deficiencies in all four factors highlighted in figure 2, including corruption and unequal development; a narrow political settlement that excluded certain ethnic groups; personalized, fragmented parties; and opaque military governance.

## **ZIMBABWE: AUTOCRATIC ONSET RESILIENCE**

Finally, Zimbabwe offers a vivid example of authoritarian resilience under ZANU-PF despite several democratic openings over the last twenty years. In fact, it has been described as a militarized, electoral authoritarian regime where elites have purposely fomented polarization to stay in office (LeBas & Munemo, 2019; Masunungure, 2011). Despite the promise of greater political pluralism in the wake of the 2008 elections, when longtime president Robert Mugabe was forced into a power sharing agreement with main opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai, this window of opportunity only proved a prelude to greater authoritarianism. Key to Mugabe’s continued authoritarian rule between 2008 and 2017 was complicity of the military.

In their study, Tendi and Dendere (2025) focus on a critical juncture in the country’s history, the 2017 ouster of Robert Mugabe by military generals. Drawing on secondary materials as well as revealing interviews with high-level diplomats, the authors argue that decisions by the international community not to declare Mugabe’s ouster a coup further undermined the country’s democratic prospects. This is because a coup declaration would have focused attention on the military’s role as the ultimate arbiter of the political settlement and the need for delinking the military from the ruling ZANU-PF party. Instead, the tolerance by the

West of the ouster and their singular focus on Mugabe’s successor, Emmerson Mnangagwa, rather than the broader political settlement resulted in a superficial transition that subsequently resulted in continued repression of opposition leaders and civil society voices. Furthermore, it left the military deeply connected to ZANU-PF. The absence of elite pacts among the opposition, evidenced from continued intra-party fighting—first by the MDC and most recently by the CCC—has further hindered the creation of united counterweights to the ZANU-PF dominance while the sizeable emigration of middle-class Zimbabweans has robbed civil society of an important constituency.

The Zimbabwe case overall demonstrates how narrow elite settlements and military power strengthen the ZANU-PF regime’s survival by undermining accountability rather than restoring it, especially when coupled with repression and co-optation. This case expands our understanding of resilience by showing that in autocratic contexts, windows of opportunity (and not just stressors) can test a regime’s underlying configuration.

## **Conclusions, applications, and areas of further research**

Resilience is a useful lens for capturing the dynamic nature of regime change and stagnation. The concept captures when stressors can be transformational or debilitating for a political system and when windows of opportunity can be widened or shut. While democratic resilience has been widely studied in recent years, the collective studies that are part of this project apply key concepts, including onset, breakdown, and bounce back resilience, to a diverse set of African countries while also indicating instances of oscillation. Through in-depth process tracing, the authors identify important triggers of breakdown as well as episodes when stressors were absorbed by an extant democratic regime. The cases collectively highlight that both democratic and autocratic resilience are shaped by

equifinality based on multiple configurations of the factors presented in figure 2. In addition, they show that standard democratic institutional checklists (e.g., holding elections, establishing legislatures) are inadequate for explaining variation in resilience.

Moreover, the case study findings can be generalized to African countries in equivalent circumstances. For instance, like Ghana, Botswana is one of Africa's longstanding democracies that was long centralized around a dominant party, the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) (Anim, 2025). Despite inequality, the country is well-recognized as managing its natural resources transparently and reinvesting profits in infrastructure and health systems (Ndlovu & Vandome, 2024). A broad political settlement exists, largely favored by the country's relatively homogeneous population around the Tswana, who constitute about 80% of the population (Anim, 2025). The main stressor to the country's resilience occurred in 2018, when former President Ian Khama fell out with his successor, Mokgweetsi Masisi, causing a breakdown in elite cohesion within the BDP (Makgala & Malila, 2022). However, the feud resulted in a window of opportunity for the opposition UDC in the 2024 elections, which defeated the BDP for the first time in the country's history.

Zambia's experience very much mirrors Kenya's as an example of bounce back resilience; in 2021, the victory of Hakainde Hichilema over an entrenched incumbent party that had sought to bias the electoral results and suppress civil society and independent media brought substantial hope to the region and reinvigorated opposition parties across Africa (Resnick, 2022).

Madagascar holds many parallels to the DRC's experience, desperately attempting to retain the outward trappings of democracy ever since 2013 when the country returned to multi-party elections after four years of instability following a coup in 2009. A narrow political settlement around ethnicity and caste, an electoral landscape with more than 200 political parties, strong interference of the military in politics, and vast rent seeking around timber and other natural resources (Anonymous, 2018; Freedom House, 2023; Marcus, 2016; Razafindrakoto et al., 2020) are all factors that continue to threaten the country's resilience

capacity.

Like Zimbabwe, Uganda very much represents an example of autocratic resilience under more than 30 years of rule by President Yoweri Museveni. As in Zimbabwe, where ZANU-PF had a liberation role during the war for independence, the Ugandan military remains central to the survival of the National Resistance Movement, which came to power through a war in 1986 (Tapscott, 2021: 48). Recognizing this, Museveni has placed loyalists and family members within top security roles while also allowing the military to pursue business interests (Tapscott, 2021: 60). Elections remain highly flawed and popular opposition candidates, including Kizza Besigye and Robert Kyagulanyi (Bobi Wine) have been detained and arrested numerous times on false pretenses (Freedom House, 2021).

Finally, Niger shares many similarities with Mali, including at least a decade of democratic civilian rule before a junta took power in 2023. The centrality of the military, which has long been viewed as a guardian of national stability, was a pivotal factor in the ouster of President Mohamed Bazoum, who had wanted to restructure the military chain of command—a factor that likely prompted his overthrow (Everett, 2023; Yabi, 2023). Like Mali, security threats from jihadist groups remain a continued stressor to the country's stability, while high levels of poverty and unemployment increasingly undermine public confidence in the country's ruling elites (BTI, 2024b).

Beyond the broader relevance of the project's findings to other African countries, the cases also raise at least three areas for further research. First, it is increasingly commonplace for scholars to argue that focusing on just elections is insufficient to restore, foster, or stabilize democracy. Broader socioeconomic and political conditions, including peace, institutional capacity, and civic space, often shape the extent to which elections are free, fair, transparent, meaningful, and competitive. An electoral timetable in transitional regimes or fragile democracy that ignores deeper structural problems could be viewed as a recipe for failure (Carothers, 2002). Indeed, both Bleck and Soumano (2025) and Tendi and Dendere (2025) make this claim for Mali and Zimbabwe respectively. Moreover, as Batumike,

Bauma, and Stearns (2025) show for the DRC, leaders can easily manipulate elections and resources to entrench their power. And yet, for countries like Kenya, strengthening the electoral process became the precedent for broader reforms that also reinforced mechanisms of horizontal and diagonal accountability (Otele, Kanyinga, and Mituallah 2025, forthcoming). As such, it is useful to consider when and why vertical accountability via elections is the precursor for reinforcing other accountability modalities in some countries but a source of instability in others.

Second, as the Zimbabwe case so clearly illustrates, external actors—ranging from international donors, diaspora communities, foreign investors, and regional organizations—play a pivotal role in Africa’s democratic and development trajectories. For instance, the African Union and regional economic communities often have provisions supporting democratic governance and denouncing unconstitutional changes in government. In addition, some Western trade deals have embedded support for democratic principles—including human rights, rule of law, and governance—within their rules of conduct, including the United States’ African Growth and Opportunity Act and the European Union’s Everything But Arms Initiative. Why have conditionalities from regional organizations and embedded within foreign trade negotiations worked to promote democratic transitions in some places (e.g. Gambia, Liberia, Madagascar) and not in others (e.g. Burkina, Ethiopia, Mali, Niger)?

Third, the rapid pace of technological innovation will prove to be a major stressor to democratic processes in Africa and elsewhere (Diamond, 2010). On the one hand, digital technologies offer prospects for expanded voting and greater public transparency while social media offers a more equal platform for disparate groups to participate in public discourse (Boulianne, 2015; Grossman et al., 2014). On the other hand, there are growing concerns about the use of digital repression and surveillance as well as the ability of artificial intelligence to promote misinformation (Feldstein, 2021; Patel, 2025: 9-10). When does technology become a tool to reinforce vertical, horizontal, and diagonal accountability, and when does it disrupt, distort, and invert those mechanisms?

Notwithstanding the importance of pursuing these and other possible areas for future research, the five case studies presented on democracy in Africa already offer important insights. Most notably, they reveal that democracy strengthening is a continuous process, and the strength of accountability mechanisms that uphold resilience is only revealed when they are genuinely tested—via a security threat, elite conflict, or societal polarization. Consequently, government actors, researchers, civil society, and development partners should be consistently risk-proofing against such stressors by rectifying weaknesses in resilience capacities and thereby building public trust in the democratic process.



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