



**POLITICKING IN THE DIGITAL AGE:
SEPARATING THE HYPE FROM REALITY**

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**POLICY
BRIEF** No.4

Published by EISA
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First published 2022

Layout and printing by Corpnet, Johannesburg

policy brief

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POLITICKING IN THE DIGITAL AGE: SEPARATING THE HYPE FROM REALITY

INTRODUCTION

Digital technologies have become a dominant, if not the defining, feature of our 21st century existence, shaping almost every aspect of human and social life, including politics, economics, diplomacy, education, and even our personal relationships. The effects of digital technologies on political life have received much attention owing to the traditional power hierarchies and contestations that are inherent in this aspect of human life. Social media and other internet-based technologies have challenged the traditional role of the state and other powerful actors as gatekeepers of information. As such, these technologies have been touted as harbingers of a new form of politics, one characterized by greater participation, inclusivity, transparency, and accountability. Digital technologies have indeed contributed to recasting the political game – from stimulating greater dialogue between political parties and the electorate on social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, to transforming the very nature of political organizing, as evident in the emergence of so-called digital parties in Europe. Even so, the link between digital technologies and the ideal of a more democratic society remains tenuous. This brief examines the influence of digital technologies on political campaigning and political participation in Africa, with a view to teasing out some of the emergent trends, issues and lessons for policy action.

DIGITAL POLITICS IN AFRICA: THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY

With an estimated internet connectivity rate of 33%, Sub-Saharan Africa lags when compared to other regions in terms of access to the internet (International Telecommunications Union, 2021). That notwithstanding, it is arguably in Africa, more than anywhere else in the world, that the digitization phenomenon has had its most complex and disruptive effects on the conduct of politics.

THE GOOD SIDE OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES

Across the continent, political parties and candidates have taken advantage of the accessibility and affordability of digital technologies to experiment with new forms of political communication, mobilization and electioneering. In the context of limited financial resources, political parties, especially the smaller ones, and independent candidates have found in social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp a highly cost-effective means to engage with their followers and reach even wider audiences with election campaign messages (Sener, Yucel & Yedikardes, 2019). Nana Akufo-Addo of Ghana, who later thanked his social media team on Twitter for his 2016 presidential victory, offers an example of successful campaigning on social media despite

limited funding. Given the interactive nature of social networking sites, their increasing adoption in politicking is also transforming the traditionally one-way model of communication between political parties and their followers into political dialogues of sorts. It can thus be argued that digital technologies have contributed to enriching political discourse in Africa, particularly from the perspective of marginalized or otherwise politically apathetic groups such as people with disabilities and the youth (Asante, 2020:21,141).

In countries such as Kenya and Mozambique, smartphone applications and social media platforms have also given a boost to the activities of ordinary citizens in safeguarding the sanctity of elections by allowing for real-time monitoring of polls. In Mozambique, for example, citizen observers have been using mobile phones and digital platforms such as Citizen's Eye and Txeka-lá, as well as the Votar Mozambique web platform and its mobile app, to monitor polls in real time (Tsandzana, 2019). Beyond elections, digital technologies have been used by civil society activists to circumvent government restrictions in the traditional media and information space, and in doing so force critical political issues onto the public agenda.

THE LIMITS OF DIGITALIZATION IN THE POLITICAL SPACE

While all these instances point to a changing political landscape that can be attributed, at least in part, to the effects of social media and other digital technologies, there is room for caution here, both in terms of the degree of disruption as well as the desirability of the outcomes being observed. First, the gap between what happens online on the one hand, and political participation and results in the real world on the other hand, remains wide. Besides distorting and misrepresenting political reality, engagement and following in virtual spaces are often not accompanied by increased votes during elections or robust and sustained demands for accountability when promises are broken. A case in point is the 2019 general elections in Botswana, where Duma Gideon Boko, the candidate for the Umbrella for Democratic Change (UDC), which had an impressive social media following, lost a constituency to a candidate with very little social media presence. Boko and the UDC were widely expected to make a dent in the support base of the ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP), thanks partly to their strong social media presence and appeal. The hype around digitization thus creates a false sense of the extent of political engagement and participation that tends to leave the status quo unchanged. As David Columbia (2018) argues, social media, in particular, appeals mostly to the emotional, reactive and quick-fix disposition of individuals, often at the expense of the deep thinking, planning, and interaction that is required for flourishing democratic politics. Considering that it is mostly the urban youth and the more socially mobile segments of society that are digitally connected, the over-investment in this space may also be undermining political progress by

distracting political parties from devoting sufficient attention to the larger segment of the electorate that is not digitally connected. As social distancing measures adopted across the continent to control the Covid-19 pandemic have underscored the necessity of digitization in contemporary political processes, we will do well to remain conscious of the limits to the democratic potential that can be attributed to this phenomenon.

THE UGLY SIDE OF THE DIGITISATION OF POLITICS

For all their disruptive capacity and reputation, digital technologies have not escaped the official scrutiny and censorship that has for long been a defining feature of African politics. Their potential for positive political change must therefore be assessed against the backdrop of the emerging phenomenon of 'digital authoritarianism', by which governments across the continent are resorting to measures such as online surveillance, arrests of online activists and outright internet shutdowns to restrict the civic space that has been opened by these technologies. For example, in the lead-up to 2020 elections in Tanzania, the government passed new regulations that were widely criticized as an attempt to curb free speech and the improved access to information made possible by the diffusion of digital technology in the country (Wanyama, 2020). In neighbouring Uganda, the successful use of social media for political mobilization by the young opposition leader, Bobi Wine, which challenged the boundaries of political control in a country where freedom of expression has been continually curtailed, was met by a government decision to ban social media and messaging applications during the country's January 2021 elections (Fick, 2021).

Social media platforms have also enabled and exacerbated hate speech, coordinated smear-campaigns, and misinformation by politicians and governments alike, all in a bid to manipulate public opinion, and in some instances intimidate and discredit political opponents. This has contributed to eroding the integrity of political processes, particularly in highly polarized societies. In Uganda, for example, a study conducted by Pollicy, a Kampala-based feminist civic tech organization, in the wake of the country's January 2021 general elections, found that women politicians and leaders experienced noticeable forms of online violence rooted in misogynistic beliefs (Kakande, 2021). Arguably, such online bullying has the potential to undermine women's participation in political discourses and processes both in the virtual and physical worlds.

REIMAGINING A NEW POLITICS FOR THE DIGITAL AGE

While the reality is far more nuanced than it is often portrayed, digital technologies indeed constitute a major disruptive force in the conduct of politics in Africa,

as in other parts of the world, the outcomes of which cannot be determined a priori. At best, the increasing adoption of these technologies on the continent opens possibilities for a new politics of the digital age. In what follows, we reflect briefly on the possible contours and some of the issues to be considered in the process of reimagining African politics in the context of digitization, with a specific focus on political participation and political campaigning.

TOWARDS A MORE INCLUSIVE AND ROBUST POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

From a political participation perspective, guarding against a technology-induced democratic divide and bridging the digital and real worlds of politics are perhaps the two most important considerations as we reimagine the conduct of politics in the digital age. With digitization in Africa being largely an urban phenomenon that also disproportionately benefits those with a higher socio-economic status, there is need for caution in centering digital technologies in our politics. This is because the democratic divide that tends to emerge from differential access to the empowering information available on the internet runs the risk of further widening existing inequalities in political access and participation. This means that even in the digital age, digital technologies should be conceived as just one of many forms of modern technologies that are needed for inclusive political mobilization and participation. A number of interventions can, however, be adopted to strengthen the nexus between digitization and inclusive political participation. In the short to medium term, digital skills campaigns by civil society organizations, educational institutions and election management bodies are needed to enhance the online political engagement of a larger proportion of the African electorate. This should be complemented in the long term by efforts on the part of governments and the private sector to invest in ICT infrastructure and affordable internet-enabled devices, which would allow for greater access to social media and other digital platforms.

Even in the context of increased digital access, online deliberation and activism do not always translate into substantive political participation and activism in the physical world. This so-called reactive democracy, especially among the youth, cannot be dissociated from the crisis of credibility affecting key political institutions and processes in Africa, and is just one manifestation of a widespread disengagement from conventional political processes such as elections. If the deliberation and activism on digital platforms such as Twitter and Facebook are to be harnessed to strengthen democratic participation, there is an urgent need to restore the credibility of our political institutions and processes, through greater accountability and responsiveness on the part of elected and other political leaders. This would create incentives for the emergence of a more engaged citizenry that is able to exploit the full potential of digital technologies to participate actively in political processes.

DIGITIZATION AND POLITICAL CAMPAIGNING: REGULATING WITHOUT STIFLING INNOVATION AND FREE SPEECH

Central to the digitization phenomenon are the possibilities it opens up for innovative and cost-effective approaches to political campaigning and mobilization. As discussed above, this digital liberalization of the political space has come with its own challenges, mainly in the form of misinformation, online violence and digital authoritarianism. This raises the question of how to induce a fair and responsible use of social media and other digital technologies without stifling their transformative potential. In reflecting on this question, two key issues are worth considering. The first is that technologies may provide a platform and amplify certain behaviours such as hate speech and misinformation, but they do not produce these. Regulating social media must therefore begin with addressing the conditions in society that encourage these undesirable behaviours. These have generally taken the form of a morally bankrupt politics, which has set a very low standard for what is acceptable and what is unacceptable in political mobilization and campaigning.

A new politics founded on an ethics of responsibility and accountability is, therefore, a sine qua non for harnessing the democratic possibilities that come with the diffusion of digital technologies on the continent. Political parties, as the organizing units of politics in modern democratic societies, can contribute to engendering this new political culture by taking seriously their role in developing the civic and political consciousness of society, through sustained education programmes that are rooted in shared moral values and ethics. This would in turn inspire a new kind of political mobilization and campaigning, both offline and online, which is conscious of, and constrained by, the ethical expectations of society. With specific reference to digital campaigning and mobilization, it would also be incumbent on political parties to self-police their online activities and those of their members, say through social media policies and codes of conduct. This should incorporate an element of training to develop organizational capacity for fair and responsible use of digital technologies.

Second, debates on the regulation of social media to contain the scourge of fake news for political ends must take into consideration the reality that governments are as much architects of online misinformation and manipulation as agents for addressing the crisis through legislation and other forms of hard regulation. This not only raises questions about the motivations behind efforts to regulate social media, but further underscores the need for such regulation to emerge organically from a broad process of critical social reflection. In any case, the development of new digital technologies has tended to outpace their regulation through legislation, making this option rather tenuous. What is required, therefore, is a social contract for the digital space between governments, political parties, tech companies and organized civil society. Such

a social pact should constitute of rules and norms that clearly spell out the rights, responsibilities and expectations regarding the use of the digital space, and would ideally be held together through three enforcement mechanisms. First, there should be self-regulation requirements that hold social media companies accountable for offensive or misleading content shared on their platforms by individuals, both in their private capacity and as representatives of political parties and other social formations. Second, provisions should be made for legal course so that individual social media users can hold other users accountable for offensive online behaviour. Third, consideration should be given to establishing national digital ombudsmen in African countries, with the responsibility to provide oversight over these digital compacts.

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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

The vision of EISA is "an African continent where democratic governance, human rights and citizen participation are upheld in a peaceful environment". This vision is executed through the organisational mission of "striving for excellence in the promotion of credible elections, participatory democracy, a human rights culture, and the strengthening of governance institutions for the consolidation of democracy in Africa".

Having supported and/or observed over 100 electoral processes in Africa, EISA has extensive experience in formulating, structuring and implementing democratic and electoral initiatives. It has built an internationally recognised centre for policy, research and information and provides this service to electoral management bodies, political parties, parliaments, national and local governments and civil society organisations in a variety of areas, such as voter and civic education and electoral assistance and observation. Besides its expanded geographical scope, the Institute works in the in-between election areas along the electoral and parliamentary cycle, including constitution building processes, legislative strengthening, conflict management and transformation, political party development and strengthening and supporting capacity building for members of parliament and parliamentary structures. EISA also provides technical assistance to continental and regional inter-governmental institutions, Election Management Bodies and Civil Society Organisations.

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This publication and series are made possible through the generous financial support of the Government of Sweden through the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida).