Africa Growth Initiative at BROOKINGS

REPORT, MARCH 2026

ENTRY POINTS FOR STRENGTHENING DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA

INSIGHTS FROM FIVE CASE STUDIES

DANIELLE RESNICK, LANDRY SIGNÉ

AUTHOR

DANIELLE RESNICK is a Nonresident Fellow at the Global Economy and Development program at the Brookings Institution.

LANDRY SIGNÉ is a Senior Fellow at the Africa Growth Initiative, Global Economy and Development program at the Brookings Institution.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Editorial guidance/oversight and peer review for this piece were provided by Pierre Nguimkeu, Jaimie Bleck, Edem Selormey, and Chipo Dendere. Fact-checking was conducted by Dafe Oputu. Copyediting and design was provided by Isabella (Izzy) Taylor.

The Brookings Institution is a nonprofit organization devoted to independent research and policy solutions. Its mission is to conduct high-quality, independent research and based on that research, to provide innovative, practical recommendations for policymakers and the public. The conclusions and recommendations of any Brookings publication are solely those of its author(s), and do not reflect the views or policies of the Institution, its management, its other scholars, or the funders acknowledged below.

This publication is supported by a grant from the Open Society Foundations.

Brookings recognizes that the value it provides is in its absolute commitment to quality, independence, and impact. Activities supported by its donors reflect this commitment.

ABOUT THE AFRICA GROWTH INITIATIVE AT BROOKINGS

The Brookings Africa Growth Initiative (AGI) works to inform new policies and models for better development outcomes in Africa through rigorous research and analyses, convenings featuring African voices, and direct engagement with African partners.

Introduction

Over the modern era of political development, democracy has expanded to encompass billions of citizens worldwide. As of 2016, almost four billion people across 96 countries lived in either an electoral or liberal democracy. However, in the decade since, democracy has receded, with only just over two billion now living in countries considered democratic (Herre et al. 2025). In fact, 40% of the world's population now lives in a country that, after initially transitioning to an electoral or liberal democracy during the global wave of democratization in the 1990s, now has regressed to either an electoral or closed autocracy (Lindberg 2026).

The African continent is not immune to these fluctuations in democracy. On the one hand, the number of electoral or liberal democracies in the region has declined from 22 to 15 over the last decade (Our World in Data 2025a, 2025b). Many countries have experienced constitutional and military coups, increasingly restrictive environments for civil society organizations, and a growing number of violent and uncompetitive elections (Matlosa 2025; Rakner 2019). On the other hand, countries such as Senegal, Botswana, Mauritius, Ghana, and Malawi have demonstrated notable democratic strengthening, with opposition parties successfully defeating incumbent governments in recent elections (Wotjanik 2026). Overall, the demand for democracy is still high across the region, regardless of regime type, with Afrobarometer data collected in 2023 across 39 countries showing that 66% of respondents agree with the statement that "democracy is preferable to any other kind of government." (Afrobarometer 2024)[1] Given this preference, what options are available to avert backsliding in some contexts and deepen democratic gains in others?

Addressing this question is especially crucial in the wake of shifts in donor funding. Donor support for democracy and governance assistance was always dwarfed by spending for other sectors, but the loss of USAID, plus the shift towards defense spending by the EU, has further reduced such funding in recent years. For instance, more than $14 billion in democracy, rights, and governance grants were cut in 2025 as part of wider reductions in U.S. foreign assistance (Silva-Leander et al 2025).

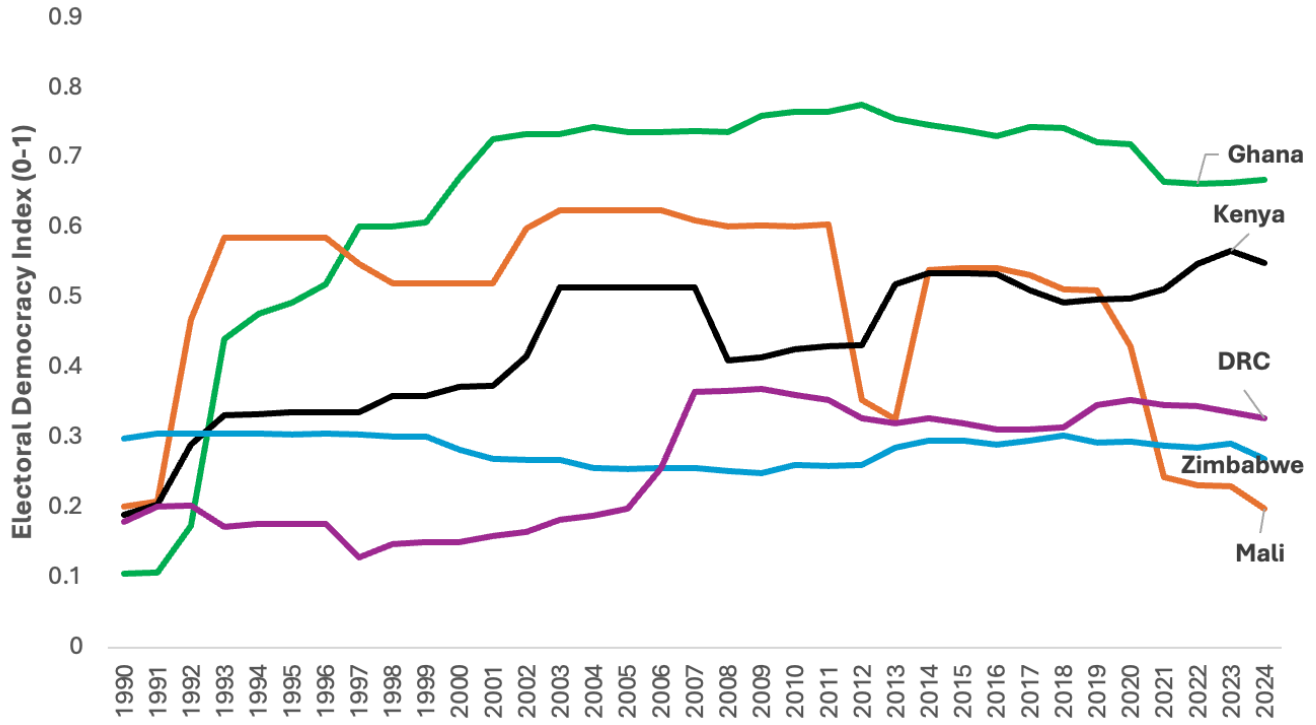
Given these trends, we examine what democracy support options may have an impact on the region and how they can be calibrated to a country's current democratic status. As part of a Brookings Institution project on the state of democracy in Africa, we examined the political trajectories of five countries—the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Ghana, Kenya, Mali, and Zimbabwe—to determine what factors accounted for their democratic resilience, backsliding, or autocratic stagnation. As seen in Figure 1, all of these countries started at relatively similar low levels of democracy in the early 1990s and have not only diverged dramatically over time but also have experienced different degrees of volatility in their trajectories.

In this brief, we synthesize in-depth case studies on the policy options available to strengthen democracy in these countries, with the goal of offering broader implications for the region. We first review insights from the democracy support literature in general and specific applications to Africa. Subsequently, we highlight three key lessons that emerge from these cases: tap into locally appropriate customs and traditions, prioritize interventions to target the main constraints to democratic deepening, and explore novel entry points if extant democracy support efforts have floundered.

1 Data available from Afrobarometer (https://www.afrobarometer.org/data/merged-data/), Q23. Respondents are asked which statement they agree with the most: "Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government," "In some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable," and "For someone like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have."

FIGURE 1

Democratic trajectories over time in focus countries



SOURCE: V-Democracy database (Coppedge et al), using the v2x_polyarchy index. Based on this index, 0 is worst performance and 1 is best performance.

Lessons from past democracy support interventions in Africa

Democracy strengthening, at its core, is a domestic process. Strengthening vertical, horizontal, or diagonal accountability requires the buy-in, active participation, and centering of African actors themselves, whether at the local, national, or continental level (Signé and Korha 2016; Subrahmanyam et al. 2014; Signé 2018; Afrobarometer 2025). Yet there are key actions and lessons learned for global partners who can collaborate with these domestic players to achieve greater democratic outcomes.

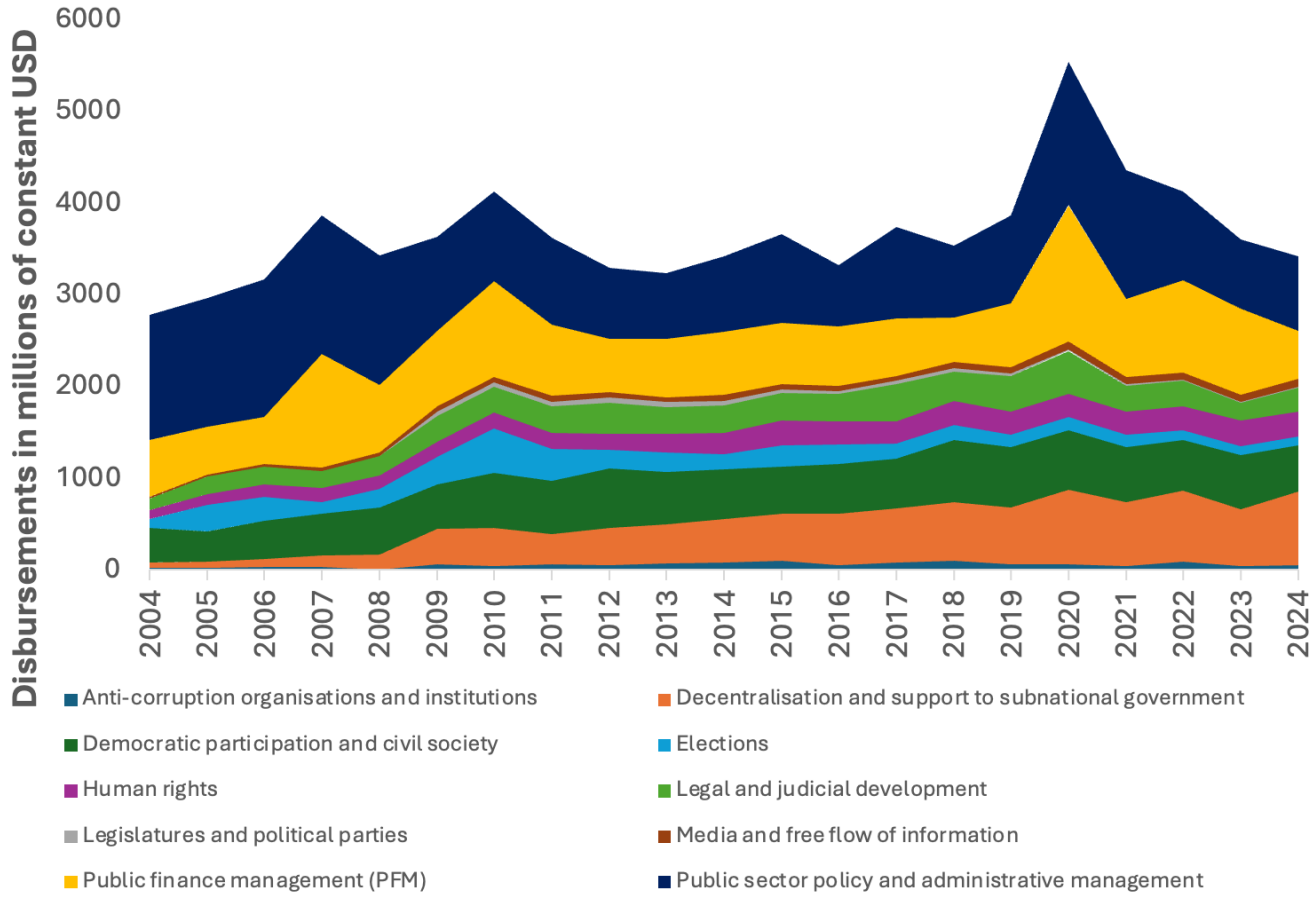
Democracy support activities by global partners generally fall into one of three categories. The first includes democracy assistance, or investments in institutions and behaviors designed to improve the odds of democracy's survival. The second category includes political conditions tied to financing or trade activities aimed at incentivizing democratic behaviors. The third category includes some form of sanction for violating democratic norms and is usually targeted at countries that are backsliding (Leininger et al 2025).

Democracy assistance interventions in Africa largely commenced in the 1990s as much of the region transitioned to multi-party democracy. Much of this support came through Western bilateral funding—especially from the United Kingdom, United States, and the European Union—through dozens of departments, specialized agencies, and political party foundations (Youngs 2019). The typical focus of democracy aid has followed a three-part framework, including supporting political parties and free and fair elections, strengthening state institutions that check the power of

centralized executives (e.g. parliament, judiciary, and local governments), and building civil society through training NGOs, media, labor unions, and enhancing civic education (Carothers 2015). Over the last 20 years, democracy aid in Africa democracy aid has increased from around $3 billion to more than $6 billion (OECD 2026). Figure 2 examines the areas to which this aid is allocated, showing the disproportionate impact of aid financing on public financial and public policy management, democratic participation and civil society, decentralization, and public sector policy with far less attention to elections, legislatures and political parties, media freedoms, and anti-corruption.

FIGURE 2

Trends in democracy aid to sub-Saharan Africa, 2004-2024



SOURCE: OECD (2026). Selected categories from the Government and Civil Society sectoral focus. Aid is from all "official donors" in the database, inclusive of the Development Assistance Committee bilateral donors, international financial institutions, the U.N., and regional development banks.

More recently, non-traditional donors have been involved in democracy support efforts, including middle-income countries such as Brazil, India, Indonesia, and Turkey (Youngs 2019), as well as Nigeria, South Africa and the African Union (Mwaba 2023). Nigeria, for instance, has tried to leverage its role as a regional hegemon to promote peace and democracy in the Economic Community of West African States, including most recently in its call for sanctions against Niger when the latter's democratically elected leader was ousted in a military coup in 2023 (Omotuyi et al 2024).

Political conditionalities—the second category of democracy support—played an important role in many of Africa's 1990s transitions as political reform became a pre-condition for the release of multilateral and

bilateral financing. More recently, the U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation included hard requirements that countries could not receive assistance if they did not tackle corruption and support democracy rights. Even in a shift of methodology in 2026, these provisions largely remained, with countries needing either to have low corruption or high levels of government accountability and support for personal freedom (Collinson and Brownell 2025).[2]

Other types of political conditionalities include linking democratic criteria to trade agreements. For instance, both the EU's Cotonou Agreement (2000-2020) and its successor, the EU-Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States Agreement, explicitly include democracy and human rights clauses. Under the U.S. African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), continued eligibility for preferential trade access to U.S. markets was contingent on, among other provisions, African countries' commitment to maintaining the rule of law, combatting corruption, and protecting human rights.[3] With respect to the third category—sanctions—more than a dozen sub-Saharan African countries have experienced some type of economic sanction over the last decade because of violation of global anti-corruption regimes, sponsorship of terrorist networks, or militarily ousting democratically elected governments.[4]

The global literature showcases important achievements related to interventions for strengthening or promoting democratic development (e.g. Gafuri 2022; Gisselquist et al. 2021). For instance, Blanken et al. (2025) found that earmarked funding for civil society organizations between 2005-2021 improved the strength of civil society over time and democracy levels in the recipient country. Steele et al. (2021) found that democracy aid was associated with improvements in free and fair election indicators. Ha (2023) finds positive impacts of democracy aid on governance related indicators, including public financial management, decentralization, and anti-corruption.

At the same time, however, numerous criticisms of this traditional democracy support have arisen over the years. First, some of these efforts faced resistance because they were seen as undermining national sovereignty and representing a form of neocolonialism by imposing a specific political model on African countries (Brown 2013; Mwaba 2023). Second, democracy support efforts were sometimes uncoordinated with development assistance, leading to several inconsistencies in outcomes and leading to more impacts on democratic transitions than on democratic consolidation (Resnick 2014). Third, the causal mechanisms of democracy aid were questioned; Carothers (2009), for example, noted that democracy promotion often hinged on the flawed assumption that with the right technical knowledge and institutions, democracy can emerge anywhere. Brown (2005) similarly observed that there is often a deliberate lack of political will by leaders and institutions to democratize that will not be overcome through technical solutions alone. The overall trend of worsening democratic outcomes despite billions of dollars spent on democracy assistance every year underscores this point (Blanken et al 2025). Fourth, while fragmentation in development assistance received elevated attention through the Paris Declaration on Aid back in 2005 (OECD 2005), an equivalent process and introspection did not exist for democracy assistance, leading to scattershot approaches rather than strategic investments.

The other two categories of democracy support have also been criticized. The uneven application of political conditionality in Africa (Emmanuel 2010) and uneven use of democratic sanctions (Del Biondo 2015), even when countries have violated similar governance principles, highlights how donor interests sometimes trump their commitment to democratic norms, raising

2 For example, MCC's "Government Accountability" indicator for determining country eligibility for FY2026 includes "prevalence of free and fair electoral processes; political pluralism and participation of all stakeholders; government accountability and transparency; freedom from domination by the military, foreign powers, totalitarian parties, religious hierarchies and economic oligarchies; and the political rights of all groups, among other things," while the "Personal freedom" indicator includes "freedom of expression and belief; association and organizational rights; rule of law and human rights; and personal autonomy and economic rights, among other things."

3 These provisions for eligibility were retained in the 2026 extension of AGOA.

4 See the Global Sanctions Data Base available for download here: https://www.globalsanctionsdatabase.com/

concerns in the region about hypocrisy. Economic sanctions by Western countries, the AU, or regional economic communities have rarely led to changes in democratic behaviors in the region (Soumahoro 2023). Afesorgbor et al. (2025) even find that sanctions have increased negative outcomes, such as food insecurity, in the targeted countries.

Collectively, this review suggests that there are several lessons to be learned about best practices for democracy support. First, there are several instruments to support democracy—aid for mechanisms of vertical, horizontal, and diagonal accountability (Signé, 2018; 2019), economic incentives to encourage more support for democracy, and economic sanctions for violating democratic norms. The combination of tools needs to be aligned with a country's democratic trajectory. An approach aimed at protecting a country from further backsliding may involve a heavier mix of the economic incentives and sanctions than one for a country that is trying to deepen its democratic credentials (Carothers 2015; Leininger et al 2025). At the same time, democracy promotion activities need to adapt their strategies if democratic backsliding begins (Grimm et al 2025), as Ohlig (2025) shows in the case of Tanzania under the late President Magufuli.

Second, democracy support needs to resonate with local realities and norms. Strengthening political institutions whose mandate or membership lack credibility and legitimacy among a broad swath of the population is unlikely to create the grounds for long-term sustainability. Third, to avoid fragmenting democracy aid and spreading resources too thin, priorities need to be identified. While vertical, horizontal, and diagonal accountability theoretically all need to be strengthened, prioritizing investments in one key dimension can ensure a stable foundation for subsequent investments in the others. Finally, as observed by Brown (2005), if there is a lack of political will by critical actors to support democracy, then status quo technical innovations are unlikely to have much impact. The following sections demonstrate how these lessons apply to the five focus countries in our project, recognizing that they are undergoing quite different directions in their democratic trajectories.

Leverage local mechanisms of democratic engagement

The above review highlights that some democracy-building efforts have been criticized for being externally imposed and not locally owned. As such, it is critical that democracy support efforts are well-aligned with local customs and norms to have broad credibility. This is particularly important in fragile contexts, such as Mali, where democracy-building efforts need to have deep roots and repair fractured societal relationships to be sustainable.

MALI

Mali is a quintessential example of a fragile state that has been dealing with climate extremes and jihadist and separatist violence for more than a decade as well as a high level of political volatility since 2012 (Bleck et al. 2024). In that year, the country experienced its first coup d'état since it had transitioned to democracy in 1992. After elections in 2013, civilian democracy was restored. Yet in 2020 and again 2021, additional coups occurred, and the country has since been under military junta rule, led by President Assimi Goïta. Bleck and Soumano (2025) argue that one of the real causes of the country's democratic backsliding since 2020 has been the gapping inequality between political elites and the broader populace, high levels of corruption, and massive shortfalls in service delivery, including adequate security to protect civilians from insurgent attacks. This reduced the perceived legitimacy of formal political institutions and democratic processes, such as elections, and increased the acceptance of military rule.

If Mali is to pursue a more sustainable democratic path going forward, Bleck and Soumano (2026) note that building the legitimacy of formal institutions of political accountability (such as political parties and the National Assembly) requires a deeper engagement

with Malians' cultural experience with a more deliberative model of democracy. This means building on historical traditions of political consultation and deliberation at the local level that had proved pivotal during the country's 1991 National Conference. Specifically, Bleck and Soumano (2026) point to the tradition of consultative meetings regularly held by chiefs in rural areas and to the practice of debating political ideas in urban grinw (tea-drinking social clubs). Moreover, consultative citizen forums have been used several times in Mali's history to deal with political crises, including in 1999 to deal with issues of political polarization.[5]

Building on these traditions, the authors propose two types of institutions that could be useful in the Malian context: citizen assemblies and deliberative councils. Citizen assemblies, which could be organized by civil society groups, could allow for diverse representatives to coalesce around key policy issues and provide their own recommendations that are communicated to MPs. Deliberative councils would oversee citizen assemblies and ensure accountability by monitoring the National Assembly's responses to citizen concerns and solutions. There are precedents for both types of institutions in other countries that favor consensualism to deal with societal cleavages, such as Belgium, Switzerland, and Canada.

In Belgium, citizen deliberation was institutionalized by the Parliament of the German-speaking Community via two bodies, 1) the Citizens' Council who decides on the topic and oversees the 2) Citizens' Assemblies (Velghe et al. 2025). The Council's members are made up of former citizen assembly members and one-third are replaced each cycle, which could be a helpful model for Mali to make sure council membership is constantly changing. In Switzerland, citizen assemblies are put on jointly by civil society organizations and the federal government (Citizens' Democracy, n.d.) and in Canada, their Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, which provided recommendations for changes to their provincial electoral system, was funded by the government but run by an independent, non-partisan body (National Citizens Assembly, n.d.). These examples of institutionalizing deliberative processes and teaming up between civil society and government could help Mali bring more people into the democratic process and build trust in institutions.

Reflecting on past efforts at consultative processes in Mali, Bleck and Soumano (2026) also offer some cautionary tales. These include designing forums that not only allow for a fruitful exchange of ideas but also give more attention to deriving solutions that are implementable. In addition, the decision of who is included in such forums needs to be transparent, include critical voices, and ensure that representation spans different genders as well as castes and linguistic communities.

Prioritize the binding constraints to improve democracy

A scattershot approach to democratic support runs the risk of fragmentation and wastage of scarce resources. Instead, a more targeted approach that comprehensively addresses top frailties may prove more impactful. In the case of Kenya, Otele et al. (2026) focus on the role of campaign finance reform as a mechanism to build up political parties to, in turn, harness their ability to serve as a genuine vehicle to represent citizens' interests and a broader policy agenda. In the DRC, Stearns et al. (2026) see executive entrenchment and the creation of parallel power structures around the president as generating a cascade of barriers for accountability. Each case therefore identifies certain mechanisms to address these binding constraints.

KENYA

In a review of Kenya's democratic trajectory, Otele et al. (2025) describe how the country has bounced back from several crisis periods—including the 2007 elec-

5 Similar traditions of consultative governance are common throughout Africa, such as the kgotla system in Botswana, Ghana's palaver community dialogues, and Kenya's baraza system for local dispute resolution. Rwanda's gacaca courts, which are participatory, community-based mechanisms for dispute resolution, were utilized for reconciliation processes after the country's 1994 genocide (see Ingelaere 2016).

toral violence and the 2017 electoral re-run—with even stronger institutions. However, there remain several weaknesses in the political system that continue to generate vulnerabilities for the country's democracy, including threats to media freedom and civic space, frequent high-level elite pacts that eliminate the role of an official opposition, judicial interference, corruption, and state capture. In turn, some of these weaknesses create low public trust, which dramatically manifested in the streets during the 2024 Gen Z protests.

To consider possible ways to address some of these challenges, Otele et al. (2026) argue that a key vulnerability is Kenya's campaign financing rules and processes. Currently, the high level of money required to compete in elections—close to $39 million in the 2022 presidential elections and as much as $4.7 million for the gubernatorial elections—undermines internal party democracy and marginalizes otherwise reform-minded candidates who may lack sufficient resources to run as candidates. Moreover, the high level of financing required exacerbates the personalization of parties because they become attached to the individual who is funding the party rather than to a particular platform or political ideology. There have been efforts to address campaign financing reform in Kenya, including a 2013 Campaign Financing Act, but this was never fully implemented. Similarly, the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC)'s Draft Election Campaign Financing Amendment Bill 2024, which is aimed at preparing for the 2027 elections, has yet to be passed (Government of Kenya n.d.).

The authors look at multiple dimensions of campaign financing reform that therefore need to be addressed and recommend a multi-faceted strategy, following recommendations of democracy support agencies that note such reforms are only successful if they holistically address asset disclosure, conflicts of interest, and lobbying (Hamada and Agrawal 2020). For instance, the authors argue that voters could be better empowered through regulation of private and corporate contributions, building the capacity of the IEBC in campaign finance law, forensic accounting, and digital auditing. In addition, sanctions should be levied when there are violations of campaign finance laws and reporting mechanisms should be standardized and digitized for the public to easily access information about candidates' incomes and expenditures. Civil society organizations likewise have an important role to play by monitoring the use of financing in elections, while Kenya's vibrant media landscape can be leveraged to deepen the public's understanding of what campaign financing is and why it is important to the health of the country's democracy.

The authors further offer some concrete suggestions for translating their recommendations into action, paying particular attention to different windows of opportunity. For example, they note that legal and institutional reforms should be conducted right after an election when tensions are lowest and political actors are less likely to perceive that they are being targeted by regulations. During the middle of the electoral cycle, there is an opportunity to deepen capacity building, stress test campaign finance reporting platforms, and for the Auditor General to conduct periodic audits of parties' financing operations. In the longer term, more emphasis would need to be placed on compliance monitoring, enforcement of regulations, and public disclosure.

THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

In their analysis of the DRC's political pathways over the last two decades, Batumike et al. (2025) characterize the DRC as an "electoral oligarchy" whereby windfalls from the privatization of the mining sector fueled high levels of corruption and there is a narrow elite who constantly shift allegiances and coalitions, undermining political party development. Institutions intended to provide horizontal accountability, such as the parliament and judiciary, are often undermined by political interference and patronage. The election of President Felix Tshisekedi in 2018 was widely viewed as rigged and while the 2023 elections were more credible, low turnout indicated citizen dissatisfaction and apathy.

When looking at opportunities to address the frailties of the DRC's political system, Stearns et al. (2026) identify executive entrenchment, or "hyperpresidentialism," as one of several binding constraints. The ex-

ecutive has invested significant powers within parallel governing bodies; the "maison civile," for example, is supposed to only manage the president and family's personal affairs but has had an extended mandate that includes even managing mining issues. The extreme dominance of the president's party in parliament and the president's ability to name the heads of regulatory and state-owned bodies without legislative approval undermines those bodies' oversight functions. The executive can also interfere in the Independent National Electoral Commission to postpone elections and has the power to remove elected provincial governors and assemblies. Since Tshisekedi announced in 2024 a commission to draft a new constitution, there is now a concern that this entrenchment could be more intense if a new constitution allows the president to run for additional terms.

Stearns et al. (2026) therefore offer several key recommendations for reducing this entrenchment. First, they suggest that the president should not have oversight over some key accountability bodies, especially the Inspectorate General of Finance (IGF), which has the power to audit the finances of state institutions, and the Official Journal of the DRC (JORDC), which publishes the state's decisions and legislation to make them enforceable. IGF is currently overseen by the Ministry of Finance and therefore lacks autonomy. Likewise, many laws are not published in JORDC, constituting an implicit presidential veto. Second, they note that parliamentarians' attendance, voting records, trips, and oral and written questions should be made public so that citizens can confirm their representatives are doing their jobs of overseeing the executive. Third, the president's close advisors should be stripped of the powers that are supposed to be vested within the line ministries and the office of the prime minister. Fourth, building up sources of countervailing pressure, particularly opposition parties and civil society is critical—however, the influence of parties is often hampered by their vast number and frequent allegiance-shifting while civil society is sometimes co-opted and institutionally weak. Requiring political parties to obtain at least five percent of the vote to be represented in parliament would reduce the number of parties present in that body, while campaign finance limits would restrict the impact of money on politics. For civil society, there is a need for developing their organizational management abilities in the sphere of financial and administrative affairs, enabling them to stay independent from political co-optation into government and enhancing their transparency to, and legitimacy with, their constituencies.

Explore new entry points to shift the status quo

In some cases, traditional approaches to support democratic behaviors either have not generated substantive changes or have reached the limit of their effectiveness. This is the case in the two extreme cases of our project, Ghana and Zimbabwe. Ghana, despite having the worst measures of electoral democracy among our sample in the early 1990s (see Figure 1), is now one of the continent's most robust democracies, which has been bolstered by many different types of democracy interventions, both for voters and political elites. There has been minimal attention, however, to the role of party brokers and the strategic role that they could play to strengthen democratic norms. By contrast, autocracy has been entrenched in Zimbabwe. There, decades of sanctions have failed to meaningfully shift the incentives of elites. Instead, they have provided an excuse for the ruling ZANU PF party to recuse itself of accountability for poor services and macroeconomic mismanagement and have prompted the government to depend increasingly on China and illicit gold for financing and investment. In each country, new ideas are needed to shift the status quo.

GHANA

Ghana is widely lauded as a successful democratic case, with multiple peaceful transfers of power across the New Patriotic Party (NPP) and National Democratic Congress (NDC) since the country transitioned to multi-party politics in 1992. In their study of Ghana's political trajectory, Ofosu et al. (2025) argue that while institutions of horizontal accountability are strong, further democratic deepening is hampered by the

country's two political parties serving more as patronage networks rather than as vehicles that filter citizen concerns into the public sphere. These weaknesses typically come to the fore during elections when the parties engage in violence, electoral fraud, and vote buying (see also Asunka et al. 2019; Bob-Milliar 2012).

In their subsequent study, Ofosu, Selormey, and Dome (2025) delve into the causes of partisan weakness in more depth and specifically focus on the role of party brokers, often referred to as grassroots "foot soldiers." Such brokers play an active role for their parties by organizing rallies, engaging in door-to-door canvassing, and serving as party agents to monitor voting. Based on focus group discussions and a survey of local party executives in 12 constituencies in the Greater Accra region, the authors find that such brokers have distinct beliefs about democracy; sizeable minorities are skeptical of the need for multiparty democracy and believe that only those with knowledge about policy issues should vote, while more than 70% claim that media reports on corruption were harmful to the country.

This leads Ofosu, Selormey, and Dome (2025) to propose a deviation from traditional party strengthening approaches. Historically, party foundations have concentrated on training party elites (Ohlig 2025), and bilateral and multilateral donors have focused on civic education experiences to promote democratic political culture and participation (Finkel and Lim 2021). Instead, Ofosu, Selormey, and Dome (2025) highlight the need to specifically target Ghana's party foot soldiers—who reside in an oft-overlooked middle ground between party elites and the citizenry—with appropriate training and civic education. On civic education, they suggest specialized modules that emphasize tolerance, nonviolence, and the importance of media freedoms as well as the long-term consequences of vote buying for politics. They further advocate for training activities that enable brokers to properly represent citizens' concerns to politicians and become involved in district-level budgeting to understand how policy decisions are made and implemented. Finally, they suggest that political party reforms, including credible and fair internal elections for grassroots leadership and primaries for selecting party leaders and candidates, would give these foot soldiers more opportunities for shaping the party rather than just servicing it. Overall, Ofosu, Selormey, and Dome (2025) highlight the potential of a "mid-range" approach to democracy assistance that does not just target citizens or leaders but rather the thousands of individuals who comprise the parties' rank-and-file.

ZIMBABWE

Zimbabwe is characterized by Dendere and Tendi (2025: 4) as "an illiberal, militarized, electoral authoritarian regime." Zimbabwe's initial move towards multi-party democracy in 1990 significantly reversed over time with ZANU PF's consolidation of power. Despite a hopeful period for the opposition after the 2008 elections, as well as the chance for a democratic opening when Mugabe was ousted in 2018, opposition parties like the Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) and the Citizens' Coalition for Change (CCC) have weakened over time due to internal fracturing and active sabotage by ZANU PF through violence, infiltration, and unlawful arrests. Likewise, civil society, including trade unions, journalists, religious organizations, and NGOs, operate under high surveillance and are targeted with arrests. The support by Zimbabwe's cabinet in 2026 to extend President Mnangagwa's term limit from five to seven years and allow the president to be elected by parliament than directly by citizens suggests a further step backwards (Nyoka 2026).

Dendere and Tendi (2025) suggested several ways in which the actions of Western donors unintentionally reinforced ZANU PF's control in the country. First, they note that during the 1990s, international funders encouraged civil society organizations and the opposition to work together as a means of leveraging scarce resources. But the downside of this approach was that ZANU PF automatically associated civil society with the opposition. Second, when Mugabe was ousted in 2018 by the military, key donor countries refused to label the action as a "coup," which Dendere and Tendi (2025) believe exacerbated the strong role of the military and the security sector in the country's political settlement. Third, as Dendere (2026) notes, sanctions have been in place since 2001 through the U.S. Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic Recovery Act, which

also limits World Bank and IMF financial aid to the country, and the EU has prohibited member countries from engaging in trade with several Zimbabwean companies. The sanctions have had complex outcomes, including economic suffering for the broader populace without shifting political behaviors of the elite (Chakawa 2023).

Consequently, Dendere (2026) recommends a different approach; one that shifts to the democracy support approach that aims to incentivize elites rather than punish them. She notes that with shifting geopolitical dynamics, there is now more of an emphasis by Western countries on building mutually beneficial trade relations and less on excluding countries due to human rights abuses. This move from traditional diplomacy to commercial diplomacy, evidenced by several shifts towards the Zimbabwe government by the U.K., Sweden, and the EU, could be leveraged to provide Zimbabwe much-needed financing through trade and mining deals. In return, donors can make their support for such deals contingent on the integration of environmental, labor, corruption, and human rights safeguards. Likewise, this approach may help tackle corruption by enabling Zimbabwe to trade more of its gold, diamonds, and rare earth materials legally, which could reduce the premium on illegally obtained natural resources. Oversight for adhering to these safeguards could be under the mandate of anti-corruption civil society organizations and independent media.

Conclusions

Supporting democratic reforms is a complex and non-linear process that requires taking stock of what has worked well, where a change in approach is needed, and which types of interventions should take precedence to build momentum and consolidate scarce resources. Key to success will be aligning the right type of partnership or intervention in a way that works together with the domestic and endogenous factors of each country. The work from the Brookings case studies uncovers that these approaches need to always be appropriately contextualized to where countries are in their democratic journey and attuned to the binding constraints that may have derailed that journey. Indeed, the five case studies in the project represent distinct trajectories: Ghana represents an elected democracy which has remained steadfast over two decades, Kenya has shifted from an electoral autocracy to an electoral democracy, and the DRC moved from a closed to electoral autocracy. Meanwhile, Mali has shifted from an electoral democracy to a closed autocracy, and Zimbabwe remains a steadfast electoral autocracy (Resnick & Signé 2025). This variation in trajectories is critical for emphasizing that countries experiencing active democratic backsliding require different tools than those seeking to develop or deepen democracy. In fragile or backsliding contexts, shifting elite incentives through commercial diplomacy and political conditionality may be more effective than deploying traditional democracy assistance. In more consolidated democracies, deploying targeted investments in specific vulnerabilities such as campaign finance, party structures, or civic education are likely to be more successful. In all cases, democracy support actors should focus on conducting rigorous political economy diagnostics to understand how elite incentives may influence the outcome of democracy interventions.

Notwithstanding this variation, three key lessons emerge for actors seeking interventions to support democratic development, promote democratic strengthening, and prevent democratic backsliding across Africa.

1. ROOT DEMOCRACY SUPPORT IN LOCAL TRADITIONS AND NORMS.

Externally designed interventions that lack local legitimacy are unlikely to generate actual sustainable democratic strengthening. In countries that are backsliding especially, democracy development and support must engage with the customs, deliberative traditions, and social structures that citizens already recognize as legitimate. One reason that citizen assemblies and deliberative councils are a proposed tool for Mali's future is the country's tradition of deliberative forums and direct consultations, expressed through chiefs' consultative meetings, which acts as a foundation for developing further ways to connect communities to formal political institutions (Bleck and Soumano 2025). Drawing on

such traditions broadens participation and reduces the perception that democracy itself is a foreign imposition, which is a criticism that authoritarian leaders frequently exploit.

2. PRIORITIZE ADDRESSING BINDING CONSTRAINTS RATHER THAN SPREADING RESOURCES THIN.

Given the significant reduction in global democracy funding, concentrating resources on the single most critical constraint to democratic progress in a given context is more likely to generate durable results than a fragmented, sector-by-sector approach. In Kenya, campaign finance reform is a central focus because of its impact on the high distortion of party development and the marginalization of reform-minded candidates across the entire political system (Otele et al. 2026). In the DRC, executive entrenchment creates a cascade of accountability failures that undermine all other reform efforts. This means focusing on a panoply of reforms that remove executive interference over key institutions, grant greater transparency over parliamentarian voting records, and incentivize electoral reforms to mitigate party proliferation that dilutes the opposition's ability to serve as a source of countervailing power (Stearns et al. 2026). Identifying and systematically addressing these binding constraints can establish a stable foundation from which other democratic gains can follow and can maximize the output of scarce resources.

3. INVEST IN THE "MIDDLE LAYER" OF DEMOCRATIC ACTORS.

Democracy support has traditionally concentrated on either elite institutions—parliaments, judiciaries, electoral commissions—or on broad citizen-level civic education. The cases suggest a persistent gap in the "middle layer:" the brokers, local leaders, party foot soldiers, and civil society intermediaries who translate between formal institutions and ordinary citizens. This "middle layer" can help facilitate dialogue between citizens and translate their ideas or grievances effectively to leaders. Ghana's case exposed how even strong top-level institutions can produce patronage-driven or violence-prone electoral behavior if the grassroots party brokers hold weak democratic norms (Ofosu et al. 2025). Other research using data on grassroots brokers in Ghana's NPP found that brokers' behavior is also shaped by the type of incentive structure parties use for their compensation (Brierley and Nathan 2022). The study found that most payments occurred long after campaign periods which were more likely predicted by social ties to local elites instead of relative performance. To reform and better invest in the "middle layer," party foundations and bilateral donors should develop civic education modules specifically targeted for middle actors, and democracy support actors can engage with parties directly on potential governance reforms such as transparent criteria for broker compensation and credible internal elections for grassroots leadership positions, so that brokers have pathways to advance within their parties based on merit instead of based on personal patronage networks. Together, these interventions could begin to shift the incentive environment that currently rewards loyalty over democratic performance, making Ghana's and similar countries' democratic infrastructure more resilient from the ground up.

These three lessons can guide actors, both domestic and global, to support the long-term trajectory of African democracies. A historically grounded, locally led, and context-informed approach will be key to developing or strengthening each facet of democracy, as these cases have shown. The interventions suggested in these cases represent actionable ways forward for countries experiencing similar crossroads in their journey, shining a light on the practical hope for partners who wish to play a role in Africa's long-term democratic resilience.

REFERENCES

Afesorgbor, Sylvanus Kwaku, Lukas Kornher, and Fabio G. Santeramo. 2025. "The Impacts of Economic Sanctions on Food (Prices) Security: Evidence From Targeted Countries." The World Economy 48(8): 1942–56. doi:10.1111/twec.13739.

Afrobarometer. 2024. African Insights 2024: Democracy at Risk - the People's Perspective. Accra, Ghana: Afrobarometer. http://www.afrobarometer.org/.

Asunka, Joseph, Sarah Brierley, Miriam Golden, Eric Kramon, and George Ofosu. 2019. "Electoral Fraud or Violence: The Effect of Observers on Party Manipulation Strategies." British Journal of Political Science 49(1): 129–51. doi:10.1017/S0007123416000491.

Batumike, Ithiel, Fred Bauma, and Jason Stearns. 2025. The Democratic Republic of the Congo: A Competitive Electoral Oligarchy. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.

Blanken, Marike, Felix Wiebrecht, and Adea Gafuri. 2025. "From Aid to Empowerment: The Impact of Democracy Assistance on Civil Society." The Journal of Development Studies 61(11): 1737–55. doi:10.1080/00220388.2025.2487005.

Bleck, Jaimie, Lucia Carrillo, Jessica Gottlieb, Katrina Kosec, Jordan Kyle, and Moumouni Soumano. 2024. "Unlocking Locally-Led Resilience amid Conflict and Climate Stress: Views from Community Leaders in Mali on Development Priorities, Aid Distribution, and Anticipatory Action." https://hdl.handle.net/10568/152260 (February 26, 2026).

Bob-Milliar, George M. 2012. "Political Party Activism in Ghana: Factors Influencing the Decision of the Politically Active to Join a Political Party." Democratization 19(4): 668–89. doi:10.1080/13510347.2011.605998.

Brown, Stephen. 2005. "Foreign Aid and Democracy Promotion: Lessons from Africa." The European Journal of Development Research 17(2): 179–98. doi:10.1080/09578810500130799.

Brown, Stephen. 2013. "Democracy Promotion in Africa." In Routledge Handbook of African Politics, eds. Nic Cheeseman, David Anderson, and Andrea Scheibler. London, UK: Routledge, 404–13.

Carothers, Thomas. 2009. "Democracy Assistance: Political vs. Developmental?" Journal of Democracy 20(1): 5–19. https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/democracy-assistance-political-vs-developmental/ (February 13, 2026).

Carothers, Thomas. 2015. "Democracy Aid at 25: Time to Choose." Journal of Democracy 26(1): 59–73. doi:10.1353/jod.2015.0010.

Chakawa, Joshua. 2023. "Why Sanctions Have Not Worked: Zimbabwe's Experience from 2001-2021." Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal 8(4–6): 205–18. doi:10.1080/23802014.2022.2080248.

Collinson, Erin, and Julia Brownell. 2025. "A Quick Look at MCC's New Scorecards." Center For Global Development. https://www.cgdev.org/blog/quick-look-mccs-new-scorecards (March 20, 2026).

Del Biondo, Karen. 2015. "Donor Interests or Developmental Performance? Explaining Sanctions in EU Democracy Promotion in Sub-Saharan Africa." World Development 75: 74–84. doi:10.1016/j.worlddev.2014.11.002.

Dendere, Chipo, and Miles Tendi. 2025. Understanding the Evolution and State of Democracy in Zimbabwe: When a Coup Is Not Called a Coup. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.

Emmanuel, Nikolas. 2010. "Undermining Cooperation: Donor-Patrons and the Failure of Political Conditionality." Democratization 17(5): 856–77. doi:10.1080/13510347.2010.501174.

Finkel, Steven E., and Junghyun Lim. 2021. "The Supply and Demand Model of Civic Education: Evidence from a Field Experiment in the Democratic Republic of Congo." Democratization 28(5): 970–91. doi:10.1080/13510347.2020.1843156.

Gafuri, Adea. 2022. "Can Democracy Aid Improve Democracy? The European Union's Democracy Assistance

2002–2018." Democratization 29(5): 777–97. doi:10.1080/13510347.2021.2012654.
Gisselquist, Rachel M., Miguel Niño-Zarazúa, Melissa Samarin, and UNU-WIDER. 2021. 2021 Does Aid Support Democracy? A Systematic Review of the Literature. 14th ed. UNU-WIDER. doi:10.35188/UNU-WIDER/2021/948-8.
Government of Kenya. "House to Consider Election Laws and Campaign Financing Ahead of 2027 Polls." https://www.parliament.go.ke/node/25124 (February 19, 2026).
Grimm, Sonja, Brigitte Weiffen, and Karina Mross. 2025. "Democracy Promotion in Times of Autocratization: A Conceptual Note." Democratization 32(7): 1617–39. doi:10.1080/13510347.2025.2543778.
Ha, Yoonbin. 2023. "Does 'Democracy Aid' Promote Democracy? : What Works and What Does Not." 21(1): 91–112. doi:10.14731/kjis.2023.04.21.1.91.
Hamada, Yukihiko, and Khushbu Agrawal. 2020. Political Finance Reforms: How to Respond to Today's Policy Challenges? International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. doi:10.31752/idea.2020.68.
Ingelaere, Bert. 2016. Inside Rwanda's Gacaca Courts: Seeking Justice after Genocide. Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press.
Leininger, Julia, Karina Mross, and Jonas Wolff. 2025. "Strategic Responses to Autocratization in International Democracy Promotion." Democratization 32(7): 1640–62. doi:10.1080/13510347.2025.2465876.
Lindberg, Staffan I. 2026. "Fifty Years of the Third Wave(s): From Democratization to Autocratization." Democratization: 1–19. doi:10.1080/13510347.2026.2615134.
Matlosa, Khabele. 2025. "The Hazards of Democratic Backsliding in Africa." In Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies, Oxford University Press. doi:10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.846.
Mwaba, Anna Kapambwe. 2023. "African Agency in Democracy Promotion: The African Union and Election Observation in Malawi." Journal of Southern African Studies 49(2): 247–63. doi:10.1080/03057070.2023.2238561.
Nyoka, Shingai. 2026. "Mnangagwa's 2030 Ambition Launched: Zimbabwe Cabinet Approves Draft Law to Extend Presidential Terms." https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c15x3xl52qdo (February 22, 2026).
OECD. 2005. Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, OECD Publishing. http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264098084-en
OECD. 2026. "CRS: Creditor Reporting System (Flows)." OECD Data Repository, February 17, 2026. https://data-explorer.oecd.org/vis?df[ds]=dsDisseminateFinalDMZ&df[id]=DSD_CRS%40DF_CRS&df[ag]=OECD.DCD.FSD&df[vs]=1.5&dq=DAC..1000.100._T._T.D.Q._T..&lom=LASTNPERIODS&lo=5&to[TIME_PERIOD]=false.
Ofosu, George, Daniel Armah-Attoh, Mavis Zupork Dome, and Edem Selormey. 2025. Ghana's Democracy under the Fourth Republic. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.
Ofosu, George, Edem Selormey, and Mavis Zupork Dome. 2025. Shaping Democracy from the Middle: Party Grassroots and Ghana's Democratic Progress. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.
Ohlig, Louise. 2025. "German Political Foundations' Democracy Promotion in Autocratizing Tanzania: Opening Spaces for Civil Society Support and Transnational Learning." Democratization 32(7): 1729–51. doi:10.1080/13510347.2024.2448849.
Omotuyi, Sunday, Olawale Olusola, and Modesola Omotuyi. 2024. "Resurgence of Military Coups in West Africa: Nigeria and the Failed Effort at Restoring Democracy in Niger." Taiwan Journal of Democracy 20(2): 1–24.
Otele, Oscar, Karuti Kanyinga, and Winnie Mitullah. 2026. Building Resilient Democracies: Campaign Finance Issues and Reforms in Kenya. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.
Otele, Oscar M, Karuti Kanyinga, and Winnie Mitullah. 2025. Kenya's Resilient Democracy: Balancing Power and Accountability. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.
Rakner, Lise. 2019. "Democratic Rollback in Africa." In Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics, Oxford University Press. doi:10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.887.
Resnick, Danielle. 2014. "Conclusions and Policy Recommendations." In Democratic Trajectories in Africa: Unravelling the Impact of Foreign Aid, eds. Danielle Resnick and Nicolas Van De Walle. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Silva-Leander, Annika, Kourtney Pompi, and Cassandra Emmons. 2025. When Aid Fades: Impacts and Pathways for the Global Democracy Ecosystem. Stockholm, Sweden: Global Democracy Coalition.

Soumahoro, Moussa. 2023. "Why Aren't Sanctions Preventing Coups in Africa?" ISS Africa. https://issafrica.org/iss-today/why-arent-sanctions-preventing-coups-in-africa (February 22, 2026).

Stearns, Jason, Ithiel Batumike, and Fred Bauma. 2026. Beyond Paper Reforms: Building Coalitions for Democracy in the DRC. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.

Steele, Carie A., Daniel Pemstein, and Stephen A. Meserve. 2021. "Democracy Promotion and Electoral Quality: A Disaggregated Analysis." Governance 34(2): 505–21. doi:10.1111/gove.12526.

Wotjanik, Andrew. 2026. "Democracy in Africa is Fragmenting Into Three Paths." Democracy in Africa. https://democracyinafrica.org/democracy-in-africa-is-fragmenting-into-three-paths/

Youngs, Richard. 2019. Upholding Democracy in a Post-Western Order. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2019/02/upholding-democracy-in-a-post-western-order (February 13, 2026).

BROOKINGS

1775 Massachusetts Ave NW,
Washington, DC 20036
(202) 797-6000
www.brookings.edu