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RETHINKING STRATEGIES FOR A PEACEFUL, SECURE, AND RESILIENT AFRICA

Governance, institutions, and state capacity

IMPROVING DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE IN AFRICA
Lessons from comparative case studies

DANIELLE RESNICK, Nonresident Fellow, Global Economy
and Development, Brookings Institution

LANDRY SIGNÉ, Senior Fellow, Africa Growth Initiative,
Global Economy and Development, Brookings Institution **@landrysigne**

Globally, democracy has been waning over the past two decades, marked by a rise of illiberal states, the deterioration of political and civil rights, and a fall in global voter turnout, according to multiple democracy tracking reports.[1] African countries are no exception to this trend, even as democracy remains the preferred form of governance for most citizens and voter participation remains relatively high.[2] Yet aggregate trends mask the significant divergences in democratic trajectories across the continent's 54 countries.

Analyzing diverse democratization trends such as these was a major focus of the Africa Growth Initiative's (AGI) project on the "State of democracy in Africa: Pathways toward resilience and transformation."[3] By looking at democratic resilience, which refers to

> **Democracy is not a linear process but a winding endeavor impacted by crisis events and windows of opportunity.**

"the ability to prevent substantial regression in the quality of democratic institutions and processes,"[4] the project recognizes that democracy is not a linear process but a winding endeavor impacted by crisis events and windows of opportunity.

The project utilized in-depth case studies of five African countries at various ends of the spectrum of democracy: the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Ghana, Kenya, Mali, and Zimbabwe. To provide more nuance about the trajectories in these countries, the project focused on three elements of accountability widely viewed by political scholars as essential for strong electoral democracies: vertical, horizontal, and diagonal accountability.[5] Vertical accountability refers to the relationships between

1   Anna Juhola, "Two Decades of Decline in the Global State of Democracy," *Demo Finland*, April 9, 2025.

2   Afrobarometer, *African Insights 2025: Citizen Engagement, Citizen Power: Africans Claim the Promise of Democracy* (Afrobarometer, 2025).

3   Details from the project can be found at: https://www.brookings.edu/collection/the-state-of-democracy-in-africa/

4   Vanessa A. Boese et al., "How Democracies Prevail: Democratic Resilience as a Two-Stage Process," *Democratization* 28, no. 5 (2021): 886.

5   Anna Lührmann et al., "Constraining Governments: New Indices of Vertical, Horizontal, and Diagonal Accountability," *American Political Science Review* 114, no. 3 (2020): 811–20,; Guillermo O'Donnell, "Horizontal Accountability in New Democracies," *Journal of Democracy* 9, no. 3 (1998): 112–26; Landry Signé, *Accountable Leadership: The Key to Africa's Successful Transformation*, Global Views no. 9 (Brookings Institution, 2018).

elites and citizens, often most clearly manifested through elections, while horizontal accountability encapsulates the ability of government oversight institutions, including the legislature, judiciary, audit bodies, and anti-corruption agencies, to exert checks and balances over the executive.[6] Diagonal accountability refers to the ability of non-state actors, including the media, universities, and civil society organizations, to ensure state leaders and institutions stay responsive to their constituents. Democracies are most resilient when all three types of accountability are robust.

Ghana has remained strong on all three dimensions of accountability over the last two decades,[7] while Zimbabwe has performed consistently poorly despite high hopes after Robert Mugabe's ouster in 2017.[8] Kenya has impressively bounced back since its extensive 2007 electoral violence,[9] while Mali has dramatically reversed democratic gains due to four successive military coups since 2011.[10] The DRC held elections in 2006 that were relatively free and fair—and has a relatively strong set of civil society actors—but has since experienced high levels of political volatility linked to a weak legislature, a proliferation of political parties with no clear policy agendas, and growing public mistrust of electoral processes.[11] These diverse starting points and trajectories offered the basis for structured comparative findings about drivers of and barriers to democratic resilience.

Four key factors emerged as instrumental in these patterns.[12] First, civil-military relations, which refer to the norms of engagement between civilian authorities and the military, impact accountability in crucial ways. If the military is given disproportionate decisionmaking power, then the security sector essentially becomes a parallel power structure that can interfere in elections, the bureaucracy, and civil society. By contrast, a professionally trained and apolitical military whose budget is overseen by civilians is key for ensuring peaceful transitions of power.[13]

Second, the underlying political economy—in terms of the sectors that drive economic growth and transformation—can impact elites' access to resources, degree of corruption, and the level of inequality in a country. In turn, these factors impact citizens' confidence and satisfaction with democratic processes, sometimes leading them to convey their grievances via protests rather than at the ballot box.[14]

Third, as echoed in research by Croissant and Lott,[15] the nature of elite coalitions is pivotal, including whether power is widely distributed amongst many different groups or only narrowly so amongst a privileged coterie of insiders. In the latter scenario, elites may have more to lose when their party is out of power and therefore are more inclined to manipulate accountability mechanisms to avoid such an outcome.

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Fourth, the makeup of party systems is determinative. Institutionalized party systems with historical or societal roots can better allow citizens to anticipate policy directions and structure elite expectations about the rules of the game than those party systems

6   Landry Signé, "Executive Power and Horizontal Accountability," in *Routledge Handbook of Democratization in Africa*, First (Routledge, 2019); Landry Signé and Koiffi Korha, "Horizontal Accountability and the Challenges for Democratic Consolidation in Africa: Evidence from Liberia," *Democratization* 23, no. 7 (2016): 1254–71.

7   George Ofosu et al., *Ghana's Democracy under the Fourth Republic* (Brookings Institution, 2025).

8   Miles Tendi and Chipo Dendere, *Understanding the Evolution and State of Democracy in Africa: The Zimbabwe Case Study* (Brookings Institution, 2025).

9   Oscar Otele et al., *Kenya's Resilient Democracy* (Brookings Institution, 2025).

10 Jaimie Bleck and Moumouni Soumano, *Explaining Mali's Democratic Breakdown: Weak Institutions, Extra-Institutional Alternatives, and Insecurity as a Trigger* (Brookings Institution, 2025).

11 Ithiel Batumike et al., *DRC: An Oligarchic Democracy* (Brookings Institution, 2025).

12 Danielle Resnick and Landry Signé, *Prospects for Democratic Resilience in Africa During Uncertain Times* (Brookings Institution, 2025).

13 Louis-Alexandre Berg, "Civil–Military Relations and Civil War Recurrence: Security Forces in Postwar Politics," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 64, nos. 7–8 (2020): 1307–34.

14 Monika Bauhr and Nicholas Charron, "Insider or Outsider? Grand Corruption and Electoral Accountability," *Comparative Political Studies* 51, no. 4 (2018): 415–46; Eliska Drapalova et al., *Corruption and the Crisis of Democracy: The Link between Corruption and the Weakening of Democratic Institutions* (Transparency International, 2019).

15 Aurel Croissant and Lars Lott, "Democratic Resilience in the Twenty-First Century: Search for an Analytical Framework and Explorative Analysis," *Political Studies*, SAGE Publications Ltd, June 28, 2025.

FIGURE 15

Country regime types since 2004

Total years under each regime type for Ghana, Mali, Kenya, DRC and Zimbabwe between 2004-2024
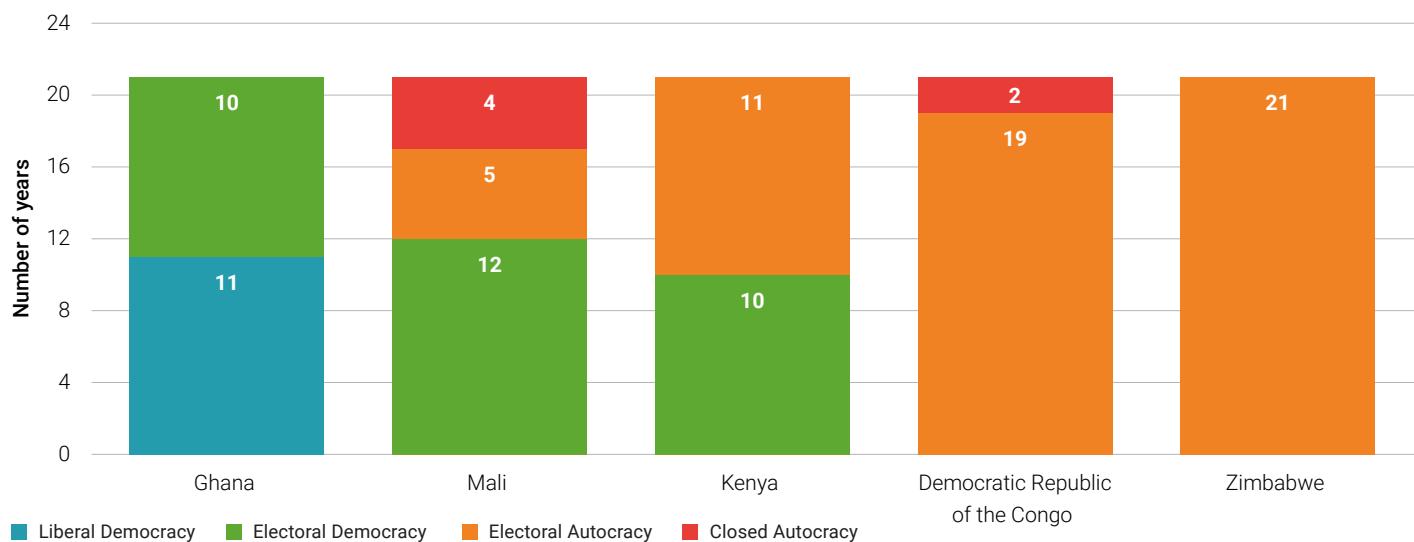
Source: Calculated from Coppedge et al.(2025) using V-Dem's Regimes of the World Index.

that revolve around an individual leader's charisma and personal connections.[16]

A second step of the project involved identifying feasible policy options to address democratic frailties identified in the country case studies. To enhance vertical accountability in Kenya, Otele, Kanyinga, and Mitullah (forthcoming) provide detailed prescriptions about how to improve Kenya's campaign financing architecture. Such prescriptions include, for instance, reforming political finance rules to curb elite influence through stricter enforcement and stronger audit trail requirements of donations, enforcing campaign expenditure laws by establishing a monitoring unit for campaign finance law, forensic accounting and digital auditing, and strengthening financial oversight institutions with independent resources and personnel.

Likewise, Ofosu, Selormey, and Dome[17] argue that a critical link in the vertical accountability relationship between voters and parties in Ghana are the grassroots party activists who often engage in vote buying and electoral violence on behalf of one of the country's two main political parties. The authors argue this constituency—thus far overlooked by democracy assistance donors—could benefit heavily from civic education efforts to inculcate democratic norms.

In Mali, which has a long tradition of civic engagement processes, including national dialogues and conferences, Bleck and Soumano[18] note that diagonal accountability could be enhanced by drawing on some of these indigenous practices. Namely, they advocate for the creation of citizens' assemblies where randomly selected citizens deliberate on key issues facing the economy and their communities and then send their recommendations to the government. Civil society can lead by organizing dialogue and informing the government of their own resolutions, which governmental bodies could then adopt. Parliamentary restitution could be improved and deployed more often to give MPs direct interaction with diverse populations. To improve political party quality, the election management body can deliver civic education through creative outlets like local radio, and the government can sponsor deliberative forums with civil society representatives and traditional and religious leaders, moderated by journalists.

16   Noam Lupu and Rachel Beatty Riedl, "Political Parties and Uncertainty in Developing Democracies," *t*46, no. 11 (2013): 1339–65; Gideon Rahat, "Party Types in the Age of Personalized Politics," *Perspectives on Politics* 22, no. 1 (2024): 213–28.

17   George Ofosu et al, *Shaping Democracy from the Middle: Party Grassroots and Ghana's Democratic Progress* (Brookings Institution, 2025).

18   Jaimie Bleck and Moumouni Soumano, *Consultations in Mali: Drawing on democratic heritage to deepen democratic practice* (Brookings Institution, 2025).

In Zimbabwe, Dendere (forthcoming) argues for expanded foreign investments in civil society groups that support human rights and fight corruption as well as broader engagement of the international community with the current government on trade issues that might concurrently incentivize the regime to embrace further governance reforms.

Finally, in the DRC, Stearns, Batumike, and Bauma (forthcoming) offer many suggestions for enhancing horizontal accountability; these include tackling the civilian-military imbalance by, among other tactics, eliminating discretionary benefits to the military that foster politicization and allowing for an independent investigation into army finances.

As another group of countries with wildly different democratic trajectories head to the polls in 2026, including Cabo Verde, Benin, Ethiopia, Uganda, and Zambia, the key findings from the AGI project about drivers of resilience can be more broadly tested. And, with the dramatic reduction in foreign aid for democracy assistance in 2025[19]—a trend likely to continue in the years to come— the project offers practitioners insights into the types of interventions that could be prioritized in contexts of resource scarcity.

FIGURE 16

Changes to electoral democracy 2004–2024

X and y axes measure democratic scores in 2004 and 2024 respectively, higher numbers indicate more democratic countries. Countries above the dotted line have become more democratic, countries below have become less democratic, while countries along the line have remained unchanged.
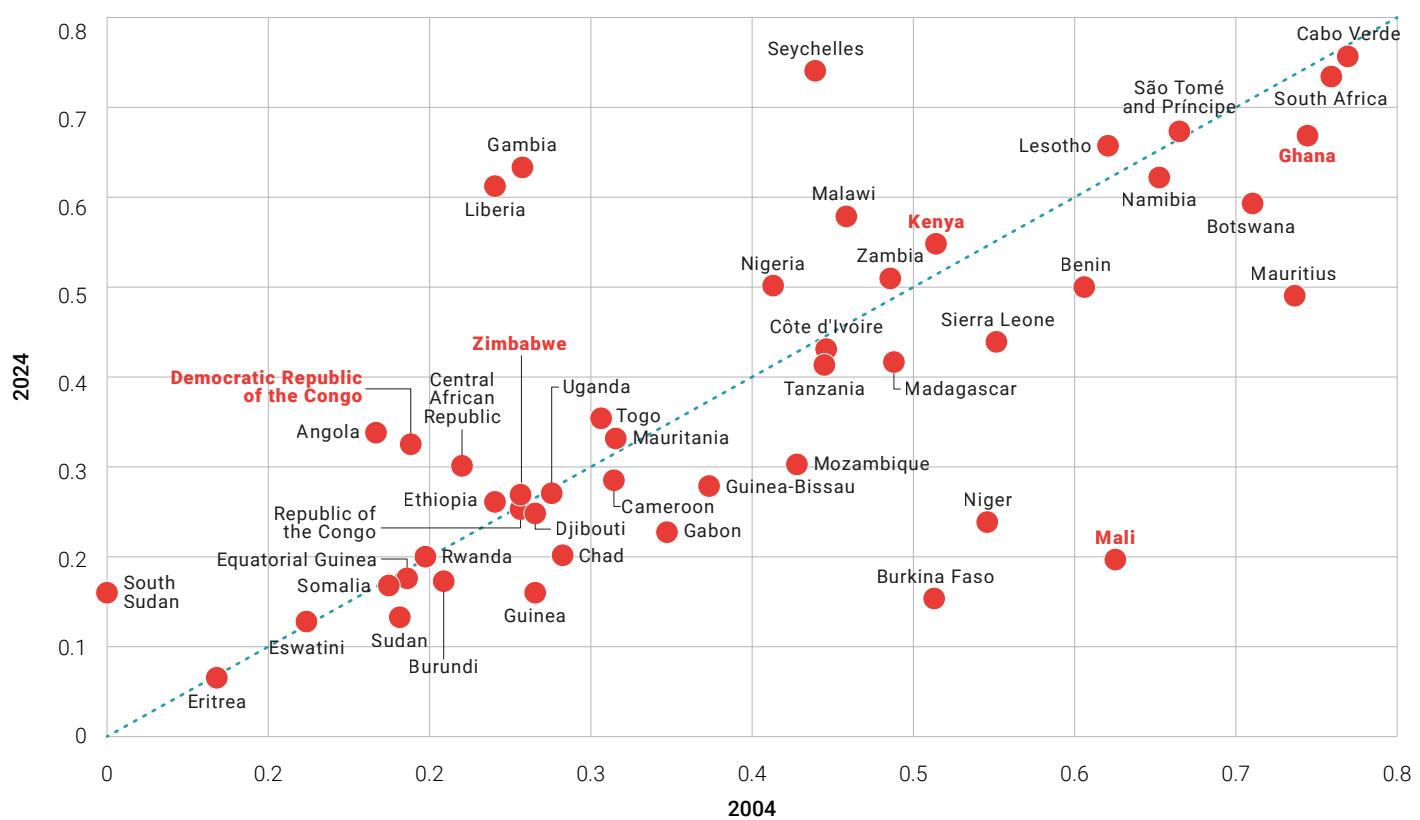
Source: Calculated from V-Dem dataset by Coppedge et al. (2025) using the v2x_polyarchy_2004 and v2x_polyarchy_2024 indicators.

19 Annika Silva-Leander et al., *When Aid Fades: Impacts and Pathways for the Global Democracy Ecosystem* (Global Democracy Coalition, 2025).

Rebuilding trust in governance in Africa

JAMES A. ROBINSON, Winner of the 2024 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences; University Professor, Harris School of Public Policy and Department of Political Science, University of Chicago

Comparative data suggests that there is a severe problem of trust in Africa. Summarizing data from 30 Afrobarometer surveys, Amessou Adaba and Boio find that fewer than one-half of people surveyed say that their president can be trusted, while trust levels in police, courts, and parliaments are even lower.[1] Though some scholars would interpret this as a sociological fact about African society, I would argue that it actually represents the failure of national institutions to be legitimate or accountable.

The reason for this was brilliantly characterized by the sociologist Peter Ekeh in the 1970s, who argued that the key to the nature of the post-colonial African state was the existence of "Two Publics." Ekeh argued that in Western countries, "what is considered morally wrong in the private realm is also considered morally wrong in the public realm."[2] In post-colonial Africa, however, "there are two public realms … with different types of moral linkages to the private realm." Ekeh went on to identify these two publics. The first corresponded to traditional small-scale African society, what he called the "primordial public." "The primordial public is moral and operates on the same moral imperatives as the private realm."[3] However, such primordial publics were merged together by colonial powers into colonies where "there is a public realm which is historically associated with the colonial administration and which has become identified with popular politics in post-colonial Africa … I shall call this the civic public." Critically, "[t]he civic public in Africa is amoral and lacks the generalized moral imperatives operative in the private realm and in the primordial public."[4]

It is the amorality of the civic public that creates the problem of trust. Ekeh's view suggests that the key political problem for post-colonial Africa is how to develop a political project or a set of institutions which can merge the primordial with the civic public. This is what the success stories in Africa have done, for example, what

1   Koffi Amessou Adaba and David Boio, "Across Africa, Public Trust in Key Institutions and Leaders Is Weakening," *Afrobarometer*, October 31, 2024.

2   Peter P. Ekeh, "Colonialism and the Two Publics in Africa: A Theoretical Statement," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 17, no. 01 (1975): 92.

3   Ekeh, "Colonialism and the Two Publics in Africa," 92.

4   Ekeh, "Colonialism and the Two Publics in Africa," 93.

Seretse Khama and the elites of the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) accomplished in the 1960s. In 1967, the anthropologist Adam Kuper was conducting fieldwork in western Botswana in the village of Kuli amongst the Ngologa people. On the third of February, less than six months after Botswana's independence, Vice President Quett Masire, the second most powerful figure in the ruling BDP, attended the Kuli "kgota," the traditional assembly. Kuper recorded in his fieldnotes:

> *"The Vice President addressed the kgota, urging progressive farming and other desiderata; he then fielded a number of questions from citizens, covering a number of Government policies, and in particular the new, higher school-fees."*[5]

By raising civic issues in a traditional setting, Masire was bridging the gap between the two publics. Something of the sort has been attempted in Somaliland since the 1990s.[6] In a sense, it is also what has happened in Rwanda over the past 30 years, where the government uses "home grown initiatives" to implement policy.[7] These initiatives tap into traditional structures and norms of society.

Apart from these relative successes, there have also been many failures. For example, Julius Nyerere's agenda for African socialism and "Ujamaa" (meaning "familyhood" in Swahili) was inspired by the idea that this was an axis which could tap into the "communalistic," traditional notions of African society and provide a bridge between the publics.[8] However, the political problem turned out to be too big for this to work in Tanzania.

How then can this problem, which still creates distrust today, be effectively addressed? The success stories chart the way. All of them have bridged the two publics by leveraging historic notions of legitimate authority and using these to forge a new social contract. There are no simple recipes here, but what is desperately needed are ideas and discussion about what might work. Outsiders can help in this process because there is a wealth of information elsewhere in the world about what might work. However, as Liberian intellectual Edward Blyden put it almost 120 years ago:

> *"If, therefore, Europe wishes to help Africa—and in her own interests she must wish to help Africa—she can do so effectively … only by assisting her in the maintenance and development of her own social system."*[9]

All success stories have bridged the two publics by leveraging historic notions of legitimate authority and using these to forge a new social contract.

5   Adam Kuper, *Kalahari Village Politics: An African Democracy* (Cambridge University Press, 1970), 99.

6   Seth D. Kaplan, "Somaliland: Reconnecting State and Society," in *Fixing Fragile States: A New Paradigm for Development*, 1st ed. (Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., 2008).

7   Rwanda Governance Review, *The Assessment of the Impact of Home Grown Initiatives*, Vol. IV, Special Issue (Kigali, 2014).

8   Robert Fatton, "The Political Ideology of Julius Nyerere: The Structural Limitations of 'African Socialism,'" *Studies in Comparative International Development* 20, no. 2 (1985): 3−24.

9   Edward W. Blyden, *African Life and Customs* (C.M. Phillips, 1908), 36.

Ending Sudan's civil war: A roadmap to peace and reconciliation

JOHN MUKUM MBAKU, Nonresident Senior Fellow, Africa Growth Initiative, Global Economy and Development, Brookings Institution

Why ending the Sudanese war matters

The Republic of the Sudan is Africa's third largest country by land mass and shares borders with seven other countries. The current conflict, which began in April 2023, has already had significant economic, social, humanitarian, and political ripple effects. According to the U.N., it "is now the world's worst humanitarian crisis for women and girls" who "make up more than half of the more than 12 million people displaced."[1] In addition, many of these women and girls "are being deliberately targeted with sexual violence."

In terms of geography, Sudan is very important to many countries in East and North Africa. First, the capital city Khartoum is where the White Nile and the Blue Nile converge to form the Nile River. The war could hinder management of the Nile's resources, affecting all 11 riparian states[2]—but particularly downstream Egypt, which relies on the Nile for over 90% of its fresh water supplies.[3] Continued political instability is therefore detrimental to peaceful resolution of Nile Basin conflicts and threatens Egypt's water security.

Second, Sudan is located on the Red Sea, with the Red Sea city of Port Sudan serving as the country's main seaport and a primary hub for trade flows into and out of the region. Exports (such as oil, cotton, and livestock) and imports (such as machinery, refined petroleum, wheat, and others) flow through this important port on a regular basis. It is estimated that the port is responsible for a combined 7.9 billion in exports and imports for the region.[4] A peaceful Sudan is therefore critical not just for economic and human development of the country, but also for the region. Consider, for example, the fact that South Sudan's oil exports, which account for 90% of government revenue, must travel through its northern neighbor to reach

A peaceful Sudan is therefore critical not just for economic and human development of the country, but also for the region.

1   U.N. Women, "Two years of war in Sudan: The world's worst humanitarian crisis for women and girls," April 15, 2025

2   John Mukum Mbaku, "The African Union is working on peace in Sudan: expert explains why it's in everyone's interests," *The Conversation*, January 24, 2024

3   U.N. Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "Egypt: Progress on achieving SDG 6,"

4   "The Rising Importance of Port Sudan," *Africa News Portal*, n.d.

international markets.[5] Without peace, Juba would not be able export its oil and could be starved of funds to provide basic services to its citizens.

Third, for centuries, Sudan has served as a major transit route for African Muslims who embark every year on the hajj to Mecca. Many air carriers also transit through Sudan on their way to Mecca. Continued violence could force these carriers to seek alternative but more expensive and longer routes, raising travel costs and preventing many Muslims from performing this important religious rite.

Root causes of the conflict

The present conflict erupted in April 2023 between the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), led by General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (commonly known as Hemedti), and the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF), led by Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan.[6] The RSF traces its origins to the Janjaweed tribal militias, which fought under the command of the government of President Omar al-Bashir during the Darfur war in the 2000s, and had been accused of committing atrocities in Darfur.

After the ouster of President al-Bashir by coup in 2019, the SAF and the RSF shared power.[7] Under the collective presidency, which was referred to as the Sovereignty Council, Hemedti served as a deputy to al-Burhan. However, disagreement between the two leaders on how to integrate the RSF into the national army triggered "nationwide collapse" and the ongoing civil war. Throughout the conflict, internal and external actors have seized on deep-rooted ethnic, political, and economic grievances, particularly between northern and southern regions and within Darfur.[8]

Some analysts have suggested that if Hemedti defeats the SAF and emerges as the country's ruler, "the Sudanese government, or remnants thereof, would become a wholly owned subsidiary of the commercial-military-ethnic agenda of the Dagalo family and its most powerful backers."[9] This conclusion is in line with what many experts have long said about paramilitary governance: It destroys; it consumes; but it does not build, neither does it create institutional environments that enable peaceful coexistence or nation-building.

A complex web of regional and global actors

At least ten countries have been drawn into Sudan's civil war through supplying support in the form of weapons, financial resources, or political backing.[10] Importantly, the U.S.-backed "quartet" or "quad," which is made up of Egypt, the UAE, Saudi Arabia and the United States, have called for "a three-month humanitarian truce," which is

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5   Mbaku, The African Union, op. cit.

6   Aljazeera Staff, "Sudan unrest: What are the Rapid Support Forces?," *Aljazeera*, April 16, 2023

7   Mishra, "'Blood on the Sand. Blood on the Hands': UN Decries World's Failure as Sudan's El Fasher Falls."

8   John Mukum Mbaku, "Sudan: foreign interests are deepening a devastating war—only regional diplomacy can stop them," *The Conversation*, June 26, 2025

9   Alex De Waal, "Sudan's future is being shaped by guns and money—like its past," *The Conversation*, Aug. 24, 2023

10   John Mukum Mbaku, "Sudan: Foreign Interests Are Deepening a Devastating War – Only Regional Diplomacy Can Stop Them," Defence Web, July 9, 2025; Zeinab Mohammed Salih, "Conflict in Sudan: A Map of Regional and International Actors," *Wilson Center*, December 19, 2024.

to be "followed by a nine-month political process."[11] But details on this plan are not forthcoming, and the interests of these nations are important to note here.

Saudi Arabia has backed the SAF through economic aid and diplomatic meditation efforts, with an eye on protecting Riyadh's economic interests in the Red Sea region, as well as the peaceful movement of pilgrims through Port Sudan to Mecca.[12] The United Arab Emirates (UAE), on the other hand, supports the RSF, allegedly due to concerns about the threat of Islamist groups that underpin the SAF.[13] Yet it is difficult to overlook the UAE's economic and geopolitical interests in Sudan—the UAE has been the major buyer of Sudan's gold, which many observers believe is the "lifeblood" of the civil war—some estimates put the exports of Sudanese gold to the UAE at more than $13.4 billion.[14] Cairo backs the SAF, primarily due to historical ties between the armies of the two countries.[15] Egypt and Sudan share not just a long border, but also significant strategic interests, some of which derive from their position as the only two downstream Nile Basin states and their coveted protection of shipping lanes along the Red Sea.[16] Finally, on November 21, U.S. legislation was introduced "seeking to halt American weapons sales to the United Arab Emirates until the United States certifies that the UAE is not arming the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in Sudan." It is generally believed that the RSF would not have been able to continue the civil war without the UAE's backing, [17] and thus stopping U.S., (as well as U.K.) arms shipments to the UAE could enhance the environment for peace negotiations. However, Reuters notes the bill is "unlikely to win significant support in Congress as U.S. administrations under presidents of both parties long have viewed the UAE as a vital regional security partner."[18]

The way forward

What then is the way forward for Sudan? Will the "self-serving army and militia forces" that are battling for political and economic "supremacy" sideline the struggle for people-driven democratic governance that undergirded the 2018-2019 revolution that ousted the brutal dictatorship of Omar al-Bashir?[19] Will the peoples of Sudan be trapped indefinitely in a state of violence and underdevelopment? The status quo cannot be considered acceptable, especially given the catastrophic suffering and gross human rights violations caused by the ongoing struggle. Below are possible pathways to lasting peace.

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11   Keath and Price, "The Role Outside Powers Are Playing in Sudan's Continued, Brutal War."

12   Declan Walsh and Vivian Nereim, "A Saudi Behest, Trump Vows to Seek Peace in Sudan, a Goal He Had Spurned," *The New York Times*, Nov. 20, 2025

13   Lee Keath and Michelle Price, "The Role Outside Powers Are Playing in Sudan's Continued, Brutal War," *PBS News*, November 7, 2025.

14   Mohammad Khansa, "Five reasons why the UAE is fixated on Sudan," Peoples Dispatch, July 27, 2025. It is estimated that in 2023, "99 % of Sudan's $1.03 bn gold exports" were "sold to the United Arab Emirates." Mohamed A. Hussein and Marium Ali, "Sudan has vast oil, gold and agricultural resources: Who controls them?," *Aljazeera*, Nov. 20, 2025.

15   Keath and Price, "The Role Outside Powers Are Playing in Sudan's Continued, Brutal War."

16   Keath and Price, "The Role Outside Powers Are Playing in Sudan's Continued, Brutal War."

17   CAAT, "Genocide in Sudan"

18   Patricia Zengerle, "US Lawmakers Seek to Halt Weapons Sales to UAE, Citing Sudan," Reuters, November 21, 2024.

19   Michelle Gavin, "Sudan in Crisis," Council on Foreign Relations, April 20, 2023.

First, the AU, working with regional organizations, as well as civil society in Sudan, should seek a mediated ceasefire, which would allow for necessary humanitarian aid to flow to those who need it the most. While international actors (e.g., the U.S.-led "quartet") can help this process, it is important that the peace process be owned and directed by the AU, the Sudanese peoples, and the country's regional neighbors.

Second is the establishment of a credible, inclusive, civilian-led transitional government, one that is produced through a people-driven political and constitutional process. Such a government is to be created through a constitution that is drafted through a bottom-up, collective process which reflects the country's religious and ethnic diversity.

Third, the international community, which to this point, has not been unified on its approach to the conflict in Sudan, must adopt an approach that is undergirded by the advancement of the governance and development aspirations of the Sudanese peoples. International involvement or intervention in Sudan must not exacerbate or prolong the conflict. It is clear that fragmented international support is emboldening the two parties to continue fighting. A unified international approach should pressure both parties to accept a ceasefire.

Fourth, a legal process must be put in place to hold accountable those alleged to have engaged in widespread human rights violations, including ethnic cleansing, as part of the war. This process must be established through the constitution and could take the form of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Fifth, all international actors should consider ceasing arms shipments into Sudan as well as military aid to either of the fighting parties. Instead, international actors/partners should direct their attention and resources to civil society organizations that are currently working to provide emergency aid to displaced civilian populations, including children and women who are suffering from lack of access to food and healthcare.

Sixth, when peace is achieved, Sudan will need financial resources to restore economic infrastructure (e.g., roads, water treatment plans, hospitals, etc.) that has been destroyed by the war. The international community can and should aid Sudan in this rehabilitation and transformation effort.

Seventh, there is urgent need to grant priority to the flow of humanitarian aid to parts of the country where people, particularly children and women, are under the threat of famine and, in addition, have been deprived of access to basic healthcare and education. Both parties to the conflict must cease attacks on civilians and aid workers in order to allow people seek help and for humanitarian workers to provide that aid.

Finally, the AU, together with its regional partners, must disabuse both parties of the belief that they can win militarily, given the fact that such a belief will place Sudan on the road to political fragmentation, economic ruin, and social disintegration.

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Beyond the headlines: New perspective on the DRC–Rwanda crisis

PATRICK NZOGNOU, Founder and Managing Director, Araunah Farms Ltd.

"The war that both belligerents do not want"—Framing the paradox of the DRC-Rwanda conflict

Luanda, Nairobi, Doha, Washington—countless mediators have stepped in, yet peace between the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Rwanda remains elusive. The paradox is glaring: Rwandan President Paul Kagame insists "I don't think anybody is interested in war. I even don't think Tshisekedi is interested in war himself."[1] (Madowo 2025, 0:33). Yet thirty years on, eastern DRC remains one of the world's deadliest conflict zones.

M23 (The Mouvement Du 23 Mars), an armed group operating in eastern DRC with alleged backing from the Rwandan Defense Forces (RDF),[2] has displaced hundreds of thousands, intensifying a humanitarian crisis and threatening regional stability.[3] Despite multiple peace accords and proposed deals, the insurgency in eastern DRC continues unabated. International attention has intensified, with the new U.S. administration signaling heightened focus—yet sustainable solutions ultimately depend on the two leaders themselves.

Beyond the headlines lie deeper questions: Why the recurring pattern between Kigali and Kinshasa under each president? Rwanda's services sector constitutes 47% of GDP, with tourism alone generating revenue comparable to total mineral exports.[4] The DRC is Rwanda's second largest export market, receiving 12.42% of total exports in the final quarter of 2024.[5] These statistics and regional economic integration frameworks explicitly emphasize mutual prosperity through peace and stability.

> International attention has intensified, with the new U.S. administration signaling heightened focus—yet sustainable solutions ultimately depend on the two leaders themselves.

1 Larry Madowo et al., "'I Don't Know': Rwandan President on If His Country's Troops Are in DR Congo," *CNN,* February 3, 2025.

2 United Nations Security Council, *Final Report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo*, S/2024/432 (2024).

3 Vibhu Mishra, "Eastern DR Congo Fighting Kills Scores, Cuts Food Aid and Drives Mass Displacement," *UN News*, December 10, 2025.

4 *Rwanda Voluntary National Review*, Sustainable Development Goals (Republic of Rwanda, 2023).

5 Republic of Rwanda, *Formal External Trade in Goods: Fourth Quarter of 2024* (National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda, 2024).

Understanding root causes is one key to lasting peace. In Lingala: *"Soki olingi koyeba, okota na motó"* (If you want to know, go to the source). In Kinyarwanda: *"Ukunda amahoro atanga amahoro"* (One who loves peace gives peace to others). Accordingly, by examining the root causes of the conflict, this viewpoint aims to make the necessary actions for lasting peace self-evident.

Background: Chaos brews in "state absence"

Eastern DRC holds some of the world's richest mineral deposits—yet the state is largely absent from these. In 2021, before M23's return, Congolese activist and surgeon Dr. Denis Mukwege described the region as marked by "state absence" and a "corrupt elite that accepts anything."[6] Three years later in Katanga and Lualaba, senior officers sent by Kinshasa were denied access by the Republican Guard while foreign operators illegally extracted cobalt.[7]

At the same time, Mukwege has treated tens of thousands of women and girls in the country—victims of sexual violence by armed groups operating with impunity.[8] In this ungoverned space, the ex-FAR/FDLR (remnants of the force that committed the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi and fled to eastern DRC) are based only 90 kilometers from Kigali.[9] These forces allegedly operate with backing from Uganda.[10] Also here, Mount Sabinyo, at the Congo-Uganda-Rwanda junction, sits in terrain ideal for military incursion—the northern corridor the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) used to advance on Kigali during the 1990-1994 civil war. Exiled opposition figures, including members of the Rwanda National Congress have held official meetings with FDLR.[11]

These elements combined make for an insecure situation. Rwanda's economic model depends entirely on stability—attracting conferences, tourism, and investment through reliable governance. Economic prosperity holds together a society still healing from genocide. One security incident and it could collapse.

The pattern and the trap

President Tshisekedi inherited this crisis—and unlike his predecessors, reached out. He laid a wreath at the Kigali Genocide Memorial, the first Congolese leader to do so.[12] He has defended the citizenship rights of Congolese Tutsi communities, including the Banyamulenge, affirming his commitment to "ensuring that all Congolese live

6   Alain Foka, "Chronique : En Finir Avec La Traite Négrière En Afrique," YouTube, *Alain Foka Officiel,* August 31, 2021.

7   Olivier Liffran and Joan Tilouine, "The Tshisekedi Clan's Dangerous Ties with Cobalt Looting 'Cartels,'" *Africa Intelligence*, June 10, 2025.

8   Panzi Foundation, *Annual Report 2022* (2022).

9   Gérard Prunier, *Africa's World War: Congo, the Rwandan Genocide, and the Making of a Continental Catastrophe* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

10 U.S. Department of State, *Democratic Republic of the Congo 2023 Human Rights Report*, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2023 (2023).

11 United Nations Security Council, *Letter Dated 6 June 2019 from the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo Addressed to the President of the Security Council* (2019), 14.

12 AFP, "In Diplomatic First, DR Congo's Tshisekedi Lays Wreath at Rwanda Memorial," *France 24*, March 25, 2019.

in peaceful cohesion without discrimination"[13]—a politically risky stance. President Kagame himself acknowledged, "I don't think Tshisekedi wants war."[14]

Yet the pattern is at risk of repeating. Former DRC President Laurent-Désiré Kabila started with Rwandan backing, then turned against Kigali.[15] Former President Joseph Kabila cooperated briefly in 2008-2009 with joint operations against FDLR and diplomatic normalization—before relations collapsed.[16] Now, Tshisekedi confronts this cycle.

President Tshisekedi inherits challenges both domestic and regional. Internally, governing a Western Europe-sized territory where colonial systems prevented state institution-building and mineral wealth attracts predatory extraction from industrial powers presents persistent structural challenges.[17] Regionally, eastern DRC's realities have been shaped over three decades by multiple actors with entrenched historical, political, and economic interests—notably Rwanda, whose leadership has remained constant since the genocide. These complexities add to an already fraught situation: the way forward must incorporate thoughtful, sustainable solutions.

The path forward for 2026

Eastern DRC is a tragedy for the country itself—millions dead,[18] sexual violence weaponized[19], millions displaced.[20] It also is an existential threat to Rwanda, a source of instability for Burundi whose armed opposition RED-Tabara operates from South Kivu[21], and a persistent threat for Uganda facing cross-border attacks from the Allied Democratic Forces, an Islamist armed group now affiliated with the Islamic State. Full DRC sovereignty and stability isn't just Kinshasa's aspiration—it's an imperative for African stability and prosperity.

The Sahel offers an instructive precedent: Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger formed the Alliance of Sahel States[22] and achieved what matters most—mutual trust. Trust enables not only practical cooperation but resilience—the ability to maintain partnership even when challenges could provide reasons to abandon it. The DRC-Rwanda relationship has been paralyzed by the opposite—three decades of mutual suspicion about cross-border armed group support. Yet the DRC-Rwanda context

13   United Nations Security Council, *United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo - Report of the Secretary General*, S/2022/892 (2022).

14   Madowo et al., "'I Don't Know': Rwandan President on If His Country's Troops Are in DR Congo."

15   Prunier, *Africa's World War*, 147–201.

16   United Nations Security Council, *Twenty-Seventh Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo*, S/2009/160 (2009).

17   Sara Lowes and Eduardo Montero, Concessions, Violence, and Indirect Rule: Evidence from the Congo Free State, The Quarterly Journal of Economics, Volume 136, Issue 4, November 2021, Pages 2047–2091.

18   International Rescue Commitee, *Mortality in the Democratic Republic of Congo: An Ongoing Crisis* (2007).

19   Office of the High Commissioner, *Democratic Republic of the Congo, 1993–2003* (United Nations Human Rights, 2010).

20   UNHCR, *Eastern DRC Situation*, Regional External Update #15 (2025).

21   United Nations Security Council, *Final Report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo*; United Nations Security Council, *Letter Dated 6 June 2019 from the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo Addressed to the President of the Security Council.*

22   Catherine Nzuki and Beverly Ochieng, *The New Alliance of Sahel States and the Future of Africa's Legacy Institutions*, CSIS Into Africa, aired May 22, 2025.

has an advantage the Sahel lacked: Rather than Western abandonment, the region benefits from African Union-led mediation,[23] supported by regional and international partners including the United States and Qatar.[24] Sustainable solutions also require strengthening regional research institutions, civil societies, and scientific communities to lead data collection and analysis—ensuring African expertise shapes evidence-based policy rather than relying solely on external narratives.

Key recommendations

First, in 2026, direct dialogue between the two presidents—alone, without intermediaries—should occur to build trust bureaucracies cannot manufacture. Prejudice and inflammatory rhetoric on both sides undermine trust-building. Effective Congolese-led governance in eastern provinces—demonstrating sovereignty through results rather than rhetoric—can counter negative narratives while building the foundation for partnership.

Second, the two countries should have comprehensive discussions that make clear Rwanda's unstated existential fears—not to justify intervention, but to enable solutions that address the fears trapping both leaders. Demonstrating effective governance in eastern provinces through concrete results remains essential. Building trust requires showing that a sovereign Congolese state can address Rwanda's legitimate security concerns through capable governance rather than empty promises.

Third, Rwanda's stated commitment to a sovereign DRC[25] aligns with U.N. Security Council calls for recognizing Congolese sovereignty.[26] Implementing the provisions of the U.S. brokered peace agreement[27]—including RDF withdrawal—would demonstrate coherence between Rwanda's interest in "gaining more from peace" and the sovereign DRC that peace requires.

Conclusion

Both leaders say they don't want war. As the Nande say: "Ushaka amahoro aha abandi amahoro" (One who seeks peace gives peace to others). The question isn't whether peace is possible—it's whether the two countries can engage in fruitful dialogue to bring about this outcome together.

> First, in 2026, direct dialogue between the two presidents—alone, without intermediaries—should occur to build trust bureaucracies cannot manufacture.

23   African Union Peace and Security Council. 2024. "Communiqué of the 1222nd Meeting on The Role of Mediation and Reconciliation in conflict resolution in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo." July 15.

24   Farouk Chothia, "Trump's 'historic' Peace Deal for DR Congo Shattered after Rebels Seize Key City," *BBC,* December 13, 2025.

25   Washington Agreement. 2025. "Joint Declaration by the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Republic of Rwanda on the Occasion of Establishing the Washington Accords for Peace and Prosperity." December 4.

26   Faisal Ali, "UNSC Condemns Rwanda, M23 Rebels for Offensive in Eastern DR Congo," *Al Jazeera,* December 20, 2025.

27   Bureau of African Affairs, "Peace Agreement Between the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Republic of Rwanda," *U.S. Department of State*, June 27, 2025.

Harnessing social media for increased political engagement

BELINDA ARCHIBONG,[1] Senior Fellow, Africa Growth Initiative, Global Economy and Development, Brookings Institution @belindaarch

In June 2024, thousands of young Kenyans took to the streets to protest a proposed finance bill that would significantly increase the price of essential goods like bread, sanitary products, and digital services, further straining households already burdened with a higher cost of living in the post-pandemic period.[2] The protesters used social media platforms like X (formerly Twitter) and Tik Tok to educate each other on the bill, correct perceived misinformation in government narratives, and organize demonstrations across the country. The event became known as the "Gen Z protests," highlighting the power of social media for political participation of Africa's youth.[3]

Recently, social media has emerged as a powerful, if contested,[4] tool that can help Africa's youth engage politically and economically in ways that go beyond protest (e.g., participation in voting, community meetings, electoral rallies, and other methods within democracies).[5] At the same time, social media can have negative effects on this same engagement if, in the absence of effective, context-informed regulation, public and private actors (both domestic and foreign) use platforms to repress civil liberties and spread disinformation that can further erode trust and participation in democratic institutions. Social media can be a powerful tool for policymakers looking to increase the political and economic participation of young people who make up the majority of Africa's growing population.[6] For these policymakers, engaging these platforms is extremely important given that social media is now the dominant form of news consumption among youth aged 18-

2   Judy Mbugua, "Why Kenya's Gen Z Has Taken to the Streets," *Journal of Democracy*, July 2025.

3   Mbugua, "Why Kenya's Gen Z Has Taken to the Streets."

4   Joël Cariolle et al., "Strengthening Social Contracts in Africa: Is Social Media a Blessing or a Curse?," *World Bank Blogs*, September 16, 2024.

5   Belinda Archibong and Raiyan Kabir, "Building Blocs: Examining the Links Between Youth, Trust and Civic and Political Engagement in Africa," paper presented at World Bank Conference on "Social Contracts in Africa," March 5, 2019.

6   Belinda Archibong and Peter Blair Henry, "Shocking Offers: Gender, Wage Inequality, and Recessions in Online Labor Markets," *AEA Papers and Proceedings* 114 (May 2024): 196–200.

FIGURE 17

Sources of news for youth

Percentage of respondents aged 18-24 getting news from various sources 2003-2022

● Radio
● TV
● Social media
● Internet
● Newspaper
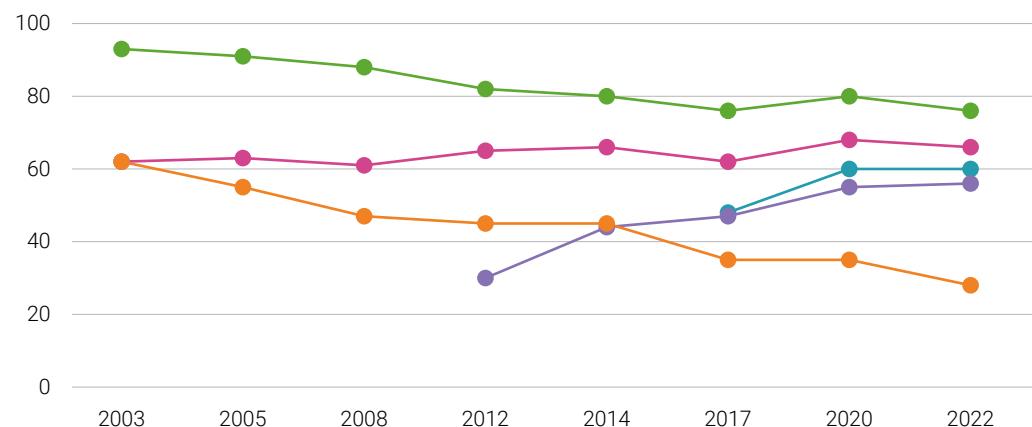
24[7]—this in a continent where over 60% of the population is young people under the age of 25, and where the rise of access to internet[8] means that Africans are increasingly more online than ever (Figure 17).

Since young Africans are using these platforms for everything—from communication, news, education, information, to employment, policymakers can harness youth access to these platforms in three major ways: (1) to incentivize higher, less costly political participation; (2) to deliver economic benefits; and (3) to invest in effective regulation against disinformation and local, citizen-owned social media platforms that can boost returns to (1) and (2). They must do so while, crucially, investing in regulation that protects the data and civil liberties of African citizens and local, regional, and global partnerships and platforms that reduce misinformation, disinformation, polarization, and violent content that can reduce the returns to (1) and (2). I outline specific policies to deliver these benefits below.

How can policymakers leverage social media to incentivize higher, but less costly, political participation of youth?

How are youth engaging politically, and what constraints do they face in doing this?

Based on a representative sample of African citizens,[9] Figure 18 shows political participation by age cohort across five major participation categories such as voting and protest participation. Notably, African youth (aged 18-24) are much less likely to vote, with just 41% of youth reporting having voted in the previous election compared to 77% of older populations in 2022. Moreover, figures for youth voting have remained low over time.

Another key observation is that while youth are less likely to be politically engaged across almost all categories, protest participation is an exception—youth are

7   People aged 15-24 years are defined as youth by United Nations definitions. I focus on adult populations here.

8   Jonas Hjort and Jonas Poulsen, "The Arrival of Fast Internet and Employment in Africa," *American Economic Review* 109, no. 3 (2019): 1032–79.

9   Using data from the nationally representative Afrobarometer surveys.

FIGURE 18

Political participation by age cohort

While young Africans are less likely to vote, participate in election rallies, or to raise issues to representatives, they are more likely than older cohorts to join protests
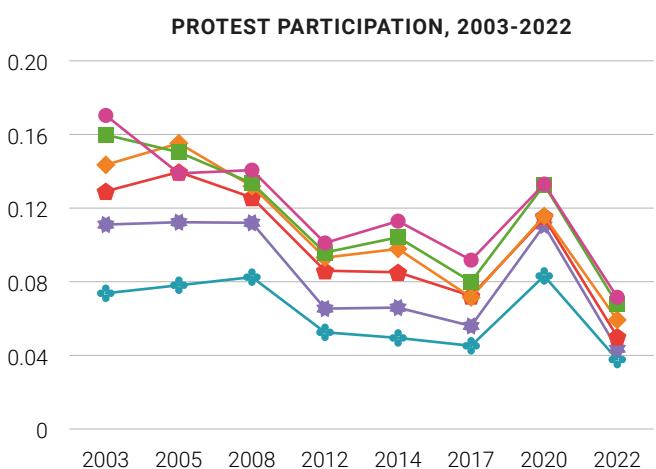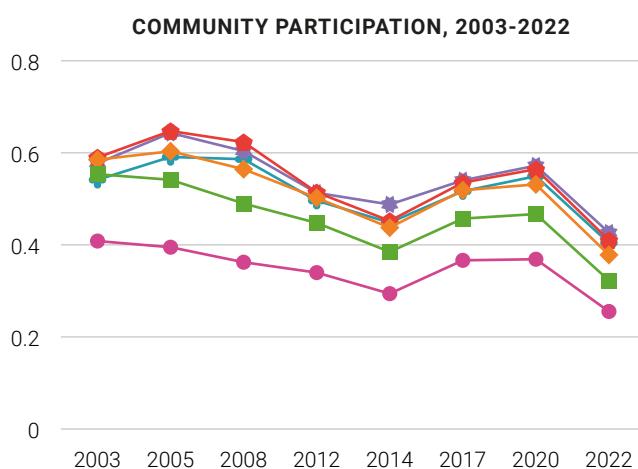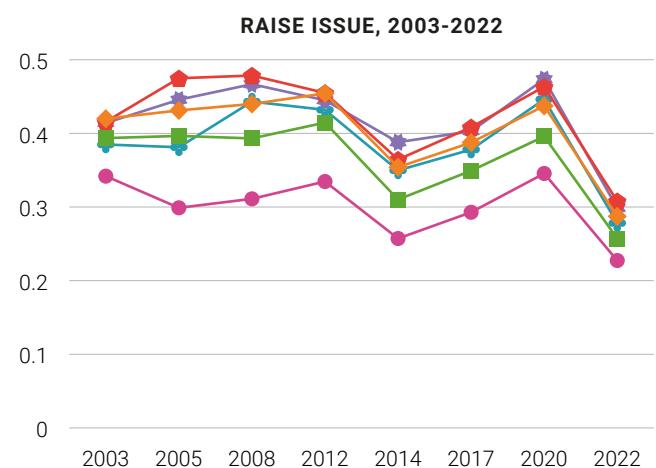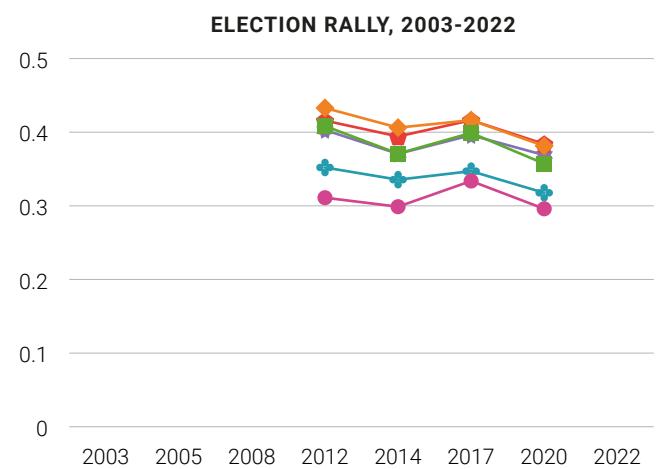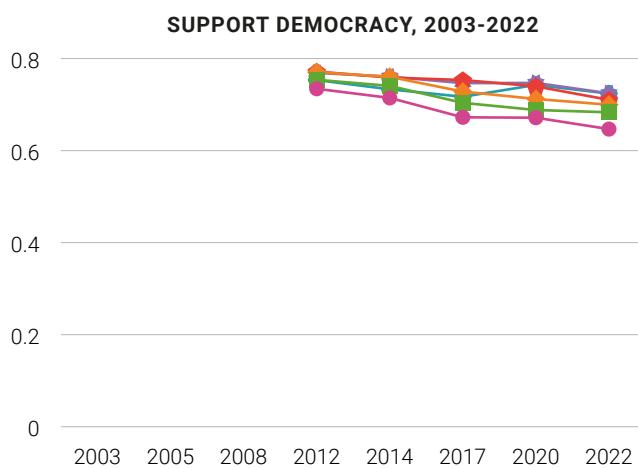

Source: Afrobarometer Rounds 1-9

significantly more likely to participate in protests relative to other age cohorts, with 7% of youth reporting protest participation as of 2022 (Figure 19).

What about news and information? Figure 17 shows news consumption by age cohort. While traditional forms of media like radio and newspapers remain popular forms of news consumption, these mediums experienced marked declines in consumption between 2003 and 2022. Conversely, more Africans, and especially African youth, are consuming news from social media and general internet sources, with 60% of youth reporting consuming news from social media as of 2022.

FIGURE 19

Participation in protests by age cohort
Percentage of respondents who reported participating in a protest in the past year
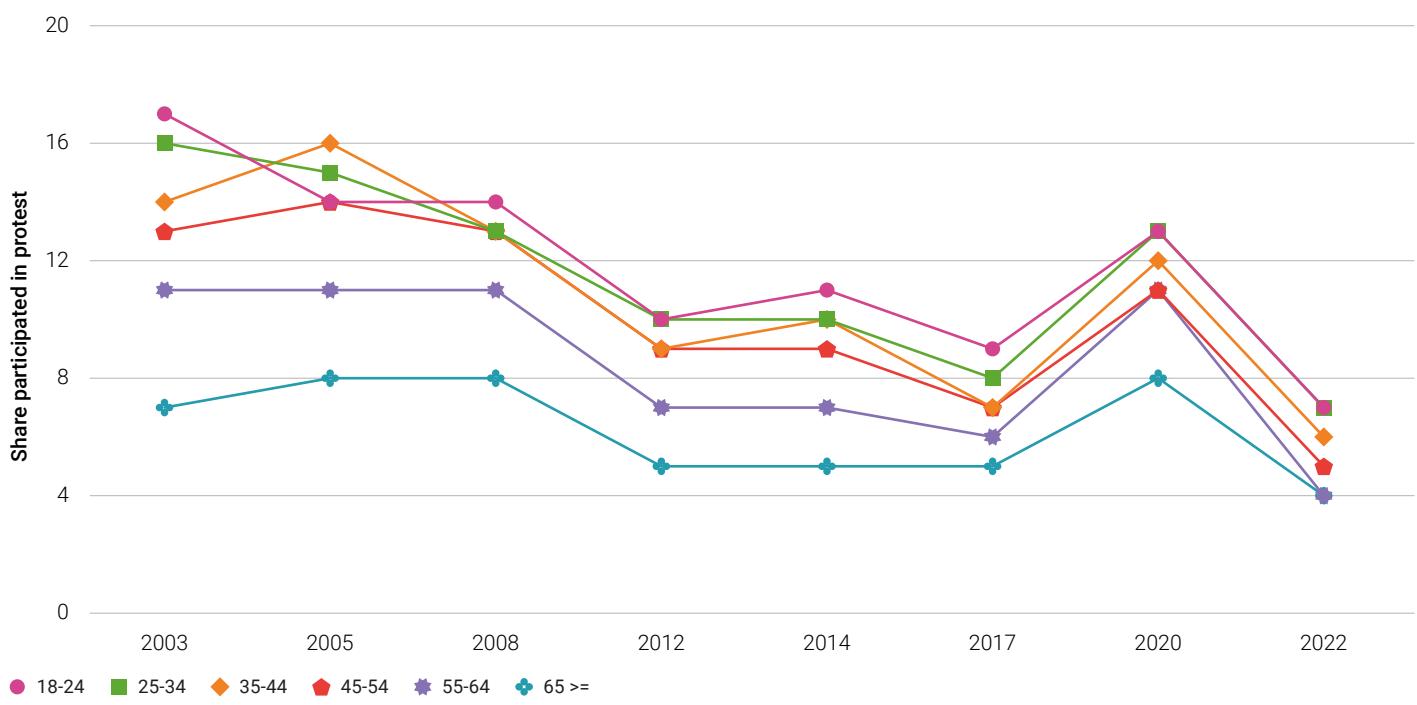
Source: Afrobarometer (Rounds 1-9)

How can policymakers leverage social media access to promote less costly political participation by Africa's youth?

Given these statistics on relatively higher youth consumption of news through social media and higher youth protest participation, what policies could harness social media access to boost other types of low-risk, political participation? I highlight three policies below:

- Policymakers can use social media to provide political news and civic education on how to get involved in community meetings/local politics. This can be implemented through the Ministry of Education or in partnership with institutions that youth trust or that involve young people in their decisionmaking (e.g., youth-focused civil society organizations).

- Policymakers can also leverage social media platforms of government organizations where young adults participate in high numbers, including communicating civic education through social media accounts of public universities, among others. Where they exist, another avenue could be through national youth service programs (like Nigeria's or Ghana's National Youth Service system) to communicate this information/civic education both in person and via social media.

- Cultural and creative industries (CCI) are a large and growing share of Africa's economy.[10] Governments can leverage this cultural capital and work with young artists who often have large social media following,[11] to share civic education and information about the benefits of political engagement. (For more on the potential of Africa's cultural and creative industries, see .)

How can policymakers leverage access to social media to improve youth economic outcomes?

Africa's youth have some of the highest unemployment rates in the world, despite being among the most educated cohorts in the continent's history, with 41% of youth reporting being unemployed as of 2022 (Figure 20).

At the same time, young people are increasingly using social media sites such as LinkedIn, as well as related local online job portals like Jobberman in West Africa and Brighter Monday in East Africa for employment purposes.[12] Governments should work with these online local platforms to share information (with both firms and job applicants) on strategies to boost employment and firm productivity. This will reduce matching costs for firms looking for skilled applicants and can help provide young entrepreneurs, and especially young female entrepreneurs/applicants, who often face bias and worse labor market outcomes, with skills, capital, and networks needed to succeed in the labor market.[13]

To deliver political and economic benefits, policymakers must, crucially, invest in (1) partnerships with local and international stakeholders to design context-informed, transparent, and consistent regulation and (2) locally grown African social media platforms.

The proliferation of social media has been accompanied by a rise in misinformation and disinformation, with potentially deadly results—as in the case of the 2017 massacre in Myanmar, which was fueled through disinformation campaigns on Facebook.[14] Additionally, the growing use of AI which uses consumer data extracted

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10   Landry Signé, "The Outsized Potential of the Cultural and Creative Industries in Africa," *Brookings Institution*, May 5, 2025.

11   For example, Afrobeats star and Grammy nominee Ayra Starr has over 7 million followers on Instagram alone.

12   Belinda Archibong, "A Laws-Jobs-Cash Framework for Gender and Youth-Based Economic Transformation in Africa," *Brookings Institution*, January 13, 2025.

13   Belinda Archibong, "How to Reduce Gender Inequality in Labor Markets in Africa," *Brookings Institution*, February 13, 2024.

14   Barbara Ortutay, "Amnesty Report Finds Facebook Amplified Hate Ahead of Rohingya Massacre in Myanmar," *PBS News*, September 29, 2022.

through these social media platforms highlights the urgent need for stricter regulations to protect the data privacy of African citizens using these platforms. Some African countries, like Nigeria with its 2023 Data Protection Act, have begun introducing stricter data protection legislation, but more regional coordination is needed for both stronger regulation and enforcement.[15] Regulation is also needed to foster investment in locally developed, African-owned social media platforms, which could advance more locally-relevant information and online content. African policymakers should work to ensure African representation on the boards of existing social media firms, and also partner with African AI experts working to protect African users and workers in the social media space, like content moderators' unions, to design careful, context-informed regulation, with safeguards to protect users and lessen the misuse of social media by malicious actors: Both global and domestic, and both within and outside of government.[16]

African policymakers who invest in effective regulatory institutions and infrastructure to reduce disinformation, misinformation, and violent content, while protecting the data and civil liberties of African citizens will be well-placed to deliver economic and political returns and boost the wellbeing of the world's fastest growing demographic—Africa's youth.[17]

FIGURE 20

Unemployment and education level by age cohort

Africa's youth (aged 18-24) have higher unemployment than older cohorts despite higher levels of education
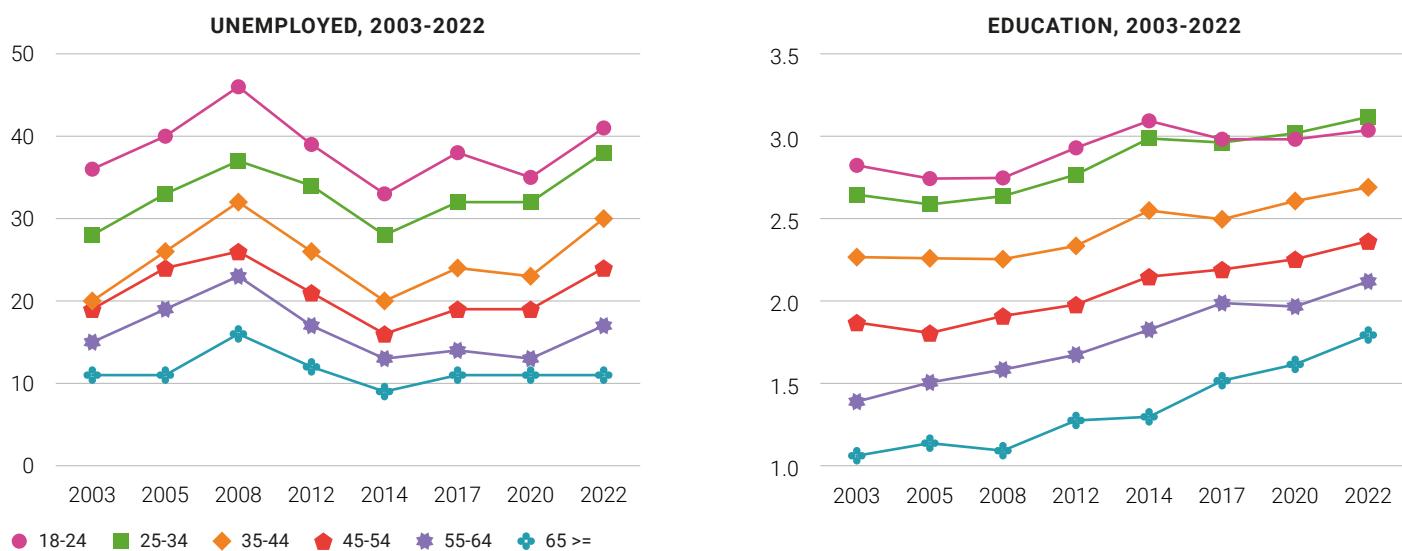
Note: Educational attainment is measured on a scale from 1 (no schooling) to 9 (post-graduate education)

Source: Afrobarometer Rounds 1-9

15 World Bank, *Regulating Digital Data in Africa* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2024).

16 Michelle Du and Chinasa T. Okolo, "Reimagining the Future of Data and AI Labor in the Global South," *Brookings Institution*, October 7, 2025.

17 Declan Walsh, "Old World, Young Africa," *The New York Times*, November 7, 2023.