

DEMOCRACY, ELECTIONS AND CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

The South African Experience

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ABSTRACT

The discourse on the reversal of democratic dividends, which has gained momentum in the past decade and a half, focuses on the erstwhile discussion on electoral governance and the relationship between elections and democracy. In this article, I emphasise the pivotal role of citizens and the value addition of elections in a democracy. Elections, as a cornerstone of democracy, provide a platform for citizens to express their will and shape the future of their nation. The article asserts a symbiotic relationship between democracy, elections, and citizen participation. A preliminary conclusion is that democracy is about improving citizens' circumstances, and regular elections provide the citizens with an opportunity to elect leaders who will ensure that they realise the democratic dividends. Therefore, there is a need for strengthened human rights-centred and inclusive electoral processes with meaningful opportunities and arrangements for citizens' participation beyond voting.

Keywords: democracy, elections, citizen participation

INTRODUCTION

This article expands on the public address delivered at the North-West University in February 2024 as part of the university's public lecture series ahead of the 29 May 2024 national and provincial elections in South Africa. On that occasion, I opined that the timing of the public lecture was vital for two main reasons. Firstly, 2024 marks South Africa's 30 years of democratic rule, a milestone that profoundly reflects South Africa's democratic transition. This transition, not in isolation but part of the continent's transitions, must be assessed for its overall impact on promoting democratic governance, peace, and development in South Africa and the continent of Africa.

Secondly, the North-West University lecture series added to the ongoing scholarly research about the global democratic recession. Recent writings and research reports on this phenomenon reveal the rise of illiberal populism, the deterioration of norms and institutions, a global decline and erosion of democracy and rise of authoritarian regimes (International IDEA 2021; Diamond 2022; University of Gothenburg V-DEM Institute 2024).

The International IDEA State of Democracy Report on the quality of African democracy shows that in 2021, there were more than 15 active violent conflicts across the continent. The report suggests that the resurgence of unconstitutional changes of government and military-aided transitions account for compounding the problem for the continent. Robert Gerenge (2023, pp.574-575) puts the problem of military coups into perspective. He tells us that:

From 2012 to 2023, the continent of Africa has experienced at least ten military coups (including double/countercoups) in Egypt, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad, Sudan, Mali, Niger and Gabon – as well as attempted coups in Guinea Bissau and Sao Tome and Principe, and Niger... Armed conflicts, including those driven by violent extremism, have also compounded the mixed trajectory of democracy on the continent, especially in the Sahel, the Lake Chad Basin, as well as the Horn of Africa, where there is cross-pollination of democratic deficits and armed conflicts. In some of the countries in these regions, such as Mali, Somalia and South Sudan, elections have been postponed due to the challenges of insecurity, including activity by terrorist groups, thereby regenerating new conflict dynamics.

This article discusses the relationship between democracy, elections, and citizen participation. The entry point is the affirmation of a nexus between democracy, elections, and citizen participation. However, the article is also aware that the nexus is not automatically established but is a product of purposive interventions and processes. Sterling work by several authors, including Elklit and Reynolds (2005) and Mozaffar and Schindler (2002), has adequately addressed the issue of electoral governance, discussed in the following section on elections and their function. This article adds to the discussion of the centrality of the citizens and the value addition of elections in a democracy. The goal is to show that the debate on electoral governance must bring to bear the equally important role of the citizens.

Although elections have become regular in most countries, they do not always yield positive outcomes critical for aiding democracy. As Diamond (2022) aptly notes, the consolidation of democracy will remain a distant mirage in the context

of lawlessness, rampant corruption, and a weak state. The spate of election-related disputes in many parts of Africa is a case in point. Most election disputes involve the aggrieved political party or independent candidates' concern over the actual or perceived 'omissions and commissions' of the election management boards (EMBs) in managing the electoral process. Literature contains many examples of cases where EMBs are accused of 'widespread manipulation and irregularities during the registration, voting and tallying processes' or where the incumbent regime constricts the capacity of the EMBs to perform (Campion & Jega 2023, p.379). Electoral disputes can also be triggered by opposition parties and civil society objections over the electoral process in part or whole.

Over the years, there has also been a trend whereby election losers have shown the propensity to dispute election results, not because the electoral process was demonstrably faulty. Instead, they dispute the results to create an atmosphere of heightened political anxiety and instability to force a negotiated settlement. In this way, power sharing becomes a strategy to circumvent the election outcomes. As a result, the losers of electoral contests gain political office through negotiated power-sharing arrangements and mechanisms for peace and political stability (Shale 2010, p.81).

However, not all election-related disputes are inherently detrimental to the democratic project. They can serve a catalytic effect, especially in cases where disputing parties have genuine reasons to seek recourse. In other words, this is more so when such disputes are not raised by mere force of assertion but are backed up by tangible evidence, as well as domestic, regional, and international norms and standards. Most importantly, this is when the disputes are ventilated within the confines of the obtaining legal frameworks and election dispute resolution architecture. As with the Kenyan elections in 2017 and Malawi's elections in 2020, the courts of law found compelling grounds to order repeats of the presidential elections due to malpractices that undermined the integrity of the election results. Therefore, the disputed election results in both cases yielded democracy-strengthening outcomes following the interventions of the courts of law.

In the following sections, the article navigates the conceptual and substantive linkages between democracy, elections, and citizen participation. The first section begins with a discussion of the definition of democracy based on the views of some leading democratic theorists. This is followed by a discussion on the functions of elections and their relevance to democracy. The third section deals with citizen participation and how it forms a vital tenet of the democracy and elections discourse. The fourth and final section provides concluding views.

IS DEMOCRACY RECEDING

It is common knowledge that an attempt to define democracy lends itself to conceptual and contextual contestation. Hence, the scholarly debates and analysis on what democracy is, what it is not, and the whole literature on the topic focus on whether it is receding (Diamond & Plattner 2010; IDEA 2021; Müller-Rommel & Geißel 2020; Salih 2023). As one of the earlier democratic theorists, Robert Dahl (1984, pp. 225-240) reasoned, attempting to define democracy is as tricky as attaining it. He, however, conceived a notion of polyarchy with whose central thesis this article aligns. Dahl adopted a descriptive approach using the following five interpretations of democracy, which are worth quoting in detail:

Firstly, polyarchy as a **regime type**. Dahl saw polyarchy as a unique regime compared to the Roman Empire and the feudal monarchies. It has a high tolerance of opposition to government conduct and widespread participation, including the removal of government by peaceful means. Seven features or institutions mark such a regime:

- a) Universal suffrage and the right to run for public office.
- b) Fairly conducted elections accompanied by non-coercion.
- c) Extensive protection of freedom of expression.
- d) The existence of competing sources of information and persuasion outside government control.
- e) Freedom to form autonomous organisations, including political parties.
- f) Government responsiveness to voters and election outcomes.

Secondly, polyarchy as a **product of democratising states**: Here, Dahl conceived of polyarchy as a set of institutions that evolved as a product of efforts to democratise and liberalise the political institutions of nation-states.

Thirdly, he regards polyarchy as **necessary to the democratic process**. This means it can be a set of political institutions required to provide a satisfactory approximation of the democratic process on a large scale. Nation-states typify this.

Dahl's fourth interpretation is of polyarchy as a **system of political control by competition**. In this interpretation, Dahl circumstances where the government officials faced with the prospect of their displacement through popular elections regard that prospect as enough incentive for them to modify their conduct. Finally, Dahl's fifth interpretation is of polyarchy as a **system of rights** where rights are institutionally guaranteed and protected.

From the above five interpretations, Robert Dahl sees democracy as a combination of foundational institutions and processes for achieving its ideals. These are the institutional and procedural elements of a democracy. In other

words, vital as they may be, these institutions and processes are not necessarily equivalent to democracy, which he sees as a higher ideal. However, they are crucial constituent elements.

Ferdinand Müller-Rommel and Brigette Geißel share much of Dahl's thesis. They see democracy as inclusivity and collective decision-making that assures political responsiveness. They posit that it effectively transforms citizens' preferences into policies and outcomes while ensuring political rights and liberties through constraints of the people's will (2020, p. 229). However, Müller-Rommel and Geißel also paint a gloomy picture of both the present and the future of democracy by highlighting four significant challenges facing liberal democracies. These challenges are arguably far-reaching; hence, they are worth describing, if briefly.

Firstly, they point to the substantial changes in the socioeconomic patterns of many liberal democracies. They suggest a declining population growth in liberal democracies despite the immigration of citizens from other regime types. In addition, they observe a trend of a declining youth population against an increasing adult population and a high unemployment rate.

Secondly, Müller-Rommel and Geißel postulate that because of socio-economic inequality and yawning social cleavages, various liberal democracies are confronted by growing populism, which could lead to a 'popular democracy' without a competing party system. They call this scenario a 'partyless democracy' and concede the possibility that, in certain circumstances, populism could also be a productive force capable of realigning party systems.

The third challenge is a changing structure of political communication facing liberal democracies (2020, p.229). The digital revolution, particularly the internet, social media, and smartphone applications, has provided new forms of communication to citizens and governments, but with potentially harmful consequences to the quality of democracy. The fourth and final challenge is globalisation, where interdependencies and decisions of multilevel governance structures impose consequences beyond single-state jurisdictions.

The recent 2024 Varieties of Democracy (V-DEM) global Democracy Report also looks at the challenges facing liberal democracy. The report employs the democratisation-autocratisation dichotomy thesis to assess the global state of democracy. The report suggests that the level of democracy that the average person in the world enjoyed in 2023 is down to the levels obtained in 1985. Based on country-based averages, the report posits, the level of democracy is back to the 1998 levels (V-DEM 2024, p.7). One of the conclusions the report makes based on the democratisation-autocratisation scale is that despite regular elections being guaranteed in most countries, the autocratic regimes have propped up more than democratic regimes in recent years.

Noting a growing trend of democratic recession in recent studies such as the International IDEA 2021 Global State of Democracy Report (GSoD), the Association of World Election Bodies (AWEB) convened an international conference in 2022 in Cape Town, South Africa. The goal was to reflect on the ability of election management bodies (EMBs) to deliver credible elections and identify proactive risk mitigation systems to withstand the challenges arising from the democratic recession. The conference affirmed the findings of the GSoD, especially regarding the global shrinking in political rights, civil liberties, transparency, and the rule of law (AWEB Conference Report 2023, pp.12-14). The conference also lamented the alarming deterioration of political tolerance, the increasing levels of political violence, and the influence of autocratic forces on electoral democracy.

In a Special Issue by the *South African Journal of International Affairs* that came out of the AWEB conference proceedings, Professor Mohamad Salih (2023) develops the democratic recession treatise. Rebutting what he describes as a narrow assessment of democratic recession, Salih criticises the studies in which researchers use democracy indices generally focusing on the performance of liberal individualism in sampled countries. He posits that this approach limits the emancipatory potential of variations in debates on democratic politics, informed by an ideal type of democracy supported by empirical assessments about the functioning of major political institutions aggregated to produce analysis at the country, cross-country, world regional and global level.

Salih offers a different argument to the debate, saying the democratic recession assessment methods must go beyond a set of methodologies seeking to explain discrepancies between theory and practice. He puts the blame squarely on the doorstep of the state, which he accuses of sabotaging the democratic institutions that bestow legitimacy on the state itself (2023, p. 368). Salih makes an intriguing but compelling proposition that what we are confronted with is not necessarily a democratic recession but a recession of the state's legitimacy. Therefore, as he puts it, the democratic recession is a consequence of the state's undermining the conduct of democratic institutions, which manifests through the following:

- 1) Denying citizens' right to participate in political activities by using the security apparatus to disperse sanctioned opposition political rallies and conventions.
- 2) Thwarting election integrity, authentic representation, and contestation through illegitimate practices such as election rigging, voter intimidation, and arresting opposition leaders and party functionaries during the build-up to elections.
- 3) Abusing, instead of protecting, civil and human rights and freedom of

expression by arresting and imprisoning journalists, and the closure and censorship of media outlets critical of the state's performance.

To conclude, this section of the article makes two essential points regarding the concept of democracy. Firstly, it acknowledges that unpacking the idea of democracy is complex and requires a deeper understanding of the relationship between democratic institutions and democracy on the one hand and rights on the other. Secondly, this section points out that the ability of democratic institutions, including the EMBs, to contribute to democracy is constrained by the growing democratic recession, which Salih appositely argues, is the result of the recession of the state's legitimacy.

In the following sections of this article, I closely explore the relationship between democracy and elections.

ELECTIONS AND THEIR FUNCTION IN RELATION TO DEMOCRACY

Elections are a deliberate process in which citizens choose national and local leaders to run the nation's affairs on their behalf. They have been a regular feature of the democratisation process since the re-birth of multiparty democracy in the late 1980s and early 1990s. On the continent of Africa, this rebirth marked the dismantling of the one-party rule regimes and particular the end of apartheid in South Africa (Matlosa 2023, p. 337).

A culture of regular multiparty elections has become a defining feature of any country's democratic dispensation. In the context of South Africa, the history-long struggle against racial oppression was based on the conviction that multipartyism based on universal suffrage and broad citizen participation are vital ingredients for a non-racial, non-sexist, and inclusive democratic society. However, the flurry of regular multiparty elections since the late 1980s has also come under sharp scrutiny regarding their value addition, particularly in recent years. As Jøgen Møller and Svend-Erik Skaaning (2024) aptly note, elections are often manipulated to borrow legitimacy. In their view, this manipulation is part of the evolution of democracy from negative mob-rule connotations to positive use, where it denotes freedom and representation. So, even the 'enemies' of democracy imitate democratic aspects such as regular elections.

Since the turn of the millennium, a higher premium has been placed on the value of elections, which is about looking at electoral governance (Katz 1997; Heywood 2000; Mozaffar & Schedler 2002; Wojtasik 2013). Increasingly, the literature goes beyond the procedural aspects of elections and instead considers

them as a mechanism to facilitate a social contract between the citizens and the holders of public office. For instance, writing on the value addition of elections, Andrew Heywood (2000) aptly noted that to add value, elections must fulfil some of the following functions:

- a) Legitimation of the political system and government.
- b) Transfer of national trust to leaders and parties.
- c) Improvement of the reverence for constitutionalism and orderly succession of governments.
- d) Selection and recruitment of leaders.
- e) Representation of interests and opinions of the citizens.
- f) Political mobilisation and education.
- g) Constructive management of conflict.
- h) Integration of social pluralism and orderly political competition.
- i) Formation of parliamentary majorities.
- j) Establishment of capable parliamentary opposition.
- k) Linkage of political institutions with voters' preferences.

Several dependencies determine whether elections achieve the above functions. I am deliberately not focusing on the over-researched subject of the autonomy of EMBs as a critical dependency for the value addition of elections to democracy. This is not because it is less important, or because critics of EMB independence are frequently ill-informed about intergovernmental relations and the inter-dependencies of state institutions. Because the centrality of EMBs to electoral democracy has been well canvassed elsewhere, suffice it to say that EMBs have come a long way as critical pillars of democracy. As Luis Eduardo Medina Torres and Edwin Ramirez Diaz (2015, p.37) correctly remind us, EMBs have evolved from primarily ensuring democratic transition, to being the arbiters and guardians of democratic consolidation.

Therefore, I focus on four other dependencies which I consider key for the purposes of this article. The first of these dependencies is a peaceful environment in which elections occur.

A Peaceful Environment

There is no gainsaying that elections should be held peacefully and undergirded by values. As Dahl (1984) aptly noted many decades ago, free and fair elections are not possible when there is no tolerance and no peace in the country and when fundamental human rights and freedoms such as freedom of expression, freedom

of demonstration, freedom of association, freedom of the media, and freedom of movement and residence are denied to the people and the candidates.

Attaining these rights and freedoms requires specific values, including but not limited to universality, equality, fairness, the secrecy of the ballot, freeness, transparency, and accountability, as discussed below.

- a) **Universality:** Elections must ensure voters and candidates have access to an effective, impartial, non-discriminatory electoral process and procedures. Participation by individual citizens in elections must imbue universal value and access.
- b) **Equality:** Voting accords the voters an opportunity for voice and choice regardless of their race, gender, social status, education, or economic standing. Everyone has an equal number of votes and an equal voice and choice. Dahl (1984, pp. 225-240) remarks that 'equality requires that one's vote must be given an equivalent weight to that of other voter to ensure their equal representation'.
- c) **Fairness:** Elections should ideally ensure a level playing field for all political parties, independent candidates, and other electoral stakeholders such as candidate supporters, throughout the entire election process.
- d) **Secrecy:** Elections must provide space for individuals to cast their ballots in secret. Secrecy can only be assured if the voter casts the ballot alone in the privacy of a secure voting booth.
- e) **Freedom:** Elections should ensure that citizens can cast their ballots free from intimidation; and should protect their rights of freedom of expression, association, and assembly.
- f) **Transparency:** Elections must always be carried out according to the due process of law and the ground rules established inclusively and openly, with information readily available in different formats catering for different sections of society.
- g) **Accountability:** This goes beyond electoral accountability, which is about ensuring regular elections. Accountability encompasses the opportunity for the populace to assess the performance of the electoral system, the representative institutions, and elected representatives so that they make informed choices.

Electoral Risk Management

The second dependency is electoral risk management. The EMB and other electoral stakeholders must do much to mitigate risks, safeguard elections' integrity, and

ensure they contribute to democracy. As in other jurisdictions and organisations, the EMBs must be guided by the five key principles of risk management culture espoused by Parsons (2022, p.1). These principles include: (1) the ability to anticipate decisions, (2) adequate resources and capacity to respond to changing conditions, (3) free flow of information into and throughout the organisation, (4) a willingness to learn and adapt, and (5) risk management embedded in all decision-making processes.

Some of the risks in elections and election management include the history of political, socio-economic, and ethnic disputes manifestly expressed during elections to varying degrees. For instance, the intractable conflict between West and East Cameroon involving the Anglophone separatist groups and the federal government is the most pronounced example of lingering historical and ethnic conflicts, which always play out during elections in Cameroon (Ateki Caxton 2017). So, the problem facing Cameroon's elections is inherently exogenous to the electoral process and no amount of election preparedness will completely address it. However, a continuous risk management culture by the Cameroon EMB and electoral assistance agencies, guided by the five principles above, will moderate the harm.

Digital and Social Media

The other risk to elections and electoral processes is the harmful use of digital and social media in elections. Today, digital and social media greatly influence shaping and informing political agenda and choices. While the burgeoning use of digital and social media has undoubtedly brought considerable benefits to electoral democracy, including the quick, practical, and cost-effective distribution of information, it also carries weighty risks to the integrity of the electoral processes. In South Africa, as with the rest of the world, we experience a corresponding surge in misinformation and disinformation, especially on social media platforms. As James, Matlosa and Shale (2023, p.323) aptly note, the disruptive role of digital and social media does not bode well for the integrity of elections and democracy.

The increase in election-related political violence is another risk that needs urgent attention because it has the potential to impair the credibility of elections. The election-related violence experienced during elections raises the critical question of whether elections can nurture and build social cohesion and contribute to democracy, especially in countries such as South Africa, which has a history of decades of marked social cleavages. Election-related violence is often exacerbated by the proliferation of political parties, which leads to a growing trend of populist politics, among other things. In South Africa, for instance, we have seen a rapid increase in political parties contesting the local government and national and

provincial elections between 1999 and 2021. The following table illustrates this point.

Table 1: Number of political parties contesting local and national elections in South Africa

Comparison: Parties Contesting National & Provincial Elections (NPE) and Local Government Elections (LGE) between 1999 and 2021										
	1999	2000	2004	2006	2009	2011	2014	2016	2019	2021
NPE	26		37		40		45		78	
LGE		87		97		121		205		323

For the 2024 national and provincial elections scheduled for 29 May, the upward trend in the number of political parties contesting the elections has dropped from 78 in 2019 to 70, and for the first time there are 11 independent candidates. However, it is still too early to tell whether this drop results from the electoral reform introducing independent candidates in the national and provincial elections. The electoral reform followed the 11 June 2020 Constitutional Court landmark judgement in *New Nation Movement NPC & others v President of the Republic of South Africa & others* [2020] ZACC 11, declaring the Electoral Act, 1998 (Act No. 73 of 1998) unconstitutional. This judgement ruled that the electoral law is out of sync with the constitution because it used the membership in a political party as a basis for the election of candidates to the national assembly and provincial legislatures.

Electoral System

The third dependency determining whether elections achieve their procedural and substantive functions and contribute to democracy is the electoral system. The electoral system is an institutional arrangement regulating the procedures and processes for competition between political party candidates and independent candidates for election as office bearers. The electoral system is also vital for translating valid votes into seats.

The impact of electoral systems goes beyond the translation of votes into seats. The engineering of any electoral system is equivalent to engineering political institutions, which, according to Reynolds et al. (2008, pp.1–5), can profoundly affect the future political life of the communities and, by extension, the country concerned. They add that political institutions have the capacity to shape the

rules of the game under which democracy is practised. This is in part because the criteria for designing an electoral system include providing representation, enabling access, providing incentives for conciliation, facilitating stable and efficient government, holding the government accountable, holding individual representatives accountable, encouraging political parties, and promoting legislative opposition and oversight (2008, pp. 9–13).

Proportional Representation

Therefore, an electoral system can also bridge social cleavages by ensuring the inclusivity of all sectors of society. Drawing from the South African experience, the choice of a proportional representation (PR) electoral system at the dawn of democracy in 1994 is one of the many examples of how the electoral system can impact social cleavages and future political life. Although not necessarily perfect and often criticised for not directly electing public representatives, especially the president, the PR system has ensured the inclusion of and cooperation among the hitherto belligerent political formations and social groups in the first post-apartheid parliament.

However, the Constitutional Court ruling on 11 June 2020 has revealed that the electoral system discriminated against aspirant individuals who were not nominated through political parties. Hence, the Constitutional Court declared parts of the Electoral Act 1998 unconstitutional. The electoral law was amended to provide scope for independent candidates to contest the 2024 national and provincial elections. Given that electoral reform is not a once-off exercise, Section 23(2) of the Electoral Amendment Act 2023 establishes an Electoral Reform Consultation Panel. The section provides that:

- (2) (a) The functions of the Panel are to independently investigate, consult on, report on and make recommendations in respect of potential reforms of the electoral system for the election of the National Assembly and the election of the provincial legislatures, in respect of the elections to be held after the 2024 elections.

The panel will report back to parliament within twelve months of its establishment. It suffices to point out here that this panel must carefully navigate the electoral reform space which has previously triggered polarised views. For instance, most proponents of the electoral reform in South Africa draw comparisons between the PR electoral system used for the national and provincial elections and the electoral system used at the municipal level. The electoral system at the municipal level combines the elements of the first-part-the-post (FPTP) and PR electoral systems.

Under this arrangement, voters get an opportunity to vote directly for political parties' candidates for ward-based seats and indirectly elect representatives for the proportional seats. The system is credited with ensuring ownership within localities, enabling political accountability, and stemming the general decline of trust in political and state institutions.

Natural Disasters and Public Health Emergencies: COVID-19

The fourth and final dependency for the purposes of this article is that of natural disasters and public health emergencies. Until recently, no adequate attention has been paid to the impact of natural disasters on elections. In South Africa and most countries where I have observed elections, the most predominant consideration in planning for potential natural disasters has been the timing of elections. Elections often occur during favourable weather conditions to avoid the periods known for torrential rains, flooding, and frigid winter seasons.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which left a trail of devastation behind it, has propelled EMBs to recognise the deleterious effects of naturally-occurring public health emergencies on elections and to rethink our election management strategies. To manage the possible disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic on the electoral processes in the run-up to the municipal elections in November 2021, the Electoral Commission of South Africa instituted an inquiry led by the retired Deputy Chief Justice, Hon. Dikgang Moseneke, to ascertain whether the elections would be free and fair during the pandemic. As elsewhere in the world, the government of the Republic of South Africa had promulgated preventive measures to restrict uncontrolled people's movements to curb the spread of the pandemic.

The inquiry report showed that the elections would not be free and fair due to several factors (Moseneke Report 2021, pp. 2-11). These included the delays in requisite preparations for the massive operational and logistical requirements to run the 4 725 local government elections (comprising the election of proportional representation members of 8 metropolitan councils, candidates in 205 local councils and 44 district councils, and 4 468 ward councillors). For instance, on 7 July 2021, the Electoral Commission announced the postponement of the voter registration weekend planned for 17 and 18 July 2021 to 31 July and 1 August 2021 respectively because of the third wave of COVID-19 spreading across the country (IEC 2021, p.13).

Stoking these operational limitations was the reality that lockdown conditions severely restricted people's freedom of movement and ability to participate in political campaign rallies. The Electoral Commission and other statutory bodies and government departments, whose support the Electoral Commission relies on for the registration of voters, could not provide the required support because

the pandemic either placed competing demands on their operational capacity or because they were affected by the lockdown restrictions.

Key among these entities is the Department of Home Affairs, which is responsible for issuing national identity documents required for voter registration, and the Department of Education, on which the Electoral Commission relies for the use of schools' infrastructure as voter registration and voting centres. In addition, the Electoral Commission draws a significant number of voting staff from teachers employed by the department. Another key institution is the South African Police Service, which is responsible for securing all registration centres across the country during voter registration as well as the 23 151 voting stations during polling, counting and tallying processes. Hence, the Electoral Commission approached the Constitutional Court seeking postponement of the polls.

Some political parties agreed with the Moseneke inquiry report and called for the postponement of the elections, while other political parties and civil society groups disagreed. Although the Constitutional Court directed that the elections go ahead as per the initial timetable, concerns over the freeness and fairness and, therefore, the legitimacy of the election outcome divided public opinion. The public debates lingered on until after the polling day.

There is no gainsaying that naturally-occurring public health emergencies pose multiple challenges at all levels of life, including family, politics, health, democracy, and human rights. For instance, at the family level, OXFAM (2021, p.6) informs us that the coronavirus created a 'perfect storm' in many households. This led to social and personal anxiety, stress, economic pressure, social isolation (including isolation with abusive family members or partners), and rising alcohol and substance use. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) also recorded a sharp global increase in reported cases of gender-based violence against women and girls during the COVID-19 period (UNFPA 2022, p.5).

The impact of COVID-19 on elections was multipronged. For instance, some countries' public health emergency response plans were neither adequately funded nor comprehensive. When COVID-19 hit, some governments could not afford to utilise the contingency funds, and they had to repurpose some funds from the budget to fund their national COVID-19 response initiatives. Consequently, some EMBs in the countries that held elections during the COVID-19 period lacked the financial resources to adequately respond to the emerging challenges that could undermine their institutional and operational capacities and denude stakeholders' confidence in the EMBs and the electoral process.

The pandemic was also damaging to the cause of election integrity as some governments instrumentalised it to neutralise the opposition's capacity to campaign. In some instances, the governments introduced strict conditions such as limiting movement within the country. They set up several police and roadblocks

manned by the army to prohibit people from entering the city centres and stopping people from moving from one city to the other. These restrictions had a deleterious effect on public movement and gatherings (Kamuti 2022, p.4). The introduction of these and other measures, and the accompanying quarantine protocols for the people suspected of having been in contact with COVID-19 cases, severely violated the freedoms of association, movement, and speech. The measures also impaired the participative imperative of electoral democracy, especially for the marginalised groups, including women and youth. Put differently, the public health emergencies that constrain the ability of this and other sectors of society to participate in the electoral process are fatal for democracy.

In drawing some conclusions from this section on the function of elections for democracy, it is essential to reiterate that the realisation of the intrinsic value of elections to democracy depends crucially on a combination of the four dependencies discussed above: a peaceful environment, electoral risk management, the electoral system, and natural disasters and public health emergencies across the electoral cycle. Again, the article acknowledges that the impact of each dependency varies according to regional and country contexts.

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

As highlighted in the previous sections above, elections add value to democracy only if they promote democratic values. One such cardinal value is citizen participation. Therefore, citizen participation is an indispensable component of credible elections and democracy. Moreover, it is both a constitutional matter and a political right enshrined in the Bill of Rights in the constitutions of most democracies. Hence, in most European countries and other parts of the world, citizens have begun asserting this right without hesitation (Gaventa 2002; Alemanno 2020).

Going by the mantra that elections are not an end but a means to an end, it is not difficult to fathom that such an end is improving the quality of life for the people. For this reason, citizens' rights groups demand that expressed consent must inspire any endeavour to uplift people's circumstances. In addition, citizens' active participation must be voluntary. As Salih (2023, p.365) puts it, this is an emerging activist form of democracy, challenging representative democracy and its comfort zone of conventional institutional politics. He avers that the old-aged representative democracy can no longer satisfy citizens yearning for an alternative institutional makeup suited to the demands of the 21st century.

Indeed, the earlier writings by scholars such as Roger Southall (2010, p.2) acknowledge Mohamed Salih's proposition regarding the shift in the discussions on the dimensions of democracy. For Southall, there is a notable distinction

in scholarly debates between a participatory form of democracy and liberal democracy. That debate describes participatory democracy as a 'deeper' form of democracy because of the level of citizen's involvement in political decision-making. On the other hand, some in that debate argue that, although armed with a bouquet of 'rights', liberal democracy has limitations apropos political participation, which they see described as restricted to occasional visits to the ballot box.

When assessing the liberal democracy's utility to the Global South, Matlosa (2023, p.348) contends that liberal democracy is inadequate for resolving the Global South's developmental challenges. He finds fault with its tendency to privilege civil liberties and political rights over and above social, economic, and cultural rights. For him, a turnaround for the Global South in general, and Africa in particular, is to place development at the core of its governance architecture to imbue the intrinsic, instrumental, and constructive values of democracy. In other words, according to this school of thought, the Achilles heel of liberal democracy is that it has elements suggesting it is an end in and of itself instead of a means to an end.

Notwithstanding such debates on which type of democracy is best, the critical point is that the definition of citizen participation must transcend the narrow everyday use, which limits it to participating in elections or town hall meetings. In South Africa, for example, a typical use of citizen participation refers to conventional acts such as public consultations (*imbizos*), in which the traditional leaders, municipalities, provincial, national political and administrative authorities usually convene. Even the service delivery protests and public demonstrations known as *toyitoyis*, unorthodox as they may be, qualify in this standard definition.

A healthy appreciation of citizen participation must encapsulate the citizens' access to the programmes affecting them, their contribution to shaping content, form, and scope, and continued involvement at the implementation stage. The example of a citizen participation model adopted by the Electoral Commission of South Africa is worth citing to illustrate this point. To give practical meaning to citizen participation, the Commission has innovative participatory approaches encouraging different sectors of society, especially the youth, to partake in electoral processes.

The Commission runs the schools' democracy and tertiary institutions' programmes. In the former, it has partnered with the Department of Basic Education (DBE) to educate and empower learners to understand and participate in the electoral democracy processes. The learners get to role-play different phases of the electoral process and write essays on democracy and elections. On the other hand, the tertiary institutions programme encourages students to participate in

democratic processes and demand accountability from elected representatives. As a result of these and many other practical initiatives, the Commission registered an unprecedented number of over 27 million voters since 1994.

Therefore, a broader conception of citizen participation must also include a purposive emphasis on accountability as an ingredient for good governance and the quality of service delivery. To employ the dictates of the co-production theory, citizen participation means that both the citizens and government (national, provincial, or municipal) share 'conjoint responsibility' in producing public services (Van Eijk & Steen 2015).

Citizen participation is as much about communicating preferences and influencing policymaking as it is about assisting in implementing the public good and contributing to its preservation and continuation. It may also include institutionalised or formal, informal, and supportive roles, without which democracy, election integrity, and improving people's lives are seriously impaired.

CONCLUSION

The ongoing debate on democratic recession, its challenge to the liberal democratic norms, and the evident impact the recession has on democratic institutions, including EMBs, motivated the writing of this article. Given that amid the democratic recession debate, some are beginning to question the utility of elections, the article revisits the discussions on the link between democracy, elections, and citizen participation from an electoral governance perspective. The article readily concedes that this is not a new discussion. Therefore, it merely builds on it albeit with an emphasis on citizen participation which is often glossed over in the literature.

The article submits that there is a symbiotic relationship between democracy, elections and citizen participation. It argues that there is a need for an appreciation of the procedural and substantive aspects of democracy that disabuses us of the notion that there is an automatic nexus between democracy, elections and citizen participation. Taking a leaf from the seminal work of Robert Dahl, the article clearly demonstrates for that symbiosis between democracy, elections and citizen participation to materialise, it must be undergirded by some certain institutions and processes.

It is axiomatic that democracy is about improving citizens' circumstances. The contribution of elections to democracy is that they provide an opportunity for the 'citizens' to elect leaders of their choice. However, regular polls on their own do not lead to democracy. They simply usher in elected public representatives whose job is to facilitate the realisation of the democratic dividend through people-centred development policies. Hence the article advances the point that

the elections must be anchored on values that imbue effective citizen participation and transcend tokenism to achieve this objective. Effective citizen participation is one in which galvanising citizens is not merely supporting different political parties to maximise electoral economies of scale. It must also enhance and inculcate voluntary actions and the existence of meaningful opportunities and arrangements for participation beyond voting.

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