



Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa

**THE DIGITAL REVOLUTION AND
ITS IMPACT ON DEMOCRACY**

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policy brief

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INTRODUCTION

The digital revolution is transforming state-society power dynamics and re-shaping the practice of democracy in Africa and globally. This transformation and re-shaping are possible because digital revolution includes the 'development of digital systems, communication and rapid advances in computing power, which have enabled new ways of generating, processing and sharing information (Davis 2016). In countries like Zimbabwe and Kenya, civil society organizations (CSOs) have empowered citizens to use mobile phones to conduct Parallel Vote Tabulation (PVT) and monitor elections using crowd sourced web-based platforms. Social media networking sites such as Twitter and WhatsApp are now tools for mobilizing citizens to hold their governments to account, and a means to escalate issues from the local to the international.

These positive impacts of the digital revolution on democracy are happening within a context of a general global decline in democratic governance. In sub-Saharan Africa, democracy is backsliding too (Campbell and Quinn 2021). The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index 2020 suggests that of the 44 countries in sub-Saharan Africa, 37 are classified as hybrid regimes and authoritarian regimes, which means that there is a pervasive weakness of public participation, civil liberties and functioning of government in these countries. According to Freedom House (2021), only 16% of African countries are classified as democracies. And since 2020, there have been successful military coups in Guinea, Mali, Sudan and Chad and several failed ones, prompting the UN Secretary General to refer to 'an epidemic of coup d'états' (Nichols 2021). In countries where elections have been held, they have often resulted in disputed outcomes and electoral violence.

What this implies is that even though most Africans are connected through the internet and other technologies, there have been no significant changes to the authoritarian ecosystem which inhibits effective citizen participation in their governance. Partly, this is attributable to authoritarian regimes adapting to the new technological landscape and using methods such as digital surveillance and artificial intelligence to hinder effective citizen participation. Based on this background, any assessment of the role of digital revolution on democracy should consider the role played by specific national contexts in shaping which technologies are adopted and how they are employed in the practice of democracy. Therefore, this brief focuses on how the offline context shapes the online, and how the impact of digital revolution on democracy is mediated by the offline context.

HOW THE DIGITAL REVOLUTION IS CHANGING THE DEMOCRATIC LANDSCAPE

The influence of the digital revolution should be measured by the extent to which it interrupts the ecosystem of authoritarianism and how much it disrupts the power dynamics prevalent in African politics. This is because the narrative of a democracy-in-decline is coinciding with rapid technological advancements, shown, in basic terms, by the increased levels of internet access and mobile penetration on the continent. According to the World Bank (2021), in 2019, 29% of the sub-Saharan population used the internet – a significant increase from just 0.5% of the population that had access in 2000. The rate of mobile cellular subscriptions also increased from 1.72 per 100 people in 2000 to 87 per 100 people in 2019; and the number of fixed broadband subscriptions increased from 221 153 in 2005 to 5 910 929 in 2020. This increased access to the internet and mobile penetration suggests that more Africans are interconnected.

Their interconnectedness provides the means for sharing of information, mass mobilization and citizen participation. From increasing citizen participation to de-monopolizing information gathering and dissemination, the internet and technology are often hailed to be levellers in politics – challenging the hegemony of states and empowering citizens. CSOs and social movements have used the internet and social media networking sites to mobilize and galvanize citizens against the excesses of their governments. For example, #EndSARS, a decentralized social movement in Nigeria resulted in disbandment of a special unit of the Nigerian Police, the Special Anti-Robbery Squad, accused of extrajudicial killings and torture of civilians (Amnesty International 2020). In South Africa, the hashtags #RhodesMustFall, #FeesMustFall, and #ZumaMustFall were used to organize and mobilize protestors on issues such as decolonization, tuition fees and widespread corruption, respectively.

These #hashtag movements show the combined power of the internet, social networking sites and other technologies as instruments for citizen journalism and citizen mobilization. They show that the benefits of the internet to citizens and activists against the excesses of governments are myriad. The internet democratizes information creation, duplication and distribution. In authoritarian regimes where information production and access are restricted, social media has created space through the agency of ordinary citizens to produce and disseminate information further and wider than their regimes would normally allow. By escalating and internationalizing local issues, digital technologies disrupt governments' monopoly over the production, gathering and dissemination of information. In that respect, social media liberalizes information, taking away the autonomy of the state. In addition, social media is useful not just for spreading new ideas but also for mass mobilization, and with a

combination of adaptation and skill, it can be used to create a collective identity and coordination of action.

However, as noted by Roberts (2021), 'each new digital tool used by activists to enable free expression is met by a barrage of government measures designed to shut down those freedoms and deny citizens their digital rights. This has happened with SMS, blogging, social media and even with privacy and anonymisation tools.' Furthermore, despite the successes of digital activism and campaigns, the digital revolution has created new forms of inequalities among citizens, and between citizens and the state. Consequently, Freedom House (2021) observed that just like democracy, internet freedom is on the decline in Africa.

CHALLENGES TO THE DIGITAL REVOLUTION

As CSOs shifted to online-based mobilization, advocacy and campaigns, large constituents without access to the internet, and mostly in the rural areas, were left out. In addition, with the majority of African countries having the most exorbitant internet data costs, low-income portions of urban populations were excluded from digital activities. According to the Worldwide Mobile Data Pricing 2021 report, 'Sub-Saharan Africa still has the most expensive data prices in the world ... with the average price for 1GB of mobile data coming in at \$6.44. Next most expensive was Oceania at \$5.51 and then South America at \$5.25' (Gilbert 2021). The implication of these exorbitant costs of mobile data is that internet-based social movements became elitist and dominated by middle-class perspectives who in most cases can afford it. This digital exclusion of low-income citizens limits the building of the social consensus necessary for effective democratic citizen participation. Some CSOs in Zimbabwe, for example, have tried to provide internet data for participants of their online meetings, but then, access is limited to those with gadgets able to support Zoom meetings. Accordingly, the increased use of the internet by CSOs has resulted in the alienation of marginalized low-income communities that are mostly prone to government excesses.

The muted impact of the digital revolution on democracy in Africa is also attributable to the responses of hybrid and authoritarian regimes to successful internet-based movements. Authoritarian regimes are adapting their 'offline' oppressive systems to quash dissent online. Some governments have transplanted physical forms of authoritarianism such as banning public gatherings by deploying security agents onto the virtual space. This online or soft authoritarianism includes instituting laws that give state security agencies surveillance powers to censor and criminalize online comments and activities opposing the government (Feldstein 2021:5). Ethiopia and Zimbabwe, among others, have imported from China digital surveillance technologies and enhanced their digital surveillance capacities to monitor online

content and disrupt internet connections (Polyakova and Meserole 2019). The effect is that ordinary citizens self-censor, and with the increased presence of online security agents infiltrating online campaigns, there is considerable mistrust, which limits social consensus and effective engagements. Through these strategies, governments are consolidating their power. They use instruments of authoritarianism such as digital surveillance, micro-targeting and use of trolls to spread disinformation and intimidate political activists (Bradshaw, Bailey and Howard 2020).

The digital revolution has given rise to social movements dependent on the internet and digital technologies for citizen engagement. The challenge with this is that social movements and CSOs risk losing the power to shape agendas and gather and disseminate information to achieve their objectives because authoritarian governments are using trolls to influence online conversations and mobilize digital militias to bully activists online (Megiddo 2019). In most cases, participants in cyber movements remain loosely connected individuals who are connected by the abstractness of their 'problem' and consequently lack the capacity to aggregate their individual frustrations together with others into collective action. This is because, in general, the internet is an uncoordinated space where the discourse on democracy and governance tends to be held in echo-chambers with no meaningful facilitation. Discussions on Twitter Spaces are becoming more coordinated but still lack tolerance for opposing perspectives, which has led to cyber-bullying and cyber-shaming of those that hold unpopular views. The net effect is that digital technologies are exacerbating, and in some cases exaggerating, social and political differences in a manner that inhibits constructive dialogue and consensus on the practice of democracy.

Within internet-based movements there are horizontal hierarchies, and those with the loudest voice and largest following become authorities, irrespective of their understanding or being a recognized authority on an issue. In addition, with most cyber movements lacking structured leadership, there seems to be a lack of organization and ability to harness participants' energy towards creating a single narrative and achieving set objectives. The danger is that the cause is overshadowed by the online personalities that are advancing it, which exposes prominent individuals of the cyber movements to security agents in authoritarian regimes. For example, FANO, an ethnic Amhara militia group, has used groups of Facebook accounts to incite violence and promote armed conflict recruitment of militias and fundraising for violent campaigns (Mackintosh 2021). In South Africa, media reports suggested that the anti-migrant protests that resulted in xenophobic violence were organized on social media sites such as WhatsApp and Twitter through hashtags like #PutSouthAfricansFirst (Atabong 2020). Such uses of the internet reduce the positive aspects of the mass mobilization effect of social media and networks. To fuel the discord on online platforms further, some governments have

engaged trolls to influence discourses, spread their propaganda, sow distrust among citizens and drown online campaigns. In Kenya, for example, malicious, coordinated disinformation and misinformation was used by paid trolls on Twitter to silence civil society activists, especially those campaigning against a government-backed proposed constitutional amendment (Madung and Obilo 2021).

TOWARDS A DIGITAL REVOLUTION THAT PROMOTES DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION (RECOMMENDATIONS)

To harness the power of digital technologies to build more resilient democratic tendencies, CSOs and social media activists should be aware of the technological inequalities/gap and as far as possible create hybrid (digital and physical) events and activities. For rural masses, together with the poor urban dwellers, it is traditional social movements with a physical presence and collective community ties that lead to action rather than social media, which is out of their reach and has peripheral influence on the masses. To address the disconnect between the masses and the 'new' elite empowered by their smartphones and social media accessibility, CSO collaboration and networking are essential to leverage their respective strengths.

Without organization, cyber protests remain uncoordinated and unable to counter the highly organized state machinery. Like social movements that have to mobilize and provide leadership to the masses, cyber social movements also require a leadership able to mobilize and organize them into a movement able to effect change. The institutionalization and transformation of these cyber social movements into a collective social movement group able to hold the government to account can take different forms, and largely depend on the context. Nonetheless, this process of institutionalization should include the framing of the crisis that the social movement intends to confront, and this could be done in partnership with CSOs that have a physical presence.

Social media movements that remain grounded in cyberspace and fail to adapt to their local contexts and new realities often struggle to transition into physical space. Unlike in democratic countries where governments respond to internet petitions, in authoritarian regimes, an internet movement has to transition into the physical space because apart from cyber counterattacks, authoritarian regimes use physical means of repression such as prosecution, torture or forced disappearances. That transition demands high levels of adaptability and change of strategies to stay ahead of regimes that more often than not are better equipped and have a wide range of repressive resources at their disposal.

More importantly, it is essential that CSOs prioritize the creation of a continental human rights regime that recognizes that civil and political rights should also be applicable online. That means advocating for regulations that protect civilians from digital authoritarianism and acknowledge the significance of digital technologies for citizen participation in their governance and strengthening of democratic governance. This also implies calling on regional and international organizations to recognize digital authoritarianism as a challenge similar to other forms of oppressive governance.

In sum, at the core of the criticism against social media activism is its failure to transform its networked individuals into social change agents able to build consensus, take collective action and achieve a collective objective. As discussed in this brief, that transition can only materialize when the social media movements institutionalize and set up structures that ensure their survival beyond the internet frenzy. That also means that digital platforms should be seen for what they are, a mobilization tool that rallies people into action relevant to their context. Digital platforms should not be perceived as a causal agent having a pivotal role in promoting social change or advancing democracy. There is nothing intrinsic in social media that automatically achieves this potential. Societal contexts and arrangements around the technology are key to its impact on politics (Lim 2013:638). Accordingly, there has to be a recombination of online and offline mobilization strategies and plans of action, such that even if the government shuts down the internet the movement is not gravely affected.

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Notes

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Notes



About EISA

Since its inception in July 1996 EISA has established itself as a leading institution and influential player dealing with elections and democracy related issues in the African continent. EISA has past and/or current field offices in 20 African countries. The organisation's Strategic Goals are:

- Electoral processes are inclusive, transparent, peaceful and well-managed;
- Citizens participate effectively in the democratic process;
- Political institutions and processes are democratic and function effectively; and
- EISA is a stronger and more influential organisation

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