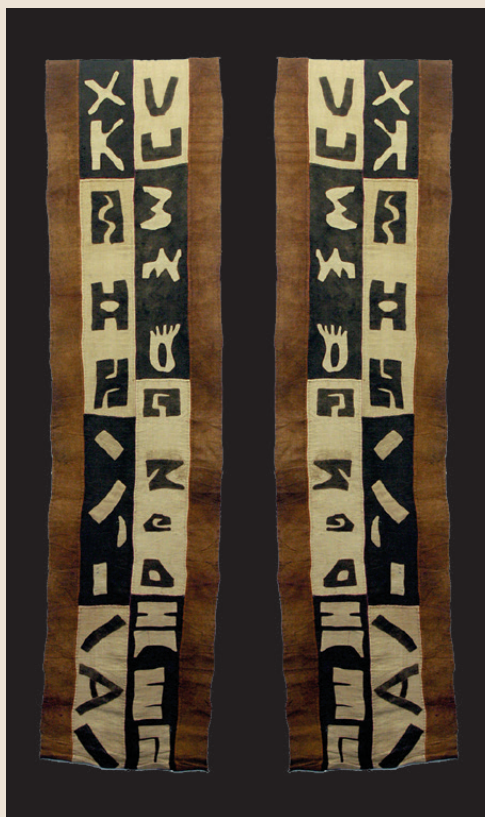


# JOURNAL OF AFRICAN ELECTIONS



**Volume 23 Number 1 Oct 2024**



# Journal of African Elections

EDITOR

Denis Kadima

OPINION PIECE BY

Stephen Chan

ARTICLES BY

Sy Mamabolo

Maxwell Maseko

Michael J. Braun

Victor Jatula

Adedeji Victor Adebayo

Molatokunbo A.S. Olutayo

Seblewongiel Kidanie

Eden Hailu

BOOK REVIEW BY

Roger Southall

Published by EISA  
14 Park Road, Richmond, Johannesburg, South Africa

P O Box 740, Auckland Park, 2006, South Africa  
Tel: +27(0)11 381 6000 Fax: +27(0)11 482 6163  
e-mail: [publications@eisa.org](mailto:publications@eisa.org)

© EISA 2024

ISSN: 1609-4700 (Print) ISSN 2415-5837 (Online)

v. 23 no. 1: 10.20940/jae/2024/v23i1

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the written permission of the publisher

Printed by: Corpnet, Johannesburg

Cover photograph: Reproduced with the permission of the  
HAMILL GALLERY OF AFRICAN ART, BOSTON, MA, USA



EDITOR

Denis Kadima, EISA, Johannesburg

MANAGING EDITOR

Heather Acott

EDITORIAL BOARD

Chair: Denis Kadima, EISA, South Africa

Cherrel Africa, Department of Political Studies, University of the Western Cape, South Africa

Jørgen Elklit, Department of Political Science, University of Aarhus, Denmark

Amanda Gouws, Department of Political Science, University of Stellenbosch, South Africa

Roukaya Kasenally, Department of Social Studies, University of Mauritius, Mauritius

Abdul Rahman Lamin, UNESCO Regional Office for Eastern Africa, Nairobi, Kenya

Khabele Matlosa, Political Affairs Department, African Union Commission

Roger Southall, Department of Sociology, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa and  
Research Associate in Political Studies, University of Cape Town.

The *Journal of African Elections* is an interdisciplinary biannual publication of research and writing in the human sciences, which seeks to promote a scholarly understanding of developments and change in Africa. Responsibility for opinions expressed and for the accuracy of facts published in papers, research notes, review articles and book reviews rests solely with the individual authors or reviewers. Contributions are referred to specialist readers for consideration, but the Editor is responsible for the final selection of the contents of the Journal.

Editorial correspondence, including manuscripts for submission and books for review, should be sent to:

The Managing Editor, Journal of African Elections

EISA: P O Box 740

Auckland Park 2006, South Africa

Tel: +27(0)11 381 6000 | Fax: +27(0)11 482 6163 | e-mail: [jae@eisa.org](mailto:jae@eisa.org)

Business correspondence, including orders and remittances, subscription queries, advertisements, back numbers and offprints, should be addressed to the publisher:

The Publications Department, Journal of African Elections

EISA: P O Box 740

Auckland Park 2006 South Africa

Tel: 27(0)11 381 6000 | Fax: +27(0)11 482 6163 | e-mail: [publications@eisa.org](mailto:publications@eisa.org)

**Abstracts for previous issues are available at:**

<https://www.eisa.org/jae.php>

# CONTENTS

## OPINION PIECE

*Stephen Chan* ..... 1

## DEMOCRACY, ELECTIONS AND CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

### The South African Experience

*Sy Mamabolo* ..... 5

### VOTER MANAGEMENT DEVICES IN SOUTH AFRICA'S ELECTIONS, 2021-2024

*Maxwell Maseko* ..... 25

## POLITICAL PARTY BUILDING IN A POPULIST STYLE

### Evidence from South Africa's Economic Freedom Fighters, 2014-2019

*Michael J. Braun* ..... 49

## DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT AND UNDERDEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

### A Qualitative Study of the 2023 Presidential Elections

*Victor Jatula* ..... 74

## WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN NIGERIA'S 2023 ELECTIONS

### A Micro-level Analysis

*Adedeji Victor Adebayo and Molatokunbo A. S. Olutayo* ..... 93

## WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN ETHIOPIA'S 2021 ELECTIONS

### The Role of Political Parties

*Seblewongiel Kidanie and Eden Hailu* ..... 114

## BOOK REVIEW

*Roger Southall* ..... 142

## OPINION PIECE

### THE LIMITS OF LIBERATION HISTORY

#### *South Africa's Elections in Retrospect*

*Stephen Chan*

Stephen Chan is Professor of World Politics at SOAS, University of London

My interest in South Africa's elections goes back several decades; I was present at South Africa's 2024 elections, as I had been at most of the country's elections since majority rule in 1993. I lived among the ANC when it was exiled in Lusaka and came to know its aspirations and, in the aftermath of 1994, watched it fulfil some of those aspirations while also setting out on a long journey of mistakes.

It was with a sense of foreboding that I flew from London to South Africa. The opinion polls uniformly had the ANC losing its majority. They only differed in predicting by how much the first electoral defeat was likely to be. But the polls were not the source of my foreboding. That came from the stubborn refusal of all my ANC friends and contacts to believe them. To the end, some were sure they could win, even if only by a narrow margin. This in itself reflected a party out of touch with the shifting of mood in South Africa, and unable to appreciate or at least estimate the pronounced groundswell of disillusionment with the government.

The level of poverty had visibly increased in the past few years and was impossible to ignore in the township of Alexandra (not far from the luxury of Sandton), but also in the outlying township of Thembisa as well as Kliptown in Soweto. These areas were familiar to me from previous visits, and I have done voluntary work on more than one occasion in Kliptown. I have to admit at being horrified by how far conditions had degenerated.

Perhaps this is in part a reflection on what emerged in 1994 after the four years of protracted negotiations following the release of Mandela in 1990 – that members of parliament should be elected from party list candidates, i.e. it was not a constituency-based parliament. This was a requirement of the National Party, the party of apartheid, seeking at least a residual representation in parliament in a future where integration would destroy white majority constituencies.

The election of 2024 itself was calm. Old war horses were wheeled out as the ANC at the last minute sought to reassure what it thought was its core vote that it

still wore the mantle of liberation. Tokyo Sexwale and Thabo Mbeki appeared at rallies, grinning, pumping hands, muttering 'hail fellow well met's. I joked that Mbeki looked as if he was pumped up on steroids. No one appealed to the young. The legacy of liberation was all that seemed to matter, and the future not at all.

But it had been Mbeki, following Mandela's own lead, who had institutionalised cadre deployment in terms of which loyalty to (and membership of) the ANC was more important than professional expertise. This was probably unavoidable in what was intended as an era of transformation, but it meant many key positions were mishandled by those newly appointed. Old systems of public administration were adopted, as no one had a strategic reform plan for public procedures. But the systems were designed in an apartheid era primarily to benefit a white minority and were stretched to accommodate an entire nation on an equal basis. And cadre deployment led quite easily, perhaps seamlessly, to cronyism – something greatly exacerbated in the Zuma era that followed Mbeki's.

Mbeki had spent more years in exile than he had lived in South Africa. On his return after the release of Mandela the country was as strange to him as it was to Mandela. Whether in exile or in prison, the task of governing a vast and complex nation was a huge challenge to those who had not been part of the nation's growth.

As the international figurehead of the ANC Mbeki had travelled much, and was inspired by the positive discrimination policies of the USA. His policies of BEE (Black Economic Empowerment) and its souped-up successor, BBEE (Broad-based Black Economic Empowerment) were designed to jump-start black entrepreneurship and, all other things being equal, new black firms were to be given preferential treatment in the award of municipal contracts. But many of the new firms were not well run and their workers not well trained. Housing units in particular, long a staple ANC promise, were often shoddily built. With many new firms seeking the same contracts, bribery of officials began to occur. The quality of the housing units did not improve.

By the time Zuma became president, corruption had grown into an epidemic and had almost become, for the firms and figures concerned, a parallel taxation system – meaning even less quality input into projects, now sometimes on a national scale. Huge state-owned companies became feeding troughs and in particular, utilities dealing with electricity and transport suffered very visibly.

Added to this was the vicious feuding that developed within party ranks and subsequent splinters. First Julius Malema left to found the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) in 2013 and then, later in the run-up to the 2024 elections, Jacob Zuma founded the MK (uMkhonto we Sizwe). Both had a benchmark commitment to nationalisation (in Zuma's case perhaps to enhance the ease of corruption by having to deal with only one proprietor), but they also reflected bitter personality disputes. In particular, Zuma seemed to have had a grudge against Ramaphosa



for succeeding him in what he considered his rightful role as president. As it was, the MK's nationalisation policies were largely inchoate, but the personal animosity was not lost on the electorate, especially outside KwaZulu-Natal, the heartland of Zuma and the MK. In addition, Zuma's 15-month jail sentence for contempt of court in 2021 means that he was not eligible to stand in the May 29 election so he was unable to take his place in the new parliament.

Personality politics were not confined to the ANC in the run-up to the 2024 elections. The DA (Democratic Alliance) saw very little love lost between the deposed black leader, the technocratic Mmusi Maimane and the new white leader John Steenhuisen – the latter often eclipsed by early DA leader Helen Zille. It was she who conducted most of the negotiations with the ANC after the elections had delivered a hung parliament. If Zuma's Zulu support harked towards ethnic politics, the DA certainly gave the impression of white domination in its party hierarchy.

Maimane formed his own small party to contest the elections, and its manifesto, firmly centred on the question of unemployment, was by far the most well thought-out in the forest of policies that emerged in these elections.

All parties, great and small, devised elaborate policy manifestos. Few elaborated on how the policies could be financed. But, insofar as there were huge ideological cleavages – nationalisation on the one hand, and a completely free market on the other – little policy debate was possible. The electorate was left with making its choice based on issues of disappointment with the ANC's performance, but no clear-cut affiliation to anyone else's promises or policies.

The perfect storm of energy, productivity and transport meltdowns – and their direct link with employment – were obvious, almost tangible; but no one could promise convincingly to calm the storm. The composite of storm-fighters that emerged as the GNU (Government of National Unity) seemed itself far from convincing. A gnu in any case is a wildebeest, a somewhat ridiculous looking animal with a huge hump and head. It is more gainly than it appears but at time of writing we have yet to see the gainliness of the GNU.

The often vexatious negotiations towards the GNU saw the public second coming of Helen Zille, the original leader of the DA who stepped down amidst a furore caused by her comment that colonialism had after all brought some benefits to the country. A fierce negotiator, she often seemed to overshadow Steenhuisen. It was a renaissance of the sheer doggedness and courage of Zille who as a young journalist had exposed the death of Steve Biko at the hands of the police. But there was a basic flaw in her asking for too much too soon, e.g. the deputy presidency for Steenhuisen. It meant every compromise was a retreat. The real difficulty was that the DA's share of the vote had not greatly increased from the two previous elections. It was essentially static. It was the ANC share of the vote

that had plummeted like a rock. Because the ANC was weakened did not mean the DA was automatically strengthened in its bargaining position. There were far too many other players in the mix.

The EFF and MK took themselves out of the GNU stakes at an early stage. Bitterness towards Ramaphosa by Zuma (who had been ruled ineligible by the courts to enter parliament), and antipathy to any sharing of power that might involve the DA, were clearly visible. But that took two big parties out of the GNU equation. It was a case of who could command the smaller parties.

It wasn't the DA. The ANC adroitly and deliberately fashioned a bloated cabinet with several parties represented. There were enough interests at stake to outflank any single thrust against the ANC from within the GNU coalition. Steenhuisen had to accept the Ministry of Agriculture, the highest position on offer, but he has no obvious professional background or qualifications in agriculture. A curious form of 'enemy cadre deployment'.

Alliances were enough to hold the MK even in the provincial government of KwaZulu-Natal, and the ANC rode roughshod over the DA in the hotly-contested elections in Gauteng. A national GNU didn't necessarily mean provincial counterparts. In a real if rather conditional sense, therefore, the ANC won. It is the strongest part of the GNU, it can divide and rule if need be. But it also means that it is the ANC, if it makes too many mistakes that offend any of its GNU partners, that stands most of all to fall from grace.

Can this assemblage, this wildebeest, govern South Africa with the reforms, disciplines and, above all for the ANC, cadre sacrifices that will be required? The one thing Malema said some years ago that made perfect sense was that all public servants should be forced to go back to school and learn how to do their jobs. Malema himself set the example and went to university and graduated at Masters level. His own front bench, for all its noise, is well qualified. Strangely, he is the attractive face of the opposition – not Zuma, who has reached the age that, without power to nourish him, and who must watch a deputy lead the MK in parliament, will be seen less in the forefront of South African politics.

But Ramaphosa is also not exactly young. So, 'can the government deliver reform?' remains the first question. Ramaphosa's speeches accepting the need for coalition-style unity were masterful and contrite. But, after Ramaphosa, who can only serve this new term as president and will not be eligible for another, who? There is no obvious younger generation that has been brought to the fore by the ANC. No young stars worked the hustings like Mbeki and Sexwale. And all parties in and out of the GNU will be looking in some way to shine over the next five years, burnishing their credentials for what may be the even more historic elections of 2029. And this begs the question of whether the party of liberation will be too aged to appear vigorous and engaged any more.

# DEMOCRACY, ELECTIONS AND CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

## *The South African Experience*

**Sy Mamabolo**

Sy Mamabolo is the Chief Electoral Officer at the Electoral Commission of South Africa

### 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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.

— REFERENCES —

- Alemanno, A 2020, 'Europe's Democracy Challenge: Citizen Participation in and Beyond Elections', *German Law Journal*, vol. 21, no. 1, pp. 35-40. doi:10.1017/glj.2019.92
- Ateki Caxton, S 2017, 'The Anglophone dilemma in Cameroon: The need for comprehensive dialogue and reform', *Conflict Trends*, vol. 2, pp. 18-26.
- AWEB Conference Report, *2023 Safeguarding Electoral Management Bodies in the Age of Global Democratic Recession*, IEC South Africa, Johannesburg.
- Dahl, R 1984, 'Polyarchy, Pluralism, and Scale', *Scandinavian Political Studies*, vol. 7, no.4, pp. 225-240.
- Diamond, L 2022, 'Democracy's Arc: From Resurgent to Imperiled', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 33, no. 1, pp.163-79.
- Diamond, L & Plattner M (eds) 2010, *Democratisation in Africa: Progress and Retreat*, the Johns Hopkins University Press and the National Endowment for Democracy, Baltimore.
- Elklit, J & Reynolds, A 2005, 'A framework for the systematic study of election quality', *Democratization*, vol. 12, no. 2, pp. 147-62.
- Gaventa, J 2002, *Exploring citizenship, participation, and accountability*, Wiley / Blackwell. Hoboken NJ.
- Gerenge, R 2023, 'The Role of African Union in Tackling Democratic Recession in Africa', *South African Journal of African Affairs*, vol. 30, no. 3, pp.569-585.
- Heywood, A 2000, *New Concepts in Politics*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York.
- International IDEA 2021, *The Global State of Democracy 2021: Building Resilience in a Pandemic Era*, IDEA, Stockholm.
- International IDEA 2021, *The State of Democracy in Africa and the Middle East: Resilient Democratic Aspirations and Opportunities for Consolidation*, Online at: <https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/state-democracy-africa-and-middle-east-2021?lang=en> (Accessed 24 April 2024).
- IEC South Africa 2021, *Justice Moseneke Inquiry on Free and Fair Local Government Elections During COVID*. Online at: <https://www.elections.org.za/freeandfair/>

- James, T, Matlosa, K & Shale, V 2023, 'Safeguarding Election Management Bodies in the Age of Global Democratic Recession: Introduction', *South African Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 30, no. 3, pp.323-337.
- Kamuti, T 2022, 'Covidisation of Oppression: COVID-19 and Human Rights Violations in Zimbabwe', *Social Science and Humanities Open*, vol. 6, no. 1, pp.1-10. Available online at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9671795/pdf/main.pdf>. Accessed on 05 May 2024.
- Katz, R 1998, *Democracy and Elections*, Oxford University Press, New York.
- Matlosa, K 2023, 'Global Trends and Impact of Democratic Recession: Hard Choices for the Global South', *South African Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 30, no 3, pp. 337-375.
- Meller, J & Skaaning, S-E 2024, *Democratisation and Autocratization in Comparative Perspective: Concepts, Currents, Causes, Consequences, and Challenges*, Routledge, New York.
- Mozaffar, S & Schedler, A 2002, 'The comparative study of electoral governance – Introduction', *International Political Science Review*, vol. 23, no. 1, pp. 5-27.
- Müller-Rommel F & Geißel, B 2020, 'Introduction: Perspectives on Democracy', *Polit Vierteljahresschr*, vol. 61, no. 2, pp. 225-235. Online at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11615-020-00252-4> P (Accessed 3 April 2024).
- OXFAM International 2021, *The Ignored Pandemic: The Dual Crises of Gender-Based Violence and COVID-19*, OXFAM Policy Paper, London.
- Parsons, J, 'Five Key Principles of a Good Risk Management Culture', CAP Series 22-0801, Centre for Agricultural Profitability, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, NE.
- Reynolds, A et al. 2008, *Electoral System Design: The New International IDEA Handbook*, IDEA, Stockholm.
- Salih, M, 2023, 'Discrepancy Between Theory and Practice: Democratic Recession or a Crisis of State Legitimacy?', *South African Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 30, no. 3, p. 357-375.
- Shale, V 2010, 'Power Sharing as A Mechanism for Managing Post-Election Conflicts in Africa: A Cure or A Curse?', In K Matlosa, G Khadiagala & V Shale (eds), *When Elephants Fight: Preventing and Resolving Election-Related Conflicts in Africa*, EISA. Johannesburg.
- Southall, R 2010, 'Public Participation: The Political Challenge in Southern Africa', *Journal of African Elections*, vol. 9, no. 1, pp. 1-15.
- Torres, L & Ramirez Diaz, E 2015, 'Electoral Governance: More Than Just Electoral Administration'. *Mexican Law Review*, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 33-46.
- United Nations Population Fund 2022, *Gender-Based Violence and COVID-19: Actions, Gaps and the Way Forward*, UNFPA East and Southern Africa Office, Johannesburg.
- Van Eijk C & Steen, T 2015, 'Why engage in co-production of public services? Mixing

theory and empirical evidence', *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, Vol. 82. no. 1, pp. 28-46.

V-DEM Democracy Report 2024, *Democracy Winning and Losing at the Ballots*, University of Gothenburg V-Dem Institute, Gothenburg.

Watson, V 2014, 'Co-production and collaboration in planning – The Difference', *Planning Theory and Practice*, vol. 15, no.1, pp. 62-76. Online at <https://www.mistraurbanfutures.org/en/publication/co-production-and-collaboration-planning-difference> (Accessed on 1 April 2024).

Wojtasik, W 2013, 'Functions of Elections in Democratic Systems', *Political Preferences*, No. 4, University of Silesia, Poland.

# VOTER MANAGEMENT DEVICES IN SOUTH AFRICA'S ELECTIONS, 2021-2024

*Maxwell Maseko*

Maxwell Maseko is a research associate, Tayarisha Centre, Wits School of Governance, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg

## ABSTRACT

*This paper tracks the performance of Voter Management Devices (VMDs) in South Africa from their piloting in the 2021 local government election to their adoption in the 2024 general elections. It seeks to unpack what this performance means for further modernising electoral processes in the country, and especially for the introduction of e-voting. The Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) argues that hand-held touch-screen electronic devices ushered in a new era for election management in South Africa. Procured for millions of rand, VMDs replaced the old Zip-Zip barcode machines used since 1998 which could not capture real-time information. They were introduced at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic posed a threat to electoral participation in the democratic world. While the IEC and some observers argue that VMDs strengthened tough health controls in the voting process during their piloting, as with most new technology they still experienced several challenges and technical glitches. Nevertheless, the IEC resolved to deploy the new devices in the 2024 general elections. Following further glitches in the general elections, two main research questions have emerged: is South Africa technologically ready to handle e-voting based on the performance of VMDs? and what can other African countries learn from South Africa regarding modernising their voting systems? Data for this study was collected using qualitative methods. This study found that political will alone is insufficient for the modernisation of voting systems. The performance of VMDs requires further scrutiny before e-voting can be successfully implemented in South Africa.*

**Keywords:** voter management devices, elections, South Africa, e-voting, Independent Electoral Commission

## INTRODUCTION

Thirty years into South Africa's democracy, voting in the country's elections is still paper-based despite promises of digital technologies to improve overall participation, transparency, and accountability in political processes (Nkala 2024; Maseko 2024a). Cheeseman et al. (2018) argue that roughly half of all national elections in Africa now involve digital equipment, most notably biometric voter registration/identification and electronic results transmission. However, faced with challenges including a lack of adequate internet coverage and high access costs, many countries struggle to achieve improved citizen participation in their elections.. These challenges are to be expected as the use of information and communication technology (ICT) is still in its infancy in developing countries (Mpekoa & van Greunen 2016).

South Africa is among the African continent's leading users of technology and the presence of overseas internet fibre cable presents numerous opportunities for digitalisation. These include trying out new methods of voting in elections, including e-voting (Goyayi 2021). She argues that mobile phone ownership and usage are high and have also penetrated rural areas. To this end, South Africa's Electoral Commission (IEC) has leveraged technology to facilitate the nomination and submission of party candidate lists online, parallel to manual submissions. The IEC and political parties also use social media platforms such as X (formerly known as Twitter), Facebook, and WhatsApp to promote voter education and registration, political campaigning, and debate on key national issues (Maseko 2024b).

Poor voter turnouts remain a concern in South Africa even after the much-anticipated 2024 general elections. According to the South African Institute of Race Relations (2023), there has been a steady decline in voter turnout since the 1994 national election's turnout of 86.87%, with the 2021 local government continuing this trend (45.86% voter turnout). The voter turnout declined from 89.3% in 1999 to an all-time low of 58.6% in the 2024 general elections (O'Regan 2024). Pundits argue that democracy is not primarily about voting in elections but about the day-to-day ability and willingness of citizens to participate in the decisions that affect their lives. Furthermore, voter turnout at elections is a check on the health of a democracy and non-violent participation in it (South African Institute of Race Relations 2023).

As South Africa's democracy evolves, citizens will be forced to reassess whether a particular electoral system ought to be amended. Indeed, in 2023 South Africa's Electoral Laws Amendment Act marked a significant milestone in the evolution of the country's democracy, expanding electoral participation (IEC



2024a) and enabling Parliament to devise a new electoral system that may include e-voting (Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa 2024). The time-consuming nature and long queues associated with traditional voting remain a concern for voters and election officials, as this paper will later demonstrate. It will also reflect on concerns about the possible isolation of citizens who might not be able to access e-voting due to the lack of internet service and the digital divide.

While South Africa searches for effective and faster ways of managing its elections, Ahmed and Maru (2024) caution that it is too simplistic to say that the use of technology in elections is all good or all bad. Norris (2015) argues that many of these technological systems fall foul of simple human errors, technical malfunctions, and logistical failures. Problems also occur when polling stations run out of ballot papers and election management teams hire poorly trained poll workers unfamiliar with procedures (Norris 2015). Ahmed and Maru (2024) urge governments to consider whether they can regulate the use of technology and whether the public trusts the chosen technology. Issues of identity politics, diversity, and digital illiteracy must also be considered (Ahmed & Maru 2024). They warn that during Kenya's 2017 election, consulting firm Cambridge Analytica allegedly used technology to target voters with disinformation. This potentially influenced the election outcome.

Furthermore, in South Africa there is increasing awareness that anonymous influencers, often positioned at the extremes of the political spectrum, contribute significantly to online misinformation and disinformation (Ahmed & Maru 2024). Increased participation by citizens in elections is therefore crucial to building a stronger democracy in South Africa and dealing with historical challenges linked to social and economic inequality. E-voting may hold the answer to achieving this increased citizen participation in elections.

In seeking to provide more context to the phenomenon under study, the rest of the paper is divided into various sections. These include the definition of key terms used in the study, the problem statement, and the main research questions to be answered. The methodology section explains how the data was collected, followed by a section on the state of democracy around the globe, including the African continent and in South Africa. The paper discusses the rise of VMDs in South Africa's 2021 local government elections and assesses their performance in the 2024 general elections, and also reflects on e-voting worldwide and the appetite for e-voting in South Africa. This is followed by further discussions on internet access and the digital divide in South Africa, which are critical to the successful usage of digital technologies in elections. The paper makes suggestions as to how the rest of the African continent could handle the modernisation of electoral systems, and discusses findings, recommendations, and a conclusion to this study.

## DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

A *Voter Management Device* is a tablet with internet access and customised for election management only (IEC 2021). This hand-held device can function as the IEC's voter registration portal, track live voter participation, and facilitate the management of voting staff and logistics.

An *Election* can be defined as the formal process of selecting a person for public office or of accepting or rejecting a political proposition by voting (Eulau, Webb & Gibbins 2024). Furthermore, election day is also a pivotal moment in the democratic experience of citizens where they can cast their vote .

*E-voting or electronic voting* is essentially a voting process that uses electronic means to cast votes and count results. According to the World Economic Forum (2024), e-voting means voters can vote from their home, another country, or a kiosk in a polling station. However, Omarjee (2019) also posits that when citizens vote on paper ballots which are then counted electronically by optical scanners this is also considered to be e-voting. Biometric devices can be used to register voters when they cast their votes (Ormajee 2019). For ease of explanation and illustration, this study refers to e-voting as the use of electronic means to cast votes and count election results.

## PROBLEM STATEMENT

South Africa's national and provincial elections held on 29 May 2024 highlighted the role of technology in electoral and democratic processes. This was the first time the IEC had used VMDs in a general election across over 23 000 voting districts. When digital devices were piloted in the 2021 local elections they experienced technical glitches, especially in large urban centres, contributing to the formation of unusually long queues.

The challenges experienced by VMDs in both elections remain central to the problem statement. The impact was felt by frustrated voters who stood in long queues for hours at polling stations, and political parties who feared losing the votes of citizens who may have decided not to take part in the election because of delays. An estimate of almost 40 million people (out of a total population of 60 million) were eligible to vote in South Africa, but over 11 million did not register. Of the 27.7 million registered voters, only 16.2 million went to the polls (O'Regan 2024). For now, it remains unclear whether those who did not vote did so because they did not care or whether they were not given a reason to and decided to boycott.

The credibility and integrity of an election can also be questioned if citizens cannot freely exercise their right to vote. This study does not suggest that machine

problems are unique to electoral management systems in South Africa or that using VMDs will completely resolve the country's challenges at the polls. It is simply based on the expectations of voters and political parties on the IEC to deliver a credible election in a highly digital world. Flawed election technology has been reported globally, negatively impacting even the U.S. presidential election in 2000 and Nigeria's presidential election in 2023 (Fatai 2023).

### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This paper seeks to address two key research questions,

- Is South Africa technologically ready to handle e-voting based on the performance of VMDs?
- What can other African countries learn from South Africa regarding modernising their voting systems?

### METHODOLOGY

The IEC has labelled VMDs in South Africa as a game-changer for election management in the country. This study adopted a qualitative approach for its data collection methods on the topic. The process involved collecting data from key documents around the elections, such as the 2021 Municipal Elections Report, looking at the challenges and successes of the local elections. The author also consulted the IEC's 2021/2022 Annual Report for perspective on spending and other important matters related to the elections, such as the deployment of VMDs.

Data also came from various media reports and IEC official statements in the build-up to and after the 2021 local government elections and the 2024 general elections. This was particularly important as at the time of writing the IEC was still busy with its assessment of the technical glitches in the 2024 general elections, and to date there is no official comprehensive report about why VMDs failed. The author also relied on public pronouncements regarding technologies in African and global elections and consulted existing research on platforms such as Google Scholar, using keywords such as voter management devices, e-voting, and South Africa. Textual analysis was used to arrange, describe, and interpret the data in themes suited to the study's research questions.

According to Bhandari (2023) and others, a qualitative study aims to describe and understand social actions and events, and qualitative data collection methods are effective when the goal is to obtain coherence, depth, and density in the data. Furthermore, they argue that a qualitative approach is an effective design for investigating and understanding complex issues in real-world settings. This

approach was valuable in evaluating the performance and use of VMDs and drawing lessons for other African countries planning to invest in e-voting in the future.

### STATE OF GLOBAL DEMOCRACY

A reflection on the state of global democracy including the African continent in general and South Africa in particular provides context for this study. A democratic system of governance is not the only valid form of government. However, it is a system favoured by many countries because of its inclusive nature, allowing its citizens to choose their leaders and persuading them to act for the greater public good. VMDs and e-voting will be assessed against this democratic background. Situating the literature in a broader global and continental setting also enables the lessons learned from South Africa's 2021 election to be applied across emerging democracies in Africa.

According to the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU)'s 2023 Democracy Index, elections are a condition of democracy but are far from being sufficient. They argue that 2024 is a crucial year for democracy globally as countries representing more than half the world's population of 8.1 billion people should have voted by the end of the year to elect new governments, presidents, mayors, governors, and municipal representatives. However, when the political system becomes uncompetitive, people become disenchanted with democracy.

The Global State of Democracy Report (2023) asserts that democracy has continued to decline across every region of the world. They warn that worldwide democracy is in trouble, stagnant at best even in countries previously thought to be healthy democracies. Glenn (2024) argues that certain trends in the state of global democracy need to be observed and this includes authoritarian regimes such as Russia and Iran which continue to rely on sham elections to create the illusion of legitimacy. Concerns about the impact of technology on elections have also become widespread and governments need to be aware of the danger of technology in undermining trust in elections and democracy (Glenn 2024). The Global State of Democracy Report (2023) recommends support for electoral processes, focusing on mechanisms and technology that guarantee fair contests and participation, transparency, and access to information.

### *Democracy in Africa*

Regarding Africa, Maseko (2024a) argues that there has been a worrying democratic decline in some countries and regions, most markedly North Africa. This is marked by an increase in military regimes, a rise in violent conflicts, and growing public

dissatisfaction with political systems. In 2023, various civil wars in Africa caused immense suffering and undermined prospects for positive political change, while Sub-Saharan Africa also suffered a significant democratic reversal (Democracy Index 2023). This reversal is dealt with in detail below. An increasing number of African leaders also continue to unilaterally change their constitutions and legal frameworks to hold on to power (Maseko 2024c). Countries such as Ethiopia and the Democratic Republic of Congo have throttled their citizens' internet access to prevent people from organising, mobilising or even discussing their grievances with their leaders (Maseko 2024b). Ethiopia, for instance, has since the early 2000s shut down the internet and on numerous occasions censored online material.

In recent years, more people in African countries have been able to access the internet than ever before. With close to 400 million users in Africa (especially in northern and southern Africa), digital media such as Facebook, X, and WhatsApp play an increasingly important role in election campaigns by circulating salient information and mobilising voters to participate (Galal 2024). This growth has been driven by improved telecommunication infrastructure and the rising adoption of mobile devices. Today social media platforms like X, WhatsApp, and Facebook are regularly used for debate, and to mobilise citizens and organise protests. Examples include the 2010-2011 Arab Spring in North African and Middle Eastern countries and South Africa's #FeesMustFall protests beginning in 2015.

According to Nkala (2024), countries such as Kenya, Zambia, and Senegal have incorporated technology in their national elections to improve their credibility. The Electoral Commission of Zambia has used biometric e-poll books in its past elections to fast-track identity verification and prevent identity theft. During Zambia's 'bush protests' in 2020 a reported 500 000 people tuned in online to social media platforms to listen to their leaders criticise alleged government corruption. This is just one example of how digital technology can strengthen democracy by allowing citizens to become involved. Others include improving health and education services and strengthening tax and revenue collection methods.

Nkala (2024) and Maseko(2024b) also argue that most countries in Africa cannot afford to incorporate digital technology in their electoral processes because of their prohibitively high costs. There is also a lack of trust in digital technologies amid concerns about human interference and the lack of protection of personal data. An example of this in South Africa's 2024 general election is the uMkhonto we Sizwe (MK) Party, which had the third-biggest share of the vote and accused the IEC of deliberately taking the ICT systems down to manipulate the vote numbers (Nkala 2024). Moreover, Aikins and Mahdi (2024) argue that there is also a lack of trust among political parties and voters in election management bodies (Maseko 2024b). They refer to an Afrobarometer study that found that the

number of citizens in Africa with little or no confidence in their national electoral commission rose from 41% to 55% between 2011/13 and 2021/23. This mistrust is deeply rooted in how election management bodies are constituted, as seen previously in Ghana, Nigeria, and Zimbabwe where these bodies have allegedly been dominated by ruling party loyalists (Aikins & Mahdi, 2024). Furthermore, they argue that elections in Africa are undermined by weak transparency surrounding electoral processes.

### *Democracy in South Africa*

In keeping with the focus of this study, the state of democracy in South Africa is discussed in the context of the right of citizens to vote and the ability of democracy to accommodate changes in electoral systems. Mpekoa & van Greunen (2016) argue that voting is a critical feature of any democratic process and that a citizen's democratic right must be confidential. Voting methods often vary from traditional voting systems to electronic voting systems. Thakur & Millham (2018, p. 1) argue that the challenge with traditional elections in South Africa is the enormous size of the country. This size, they add, makes South Africa the 25th largest country in the world by geographical size with over 1.2 million square kilometres. This made election logistics costly and complicated opening dialogue for e-voting (Thakur & Millham 2018).

South Africa attained democracy in 1994, and an interim Constitution ushered in many political changes including the introduction of a new system of government and new institutions such as the IEC (Mhlongo 2020). During the pre-1994 era, the majority of South Africans were prohibited from voting in general elections by the apartheid government because of factors such as race (Currie & De Waal 2013). Furthermore, African, Coloured, and Indian communities could not engage meaningfully in decision-making within the state and government institutions due to oppressive laws such as the Group Areas Act No. 41 of 1950 and the Population Registration Act No. 41 of 1950. The National Assembly adopted the final Constitution on 8 May 1996, and it was signed into law by the late former President Nelson Mandela in December of that year (Parliament of the Republic of South Africa 2024).

Section 19(3)(a) of this so-called progressive Constitution grants every citizen over the age of 18 the right to vote and enables them to participate freely in governance and policymaking (Mhlongo 2020; Electoral Act, 1998). However, 30 years since the dawn of democracy, this fundamental right is yet to be fully realised. At local government level in particular this often results in protracted, widespread violent protests, especially in black townships. South Africa's paper-based voting method is derived from the Australian ballot system (Mpekoa 2017).

However, she also warns that this voting system is slow, convoluted, costly, and can be inaccurate and inefficient due to human error. According to the World Bank (2022), historical social and economic inequalities also affect participation in South Africa's political processes. Where participatory processes exist, they are marred by a mixture of neglect, poor service delivery, corruption, infrequent feedback, and limited involvement of citizens in decision-making.

South Africa's democracy is classified as flawed, according to the EIU's 2023 Democracy Index. This means that elections in the country are free and fair, and basic civil liberties are respected. Furthermore, the EIU warns that flawed democracies often have significant weaknesses such as problems in governance, an underdeveloped political culture, and low levels of political participation. Thirty years into South Africa's democracy, millions of citizens, including the youth, are still excluded from democratic participatory processes. Considering these challenges, researchers and practitioners have been debating whether digital technologies may be the answer to regaining the trust of disillusioned citizens in democratic processes such as citizen participation.

#### VMDS IN SOUTH AFRICA'S 2021 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS

In 2019, the IEC notified 'interested parties' that it would be issuing a tender to procure new voter registration technology to assist in managing the voters' roll on voting day (IEC 2020). A total of 40 000 machines were procured for a reported R500 million to replace old Zip-Zip barcode machines used since 1998 and which could not capture real-time information (Du Plessis 2021). However, just over 30 000 were deployed in the election (IEC 2021/2022). Multi-functional VMD technology scans barcodes of IDs, records voters' addresses, stores details of the national voters' roll, and transmits data from polling stations in real-time to a central point (IEC 2021). In a media briefing ahead of the 2021 local elections, IEC Chief Electoral Officer Sy Mamabolo stated that VMDs were connected to the internet, but where the signal was weak or non-existent, voter information was stored and uploaded when the device encountered a strong internet signal (Sibanyoni 2021). According to Maseko (2024a), supporters of digital technology argue that with over 40 million active internet users, South Africa was perfect for testing VMD adoption in election management. Furthermore, the uniqueness of the 2021 local government elections, based on strict health controls, would provide key lessons for other emerging democracies in Africa planning to modernise their election systems.

After they were piloted in the 2021 local government elections, VMDs ushered in a new era for election management in South Africa. The IEC argues that these hand-held touch-screen electronic devices were a game-changer for

voter registration, successfully live-tracking voters on election day, and dealing with double voting (IEC 2021). It says the devices enabled the processing of more than 12.1 million voters and the capturing and registration of their addresses during the registration period ahead of the November elections. In the IEC's report (pp. 9-10) on the 2021 local government election, IEC Vice-Chairperson Janet Love shared her assessment of VMDs as follows:

Innovations in technology that were used in the 2021 elections have laid a strong foundation for the further, future automation of electoral operations and for our country to move towards the possibility of electronic voting. In these elections, not having had the opportunity to hold a comprehensive dry-run using the newly acquired voter management devices (VMDs) prior to the registration weekend, the Commission had to manage a number of operational challenges that emanated from the first-time deployment of the new technology. Nonetheless, it did so for, without the VMDs, it would not have been possible to achieve the 42-day timetable. In addition, these devices have catapulted electoral management in our country to new heights. The commission deployed 30 387 VMDs, which were centrally connected through an Access Point Network (APN). Their introduction can only serve to fortify controls in the voting process and enhance our capability to manage the voting and counting processes efficiently.

VMDs were also introduced at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic posed a threat to electoral participation in the democratic world (Maseko 2024a). While the IEC and some observers argue that they also strengthened tough health controls in the voting process, the devices still experienced some challenges during their piloting. For example, a reported 100 000 voters were disenfranchised after their details could not be uploaded into the electoral system (Du Plessis 2021). There were also reports of connectivity issues due to poor internet connections at some polling stations. Despite these challenges, the IEC resolved to continue using the new devices in the 2024 general elections.

#### VMDS IN SA'S 2024 GENERAL ELECTIONS

On Wednesday 29 May 2024, millions of South Africans queued patiently to vote in elections that threatened to challenge the ANC's 30-year dominance in Parliament. Just over 16 million people cast their votes amid various reports of technical glitches and failures of VMDs, mainly in the country's metros. Images of thousands of people standing in long queues after midnight on voting day



waiting to cast their votes, predominantly in Durban, Johannesburg, and Cape Town were displayed all over social media and television news. Interviewed by journalists about this matter at the official results centre, the IEC Chief Electoral Officer Sy Mamabola emphasised that the commission had not deliberately planned the delays, and there were no plans to extend voting in South Africa for a second day to accommodate people in queues. Instead, the IEC and political parties used platforms such as X (formerly known as Twitter) to ask voters to stay in the queues until they were processed. The IEC also instructed its officials to manually mark the voters' roll where they experienced technical glitches. Election observer missions also added their voices to the issue of technical glitches, with the AU Election Observer Mission urging the IEC to investigate the matter further and ensure that it did not repeat these problems in future elections.. The observer mission warned about the impact any uncertainty would have on the country's young voters.

Cowan (2024) argues that the IEC has still not yet concluded a detailed assessment of what caused VMDs to fail in the 2024 general elections, adding that the scale of the problem remains unknown. In the absence of an official report, Ren-Form, the company that provided the VMDs, maintains that it supplied devices that exceeded the technical requirements of the tendering process of 2021 (Cowan 2024). Instead, Cowan argues that the company blamed the glitches in the software loaded by the IEC onto the devices.

### E-VOTING WORLDWIDE

The concept of e-voting is not unique to South Africa. According to Mpekoa and van Greunen (2016), several countries have either piloted or implemented e-voting but very few have been successful. They also caution that the decision to adopt such a system is neither simple nor straightforward. Thakur (2024) argues that countries are most fragile between the time when voting starts and the election results are announced. He posits that e-voting offers speed in counting votes and eliminates this period of vulnerability.

The World Economic Forum (2024) argues that e-voting is part of a developing system around the world which pundits believe is crucial for reducing social and economic inequalities. They also argue that trials on electronic voting began around the 1980s, but it was not until the early 2000s that the initiative finally took off, driven by a rise in the use of the internet. Countries such as Estonia pioneered online voting in 2005 (Omarjee 2019), and the country's online voting system is widely known to have attracted hundreds of foreign delegations to Tallinn in the past wanting to see it in practice. Pundits for e-voting argue that the Estonian

government is showcasing the system as a model for other world governments on how online voting can be done.

India and Brazil, among the world's largest democracies because of the sheer number of voters, have been making use of e-voting for over two decades, having automated their systems in 1998 and 2000 respectively (Omarjee 2019). India, for example, developed its electronic voting machines which passed the pilot study, and the technology was able to solve many of the problems associated with the traditional paper-based voting system (Mpekoa & van Greunen 2016). However, their current voting system has many security challenges.

Thakur & Millham (2018) argue that e-voting allows for fast, unemotional, and accurate vote tallying, and e-voting systems can easily be configured to cater for multi-lingual and multi-abled interfaces. Furthermore, the technology can be used in referendums, shareholder meetings, university, and club elections with short commissioning and decommissioning times. For example, some South African universities such as the University of South Africa uses the e-voting platform of the Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa (EISA) (UNISA 2023). However, e-voting has its drawbacks, which include a high initial cost, both for setup and voter education, and the ever-present threat of malware or hidden code that could manipulate the vote (Thakur & Millham 2018, p. 1). Furthermore, (Omarjee 2019) posits that Ireland and Netherlands abandoned their e-voting due to security and hacking concerns. She also argues that Namibia was the first African country to adopt e-voting in 2014 following challenges with vote counting and tabulation processes in the 2009 elections, which led to a delay in the announcement of the election results. Though Namibia's technology was prone to technical glitches in 2014, the machines were still used in the 2019 presidential elections (Omarjee 2019, p. 3).

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) planned to use electronic machines in its 2018 elections, but the project was negatively impacted by fears that the machines would be used to rig election outcomes (Wambua-Soi 2018). She argues that the country's electoral commission introduced voting machines to cut costs and speed up voting and counting in an election with more than 40 million voters. At the time, arsonists allegedly burnt 7 000 voting machines ahead of the election.

### E-VOTING IN SOUTH AFRICA

At the time of writing this paper, South Africa had not formally adopted e-voting. According to Fokane (2021) South Africa's IEC introduced technological solutions to assist with the processing of ballots in the 2009 general elections. In 2013, a seminar to assess the feasibility of electronic voting in the country was convened. It was noted by the then chairperson of the IEC, Advocate Pansy Tlakula, that whilst

e-voting presented some benefits such as speed and accuracy in vote counting, it would be expensive to monitor and could reduce transparency in the voting process (IEC 2013). At the time, she also noted the absence of global standards for verifying and auditing e-voting systems. In 2019, the IEC argued that it was neither appropriate nor cost-effective to introduce voting technology, but vice-chairperson Janet Love warned that this view was not absolute as the commission was continuously evaluating its position by interacting with colleagues from around the world (Wiener 2019). The IEC's position came despite many challenges in the 2019 general elections which threatened the credibility of the result such as issues of multiple voting, and long queues.

Fokane (2021) argues that electronic voting returned to the national agenda in 2020 using the Electoral Laws Amendment Bill which also dealt with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The proposal argued that electronic voting would help increase efficiencies in the existing system, including counting and capturing election results. However, just ahead of the 2021 local government elections, the IEC proposal to test e-voting was rejected by the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee for Home Affairs citing fears of hacking and insufficient budgets, which were also raised through civil society submissions (Fokane 2021). In the end, the portfolio committee requested the IEC to return to Parliament with case studies, and challenges, and successes of e-voting in other countries (Fokane 2021). After the 2021 local elections, the IEC's deputy chief executive Mashego Sheburi alluded to financial constraints making it difficult to introduce new voting technology in the country (Nyathi 2023).

Following the conclusion of the 2024 general elections, the conversation about introducing e-voting appears to have received renewed enthusiasm on platforms such as X (formerly known as Twitter), especially after the weak performance of VMDs in the election discussed above. In its election satisfaction survey, the Human Science Research Council found that on average, 51% of respondents (comprising both those who support the idea and those who strongly support it) supported electronic voting (Human Sciences Research Council 2024).

### ONLINE ACCESS IN SOUTH AFRICA

An explosion of digital technologies, not just in South Africa but also across the African continent, has transformed the nature of elections. Various technologies have impacted election campaigning, the dissemination of information, the formation of opinions, and the choice of instruments used in elections.

At the start of January 2024, South Africa had over 45 million active internet users out of a population of over 60 million, mostly using mobile phones to go online (Cowling 2024). This figure represents some of the highest numbers of

internet users in Africa, together with those in Kenya and Nigeria. The 2022 national census results also indicate the upward trend in mobile phone ownership with over 90% of households in the country owning a cellphone in working order. However, a good internet connection is needed to ensure the successful implementation of digital technologies for election purposes. Results from the census further show that internet access in South Africa has been confined largely to urban areas, and most people access it in their workplaces, public libraries, universities, and internet cafes. Users have been predominantly white, city-dwellers, relatively affluent, and well-educated (Jensen 2001). Previous studies have also argued that South Africa was grappling with a lack of access to technology especially for poor, rural, and vulnerable communities. There are also problems with high data costs, the lack of protection of personal information online, and fears about the spread of fake news (including misinformation and disinformation). According to Africa News (2023) not much has changed as the South African government is still focussed on improving poor internet connectivity. They have cautioned that the government needs to act faster to keep up with a rapidly changing digital world.

### THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

According to Motala (2018), South Africa's digital divide is rooted in the country's racial segregation and the unequal development imposed by apartheid. These historical challenges resulted in the uneven distribution of basic technological infrastructure across the country, which persisted 30 years into democracy (Faloyea & Ajayib 2023, p. 3). According to Rey-Moreno & Pather (2020), the problem is being worsened by weak government policies and a lack of strategic direction on the part of officials. Mathekga (2024) argues that the digital divide prevents many people in the country, particularly the poor, from participating in an increasingly networked world. He argues that South Africa, for example, relies on approximately 10 undersea cables connecting the country through its vast coastline, and outages affecting some of the cables and internet traffic are not helping the South African situation.

### AFRICAN EXPERIENCE

2024 is also a crucial year for elections and democracy in Africa. According to Aikins and Mahdi (2024), 180 million eligible voters should have made their mark in close to 20 polls across the continent by the end of the year. They caution that many countries are still struggling to hold free, fair, and transparent elections despite decades of democracy. As explained earlier, countries are looking for

fresh solutions to deal with a democratic decline. Fatai (2023) argues that those governments leaning towards modernising their election management should note that digital elections are not cheap, and inadequate preparation could have dire consequences on voting day. Furthermore, Fatai (2023) also warns that because technology is operated by humans, any systems put in place must take care to ensure the absolute safety of that system.

Ahmed and Maru (2024) maintain that when used correctly, technology plays a major role in a country's election by assisting to quickly analyse large amounts of data such as voter patterns, running automated chatbots for voter engagement and authenticating voters, and hopefully detecting cyber threats. It is for this and other reasons above that the South African election is interesting to watch, and different African countries can use the lessons learned to strengthen their own democracies. Ahmed and Maru (2024) rightly posit that successfully adopting digital technology should be dependent on popular legitimacy and trust in that chosen technology. Governments must have the correct legislation and capability to enforce oversight of that technology, otherwise the work will be a futile exercise and a waste of resources.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study sought to answer two key research questions about whether South Africa was ready to handle e-voting, and to reflect on the lessons for other African countries that might be considering e-voting in the future. It is clear from this study that democratic institutions are falling short of people's expectations. The plight of developing nations and historically marginalised groups is a testament to growing public dissatisfaction about the democratic decline and the demand for solutions. The research questions were answered as follows.

### *Is South Africa technologically ready to handle e-voting based on the performance of VMDs?*

Simply put, the answer is yes when one considers several factors such as the positive attitude of IEC leaders, political parties, and civil society toward modernising local electoral systems and strengthening democracy by encouraging more people to participate in democratic processes. For instance, various social media platforms are used by the IEC, political parties, and civil society to promote voter registration and education, campaign and mobilise voter support, and promote debate and highlight issues of national interest. The answer is also simple when one considers the growing rate of internet adoption in South Africa and the growing ownership of mobile phones needed to access digital services. To ensure the responsible use of social media in its campaigns, South Africa's IEC

recommends that it follows the 'Principles and Guidelines for the Use of Digital and Social Media in Elections in Africa' inspired by the first-ever Continental Conference for Election Management Bodies held in Cape Town, South Africa in March 2020 (IEC 2024b).

However, the answer becomes more complicated when considering that the right social, political, and economic conditions must be created before officials can introduce e-voting. For e-voting to succeed, Maseko (2024c) suggests that aside from political will, South Africa also needs skilled artisans who have a basic understanding of technology to ensure that digital benefits reach everyone. Implementing this needs investment in time and money, and the reality of government cuts in spending for huge projects may reduce prospects for the quick initiation of projects such as e-voting in the future. Mpekoa and van Greunen (2016) have also previously argued that implementing e-voting is not a straightforward process and all new projects encounter diverse problems whether they be technical, social, economic, organisational, or political.

The proper skilling of artisans should be accompanied by appropriate legislation to guide the process, and affordable data prices for citizens. Challenges of persistent inequality and the digital divide are policy issues that need reforms promoting private investment, job creation, and inclusive growth. These issues may need longer to resolve and should not impede the progression of the country towards more modernised systems of electoral governance. When the IEC's appetite for e-voting is considered, the literature shows much back and forth in the decision-making since 2009 when the commission introduced technological solutions to assist with the processing of ballots in the general elections. This indicates that the IEC is still not clear on the way forward.

This study posits that the road ahead will not be smooth sailing for African countries hoping to use e-voting in the future. Current literature shows that not much has changed as the South African government is still focussed on improving poor internet connectivity.

### *What can other African countries learn from South Africa regarding modernising their voting systems?*

As the literature indicates, many African countries seem to be interested in modernising their electoral systems; however, e-voting is a long way from being a reality for various reasons. These challenges include the scarcity of skilled professionals in data science and machine learning, limited technological infrastructure, and poor to weak digital policies also raised by Faloyea and Ajayib (2023, p. 9) and Rey-Moreno and Pather (2020, p. 3) in this study. These countries can learn from the South African experience in the following ways.

Technical glitches on VMDs are not unique to South Africa. New technology will almost always face problems due to malfunctioning devices and elements of human error as witnessed in South Africa's elections in 2021 and 2024. To avert unnecessary delays in voting, service providers should anticipate technical problems and make provision for adequate time to rectify unforeseen technical problems and system failures. Most importantly, cool heads need to prevail in a time of crisis and allow election management bodies to do their work uninterrupted. South Africa's 2024 elections were declared free and fair by the IEC despite these technical glitches and machine malfunctions.

In the 2021 local government elections, VMDs achieved their aim of verifying most voters. Although there were technical challenges in some polling stations, the problems were not as common as in the 2024 general elections. This suggests that VMDs assisted the IEC in delivering credible elections despite the threats of COVID-19. For other African countries looking to invest in similar technology, there is hope for success when the correct technology is utilised.

Budget issues need to be addressed ahead of time for those countries seeking to adopt technology in their elections. The system failures in South Africa have highlighted the need for adequate budgets to allow election management bodies to do their work properly. According to the IEC (2021/2022), budget cuts amounting to R382 million in the 2020/21 and 2021/22 financial years led to the cancellation of a planned voter registration drive ahead of the elections.

Electoral management bodies must take charge of and address valid concerns around machine failure and other concerns. This will assist citizens to keep calm during system failures. As witnessed in South Africa's 2024 general elections, frantic calls were made by the IEC and political parties for voters to remain in the long queues as many people had still not voted by the cut-off time of 9 pm. There were suggestions in the local media that the queues were a result of the failure of VMDs to verify voters and that some polling officials did not realise that they could use manual verification in the event of system failure. As stated by Cowan (2024) previously, the IEC is still assessing the full extent of the performance of VMDs in the 2024 general elections.

VMDs did not resolve the issue of voter apathy, low voter registration numbers, and low voter turnouts which are fairly common in South Africa's elections. This points to a need for IEC officials and other African countries to find more lasting solutions through investment in further research. A crisis looms for democracies in Africa if patterns of non-participation in elections persist.

On a continent with rising military and authoritarian regimes, South Africa has provided important lessons about respecting the rule of law and court outcomes. Not all issues raised by political parties had been resolved at the time of writing this paper, but the elections were declared free and fair while due

process is underway to address the concerns of aggrieved parties. Decisions by the electoral court have been respected and where this was not possible, the matter has been referred to higher courts for a decision. The South African elections also highlighted the importance of election management bodies adequately training staff to use new technologies. This will prevent unnecessary long delays at polling stations.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

This study makes several recommendations, as follows:

1. The performance of VMDs needs to be revisited and scrutinised more closely by South Africa's IEC, especially if the devices are to be used again in future elections.
2. Although the country's 2024 elections were declared free and fair, complaints about technical glitches should not be taken lightly as the strength of democracy is compromised when citizens are deprived of their right to vote freely and fairly due to machine failure.
3. The IEC should ensure that all their staff deployed to voting stations are well trained in how to operate election machines (Timcke & Schroeder 2024, p. 4). Amid unproven allegations of sabotage, the IEC should strengthen forensic screening of staff hired for elections to ensure that their integrity is not easily compromised.
4. In 2023, the non-profit entity Organisation Undoing Tax Abuse (OUTA) encouraged the government to allocate adequate funding to the IEC to cover its constitutional responsibilities. It advised that this would assist in securing future elections (OUTA 2024, p.1).
5. Long queues and staff shortages at voting stations create conditions that are barriers to exercising voting rights (Timcke & Schroeder 2024). Improvements in planning, training, and resource allocation are required for future elections to ensure all voters can participate.
6. It is critical to note that there is no one best way for election management, but in a fast-changing digital world, voters seek instant results. It may seem reasonable for African countries to combine manual and electronic voting methods as they search for more suitable ways to digitise their elections. This is also suitable in view of the ongoing challenges of inequality and the digital divide present in many Africans.
7. African governments need solid governance coupled with a commitment to implement their existing digital rights and laws if they wish



to succeed in using digital technologies in their elections. Budget cuts and a lack of political will must be dealt with accordingly to achieve maximum results.

8. Electoral management bodies (EMBs) must follow electoral laws strictly, and selfishly guard their independence to enhance the credibility of elections. EMBs such as South Africa's IEC have been negatively impacted by budget cuts, but they should still use the resources at their disposal to ensure the transmission of results in real-time.
9. African leaders need to conscientise themselves that an election is not always a sign of a healthy democracy, although it gives citizens a chance to choose and evaluate their leaders. A positive attitude towards technology will go some way towards strengthening democracy, and leaders need to embrace and support this notion. However, with the right attitude comes suitable social, political, and economic conditions conducive to ensuring that digital benefits reach everyone. Furthermore, leaders should also consider the views and opinions of all stakeholders before embarking on the adoption of new technologies, as Mpekoa and van Greunen (2016, p. 366) have suggested. These stakeholders include voters, political parties, election observers, and electoral management bodies.
10. Campaigns to raise awareness about misinformation and disinformation in the digital age must continue even outside elections and should include partnerships with local mainstream media, the public, and government departments. This includes protecting the privacy of citizens online to restore their trust and confidence in e-voting. South Africa has enacted laws such as the POPIA Act to protect the personal information of citizens online. However, bad governance, corruption, and a poor human rights track record threaten the rule of law in many sub-Saharan countries and South Africa is no exception to these challenges.

## CONCLUSION

This study highlights the performance of VMDs in South Africa from their pilot stage in the 2021 local government election to their adoption in the 2024 general elections. Interesting discoveries and observations were made, especially regarding the confidence and willingness of the IEC to adopt new technology in a general election despite some recorded hiccups in the piloting stage. This speaks to its commitment to modernise elections. The IEC says in South Africa, VMDs

are not a requirement in law, but an additional safeguard for the voting process. This means that the voters' roll can still be marked manually to avert problems and delays caused by VMDs in the voting process.

Election bodies should be transparent in how they work in order to regain public trust and confidence by building consensus on electoral reforms across the political divide. With no end to budget cuts, it will take strict financial discipline for election management bodies to control their spending while delivering credible elections.

#### — REFERENCE —

- Ahmed, S & Maru, MT 2024, *AI and African Elections: Efficiency Gains Hinge on Trust and Proper Governance*, Retrieved from <https://democracyinfrica.org/ai-and-african-elections-efficiency-gains-hinge-on-trust-and-proper-governance/> (Accessed 19 June 2024).
- Aikins, ER & Mahdi, M 2024, *Five Worrying Signs of Africa's Poor Election Quality*, Retrieved from <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/five-worrying-signs-of-africa-s-poor-election-quality> (Accessed 20 June 2024).
- Bhandari, P 2023, *What Is Qualitative Research? | Methods and Amp; Examples*, Retrieved from <https://www.scribbr.com/methodology/qualitative-research/> (Accessed 24 June 2024).
- Cheeseman, N, Lynch, G, & Willis, J 2018, 'Digital Dilemmas: The Unintended Consequences of Election Technology', *Democratization*, vol. 25, no. 8, pp. 1397–1418. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2018.1470165>.
- Cowan, K 2024, 'IEC paid Joburg printing company R546m for faulty voter management devices that delayed voting', *news24* 18 July. Retrieved from <https://www.news24.com/news24/investigations/iec-paid-joburg-printing-company-r546m-for-faulty-voter-management-devices-that-delayed-voting-20240718> (Accessed 31 July 2024).
- Cowling, N 2024, 'Digital Population in South Africa as of January 2024(in millions)', *Statista* Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/685134/south-africa-digital-population/> (Accessed 25 June 2024).
- Currie, I & De Waal, J 2013, *The Bill of Rights Handbook* (6<sup>th</sup> ed.), Juta and Company Ltd., [Cape Town?].
- Du Plessis, C 2021, 'New Voter Management Devices Blamed for Disenfranchising up to 100,000 People', *Daily Maverick*, 3 November, Retrieved from <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-11-03-new-voter-management-devices-blamed-for-disenfranchising-up-to-100000-people/> (25 June 2024).
- Economist Intelligence Unit* 2023, *Democracy Index Final Report*, *Economist*, London.
- Electoral Act* 1998, Government Printer, Pretoria.

- Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa 2024, *Explainer: The Three Ballot System and Amendment of Section 24A of the Electoral Act*, Retrieved from <https://www.eisa.org/the-three-ballot-system-and-amendment-of-section-24a-of-the-electoral-act/> (Accessed 1 August 2024).
- Eulau, H, Webb, PD & Gibbins, R 2024, 'Election', *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/election-political-science> (Accessed 19 June 2024).
- Faloyea, ST & Ajayib, N 2023, 'Understanding the Impact of the Digital Divide on South African Students in Higher Educational Institutions', *African Journal of Science, Technology, Innovation and Development*, vol. 14, pp. 1-11. 10.1080/20421338.2021.1983118.
- Fatai, A 2023, *Nigeria's Election was nearly derailed by Technology - But Biometric Devices Weren't the Problem*, Retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/nigerias-election-was-nearly-derailed-by-technology-but-biometric-devices-werent-the-problem-200936> (Accessed 19 June 2024).
- Fokane, T 2021, *South Africa's Parliament Rejects Plan to Introduce e-Voting*, Retrieved from <https://cipesa.org/2021/03/south-africas-parliament-rejects-plan-to-introduce-e-voting/> (Accessed 18 June 2024).
- Galal, S 2024, 'Social Media in Africa – Statistics & Facts', Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/topics/9922/social-media-in-africa/#topicOverview> (Accessed 25 June 2024).
- Glenn, JK 2024, *Is Democracy Surviving the "Year of Elections"?* Journal of Democracy, Washington DC.
- Global State of Democracy Report 2023, *The New Checks and Balances*. Global State of Democracy Initiative, International IDEA, [Stockholm].
- Goyayi, M 2021, *The Role of Voting Technology in Enhancing Democracy in South Africa*, Retrieved from <https://ddp.org.za/blog/2021/07/09/the-role-of-voting-technology-in-enhancing-democracy-in-south-africa/> (Accessed 25 June 2024).
- Human Sciences Research Council 2024, *Election Satisfaction Survey*, Pretoria.
- IEC 2013, *Electoral Commission Convenes Seminar to Examine Feasibility of e-Voting*, Retrieved from <https://www.elections.org.za/content/News/Electoral-Commission-Convenes-Seminar-to-Examine-Feasibility-of-e-Voting/> (Accessed 17 June 2024).
- IEC 2019, *Electoral Commission to procure new Voter Registration Devices to replace 'Zip-Zip Machines'*, Retrieved from <https://www.elections.org.za/content/About-Us/News/Electoral-Commission-to-procure-new-Voter-Registration-Devices-to-replace--Zip-Zip-Machines-/> (Accessed 27 June 2024).
- IEC 2021, *Voter Management Devices (VMD)*. Independent Electoral Commission, South Africa.

- IEC 2021/2022, *Annual Report*. National Government of South Africa. Retrieved from [https://nationalgovernment.co.za/entity\\_annual/2998/2022-electoral-commission-\(iec\)-of-south-africa-annual-report.pdf](https://nationalgovernment.co.za/entity_annual/2998/2022-electoral-commission-(iec)-of-south-africa-annual-report.pdf) (Accessed 2 August 2024).
- IEC 2024a, *What's New in the 2024 Elections: Electoral Amendment Act*. Electoral Commission of South Africa.
- IEC 2024b, *Principles and Guidelines for the Use of Digital and Social Media in Elections in Africa*. Retrieved from <https://www.elections.org.za/pw/Elections-And-Results/Principles-and-Guidelines-for-the-use-of-the-Digital-and-Social-Media-in-Elections-in-Africa> (Accessed 2 August 2024).
- Jensen, M 2001, *The African Internet – A 2001 Status Report*, Retrieved from <http://www.digitaldivide.net/articles/view.php?ArticleID=322> (Accessed 16 June 2024).
- Maseko, M 2024a, *Is South Africa Ready for Electronic Voting?* Retrieved from <https://mg.co.za/africa/2024-04-05-is-south-africa-ready-for-electronic-voting/> (Accessed 19 June 2024).
- Maseko, M 2024b, *Democracy in Africa: Digital Voting Technology and Social Media Can Be A Force For Good – and Bad*, Retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/democracy-in-africa-digital-voting-technology-and-social-media-can-be-a-force-for-good-and-bad-229311> (Accessed 20 June 2024).
- Maseko, M 2024c, *ANALYSIS | Could Failure of Voter Management Devices Jeopardise Introduction of E-voting in SA?* Retrieved from <https://www.news24.com/news24/opinions/analysis/analysis-could-failure-of-voter-management-devices-jeopardise-introduction-of-e-voting-in-sa-20240608> (Accessed 19 June 2024).
- Mathekga, R 2023, *Bridging Africa's Digital Divide*, Retrieved from <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/africa-digital/> (Accessed 27 June 2024).
- Mhlongo, L 2020, *A Critical Analysis of South Africa's System of Government: From A Disjunctive System to A Synergistic System of Government*. *Obiter*, 41(2), 257-274, Port Elizabeth.
- Motala, E 2018, *The State, Education, and Equity in Post-Apartheid South Africa: The Impact of State Policies*, Routledge, London.
- Mpekoa, N & Van Greunen, D 2016, 'm-Voting: Understanding the Complexities of its Implementation', *International Journal for Digital Society*. 7. 10.20533/ijds.2040.2570.2016.0149.
- Mpekoa, N 2017, 'A Framework for M-voting Implementation in South Africa', Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (PhD Thesis).
- National Census 2022, *Census 2022 Population Count Results 10 October 2023*. Pretoria, Government Printer.
- Nkala, S 2024, *Trust Deficit In Tech Devices Hits Elections Credibility*, Retrieved from <https://theafrican.co.za/technology/trust-deficit-in-tech-devices-hits->

- elections-credibility-ea7d99d9-ccf5-4e9f-a31d-f7bb51d1b3be/ (Accessed 19 June 2024).
- Nyathi, M 2023, *IEC 'Technically Ready' for 2024 Elections*, Retrieved from <https://mg.co.za/politics/2023-10-30-iec-technically-ready-for-2024-elections/> (Accessed 21 June 2024).
- Omarjee, L 2019, *E-voting: Which Countries Use It, Where has it Failed and Why?* Retrieved from <https://www.news24.com/fin24/e-voting-which-countries-use-it-where-has-it-failed-and-why-20190510> (Accessed 20 June 2024).
- O'Regan, V 2024, *The Big No-Vote: Over 11 Million Registered Voters Did Not Cast Ballots in 2024 Polls*, retrieved from <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2024-06-07-the-big-no-vote-over-11-million-registered-voters-did-not-cast-ballots-in-2024-polls/> (Accessed 3 August 2024).
- OUTA 2023, 'Fund the IEC Properly Rather Than Political Parties', retrieved from <https://www.oua.co.za/blog/newsroom-1/post/fund-the-iec-properly-rather-than-political-parties-1266> (Accessed 21 August 2024).
- Parliament of the Republic of South Africa 2024, *Parliament's Statement on the Anniversary of the Adoption of the Constitution*. Retrieved from <https://www.parliament.gov.za/press-releases/parliaments-statement-anniversary-adoption-constitution> (Accessed 1 August 2024).
- Rey-Moreno, C & Pather, S 2020, *Advancing Rural Connectivity in South Africa Through Policy and Regulation: A Case for Community Networks*. 2020 ISTAfrica Conference (IST-Africa), 18–22 May.
- Sibanyoni, M 2021, 'LGE 2021 | IEC to Use VMDs Instead of 'Zip-Zip Machines'. *IEC Media Briefing – Update on the voter registration progress*, South African Broadcasting Corporation.
- South African Institute of Race Relations 2023, *South Africa's Low Voter Turnout is no Laughing Matter: 5 Crucial Takeaways*, Retrieved from <https://irr.org.za/fan/media/south-africas-low-voter-turnout-is-no-laughing-matter-5-crucial-takeaways> (Accessed 3 August 2024).
- Thakur, C & Millham, R 2018, 'The Decision to Adopt Electronic Voting in South Africa', *Muma Case Review* vol. 3, no. 14, pp. 1-16 <https://doi.org/10.28945/4216>.
- Thakur, C 2024, *E-voting versus Paper Ballots*. Retrieved from <https://mg.co.za/africa/2024-04-24-e-voting-versus-paper-ballots/> (Accessed 2 August 2024).
- Timcke, S & Schroeder, Z 2024, *Election Observation Report 2024 National Regional and Provincial Elections*, Research ICT Africa.
- UNISA 2023, *E-voting Guidelines for the Unisa SRC Election 2023*. Retrieved from <https://www.unisa.ac.za/sites/myunisa/default/Announcements/e%E2%80%93Voting-guidelines-for-the-Unisa-SRC-Election-2023> (Accessed 3 August 2024).

- Wambua-Soi, C 2018, *DRC's New Electronic Machines 'Could Help Rig Election*, Retrieved <https://www.aljazeera.com/videos/2018/12/18/drcs-new-electronic-machines-could-help-rig-election/> (Accessed 21 June 2024).
- Wiener, M 2019, 'Indelible Ink vs Biometrics – What the Voting Experts Say', Retrieved from <https://www.news24.com/news24/indelible-ink-vs-biometrics-what-the-voting-experts-say-20190510> (Accessed 20 June 2024).
- World Bank 2022, *New World Bank Report Assesses Sources of Inequality in Five Countries in Southern Africa*, Retrieved from <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/03/09/new-world-bank-report-assesses-sources-of-inequality-in-five-countries-in-southern-africa> (Accessed 21 June 2024).
- World Economic Forum 2024, *What Is E-voting? Who's Using It and Is It Safe?* Retrieved from <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2024/04/what-is-electronic-voting/> (Accessed 19 June 2024).

# POLITICAL PARTY BUILDING IN A POPULIST STYLE

*Evidence from South Africa's Economic Freedom Fighters,  
2014-2019*

*Michael J. Braun*

Michael Braun is a Centennial Postdoctoral Fellow in Political Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg

## ABSTRACT

*This article assesses the local organisation of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) in its first participation in South Africa's local government elections in 2016. Drawing on original interviews with local party activists, it explains how the EFF's brand of populism mobilised at the grassroots level during its formative years. The study argues that the party's populist style was effective because it helped appropriate existing diverse networks of political activists by positioning itself as the voice of 'ordinary black people' against business and government 'elites'. This orientation of the EFF appealed to youth, activists, and mineworkers who felt excluded from the African National Congress (ANC); while the protests and regalia of its populist style nurtured feelings of collective identity and efficacy among local party organisers. The article indicates how a populist style can be effective in exploiting generational cleavages to build a viable opposition party within the constraints of a dominant party system.*

**Keywords:** South Africa, political parties, elections, Economic Freedom Fighters, party activism

## INTRODUCTION

The Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) was launched in South Africa in 2013 after its founder and leader Julius Malema was expelled from the African National Congress (ANC). It sought support from the disadvantaged black majority in contemporary South Africa and has been widely labelled as left-wing populist, part of the global resurgence of populism across the political spectrum (Mouffe 2018). While there has been significant research on African populism and populist

leaders (Cheeseman & Larmer 2015; Resnick 2014; Melchiorre 2023) and the EFF in particular (Mbetse 2015; Nyenhuis 2020; Fölscher, de Jager & Nyenhuis 2021), there has been minimal work on the ground forces that mobilise votes for African populist parties to succeed at the local level. To remedy this lacuna, this study examines the critical period between the 2014 and 2019 national elections in South Africa when the EFF solidified their position as a competitive opposition party, increasing their vote share from 6.4% to 10.8%.

To assess the role of 'populism' in fomenting grassroots mobilisation, the article analyses the ways in which different components of a populist political style motivated individual activists to contribute their time and resources to the EFF's electoral campaigns. The notion of a populist style focuses analysis on the performance of leaders and followers which include (1) appeals to 'the people' against 'elites'; (2) references to impending crisis, breakdown or threat; and (3) disregard for the normal rules of political engagement, termed 'bad manners' (Moffitt 2016). The EFF clearly adopted a populist style by framing the party as representative of the black majority, as opposed to government 'elites'. They appealed to a sense of crisis over President Zuma's Nkandla corruption scandal and the 2012 Marikana massacre, and disrupted Parliament with their revolutionary garb and 'rowdy and disruptive' protest (Mbetse 2016, p. 598; Moffitt 2016). However, this says little about how these aspects of populist style affected their ability to recruit grassroots activists, which is the aim of this article.

Firstly, the article details the local resources mobilised by the EFF to establish the importance of individual activists in growing the membership and voting base of the party. Secondly, it examines the reasons activists expressed for joining the party in terms of Ware's (1999) exhaustive framework of purposive, material, and solidary incentives. Further, the study argues that the populist style of the EFF helped it appropriate existing networks of activists in three ways:

- (1) Framing their struggle as one of black people against the so-called elites of White Monopoly Capital (WMC) gave them a broad appeal to activists from diverse ideological orientations;
- (2) Invoking a sense of crisis in ANC leadership appealed to activists who believed that something had to be done about issues such as mining wages, university fees, housing, and land reform;
- (3) Julius Malema's outspoken behaviour, the EFF uniform, and their contentious actions inculcated a party identity which gave local activists the impression it was an effective vehicle to fight for the issues that mattered to them.



Consistent with a notion of ‘generational populism’ (Melchiorre 2023), the nascent EFF was able to recruit activists from younger generations of black South Africans who had weak ties to ANC and no longer saw it as a viable platform for their concerns or their political careers (Braun 2024a).

## METHODOLOGY

The 2016 local election campaigns were an opportune time to meet local EFF activists who were running as councillor candidates at ward level. To build rapport and better understand their activities and motivations, I attended events such as election posterling, door-to-door campaigning, social events, court hearings, and rallies. Between 2016 and 2019, I conducted 43 semi-structured interviews with current and former EFF activists and engaged with many others during the election campaign and in subsequent visits. Interviews were conducted for approximately one hour with the aid of a guide in the wards where the activists were based. I recorded and personally transcribed every interview to familiarise myself with the responses of research participants before using an inductive approach to identify the common themes in their explanations for joining the party. After initially organising these themes in terms of purposive, material, and solidary incentives, I used thematic analysis to develop sub-categories of these incentives, each of which encompassed the motivations expressed by at least four of the EFF activists interviewed.

Multiple strategies were used to build a diverse pool of EFF contacts from different entry points into local party networks. In Durban and Johannesburg, I interviewed EFF activists through pre-existing contacts, as well as EFF student activists I had met at campus events. Using a snowballing technique, these initial contacts introduced me to other activists to interview in other locations. Attending EFF campaign events also made it possible to tap into alternative networks of activists. At the 2016 EFF manifesto launch at Orlando Stadium in Soweto I made contacts from Johannesburg and Ekurhuleni who introduced me to additional activists. The relationships I developed with these activists led to visits to Tzaneen, Rustenburg, and Pietermaritzburg where I met local party members who added further geographical breadth to the research. In eThekweni I attended a regional posterling event where I met EFF councillor candidates from wards in Inanda and Ntuzuma townships. After the elections I noted that the EFF had a particularly strong result in a specific ward in Umlazi, so I arranged with a regional leader for a group interview with activists in that location.

eThekweni, Ekurhuleni, and Johannesburg municipalities were chosen as primary research sites because they host the largest black African populations in the country, while the wards in Rustenburg were chosen because they had become

nationally recognised as bastions of EFF support following the 2012 Marikana massacre. These municipalities vary in terms of their ethnolinguistic composition, which is primary isiZulu in eThekweni, with Setswana residents and isiXhosa migrant workers in the mining regions of Rustenburg, and a blend of South Africa's 13 official languages in Johannesburg and Ekurhuleni. The ward where I attended campaign events in Ekurhuleni is also notable because of the high population of Sepedi and Xitsonga speakers who had moved there from Limpopo.

### RESOURCE MOBILISATION IN THE EFF

Building branch structures and accumulating party members had been a consistent part of the EFF's organisational strategy since its formation. According to a former EFF provincial secretary (Interview, 15 June 2016) for KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) 'in terms of organisational growth, we just wanted to see numbers – numbers and nothing else. We had free room to run around and do whatever we wanted to do as long as we would produce numbers'. A reliance on branch structures and other social networks rather than expensive advertising campaigns was evident in the 2016 elections, when Malema said that they spent less than R10 million on the campaign, relying on word of mouth and rallies across the country (Mbetse 2016, p. 602). In addition to regional and national rallies, door-to-door visits were the primary local campaigning method in all wards where my interviews and observations were conducted.

This labour-intensive strategy meant that branches required a committed councillor candidate and pool of volunteers to speak to residents across their entire electoral ward. However, EFF councillor candidates said they received very few resources beyond election placards and used their personal funds to provide food and transportation for volunteers. This was evident as I accompanied EFF branch members during their campaign activities in 2016. For example, during a mass-postering campaign organised by regional and provincial EFF structures in eThekweni, there was no food provided for local volunteers. Instead, it was the ward councillor candidates who paid to feed their volunteers. Branches relied on local activists who were responsible for door-to-door campaigning, postering, and using local newspapers and community radio stations to promote the party. None of the branches I visited had party T-shirts to distribute, and in a Tembisa informal settlement the councillor candidate sought donations of plain red T-shirts to emblazon with the party logo for their volunteers. In the Marikana ward which the EFF targeted – and won – the future councillor explained how their branch members pooled together to organise weekend braais for the community. This was typical of the constraints that EFF activists faced:

There were no finances. Even to call a mere meeting with your people it's tough. You need airtime, there's no money, EFF does not have money so you can't call someone from the head office and say you want money for campaigning. You need to invest your money, personal money to make sure the ward continues.

(interview, EFF branch founder Tzaneen, 10 July 2017)

I was putting up posters, and you must remember it was only an eight-month-old party when they campaigned their first national elections so resources were very scarce. Even if they give you posters they don't give you additional material so how are you going to go about putting up those posters? So we had to use our money for the love of it.

(interview, EFF Ward Councillor candidate Hammarsdale, 17 May 2016)

Party branches also helped to maintain a community presence by advocating for piecemeal improvement of infrastructure and community services. For instance, a regional EFF organiser in Tzaneen (interview, 10 July 2017) explained why they negotiated with local businesses for building materials to fix local dirt roads: 'It's an opportunity – where we find a gap, we close that gap. So that the people can see the EFF, unlike the other party [ANC], is working even though they are limited, they have nothing [public funds] to use'. In another ward of Tzaneen the branch founder (interview, 10 July 2017) said that they would arrange community clean-ups, and approach the relevant municipal departments in order to bring services such as HIV tests, ID renewals, and emergency water to their semi-rural township where access was lacking. He believed this was necessary 'because you need to make people understand that this organisation is the organisation for the people, especially the oppressed black people of South Africa'.

Functioning local branches were essential to fulfill the call by the EFF leadership for candidates to engage with local problems as part of their electoral strategy. A councillor candidate in Hammarsdale (interview, 17 May 2016) recalled a meeting EFF Deputy President Floyd Shivambu held with councillor candidates in eThekweni before the 2016 elections:

He spoke about attending to community issues if there are any, perhaps there's a house [with] old people living there, maybe they're having a problem with accessing social grants. You need to go there, avail yourself, be of assistance there...He even went as far as to say *you don't even need to have money to start acting as a ward councillor*.

One of the local grievances EFF branches frequently sought to address was the electricity faults that plague residential areas across South Africa. For example, an EFF member in Diepsloot (interview, 26 May 2016) described how his branch wore their party regalia and went to the Eskom offices to demand the repair of a broken transformer that had left some residents without electricity for two months, claiming they succeeded in having it fixed. This was a common issue raised as I accompanied EFF councillor candidates during door-to-door campaigns in 2016, with residents asking for assistance in repairing broken transformers that interrupted their electricity supply. In Cosmo City, the EFF candidate organised an impromptu community meeting and a petition after being told of power outages in two sections of his ward. In Inanda, a councillor candidate arranged to collect funds from the community to fix a non-functioning transformer. These attempts at local problem solving were frequently spoken about by local EFF and reflected their attempts to follow the party's national directive for its councillor candidates to 'behave as if they were councillors' to ingratiate themselves with voters.

EFF student commands were active in campus protests and appeals for students who had been denied funding or student accommodation. The secretary-general of the EFF Student Command of the University of Johannesburg Soweto Campus (interview, 27 May 2016) explained how they had taken up these causes with management and raised donations to put free sanitary products inside the female toilets. The mobilisation strategy adopted on university campuses mirrored that of the wards described above, rooted in having a presence where their potential supporters were living.

It's simple, we just go to their respective residence, campaign there, inform there, door-to-door campaigns, those are the most effective ones. Because what you need to do is you must go to the people on the ground, you must find out their lived experiences.

(interview, EFFSC Branch Secretary, UKZN Pietermaritzburg 3 April 2018)

There are other members that live in residences so they will mobilise there. The students in those residences will state their grievances to that person, then that person will come with those grievances then we see how we can manage them.

(interview, EFFSC secretary-general, UJ Soweto campus, 27 May 2016)

Replicating the tactics of the ANC-affiliated SASCO student organisation, EFF branches on campus organised razzmatazz events for students in the residences with speeches, singing, and dancing. EFF student organisations also provided a

reservoir of volunteers to campaign at ward level. A former EFF student leader at the University of Limpopo (interview, 10 July 2017) explained that ‘the EFF they will give us probably five buses and go and deploy us in the surrounding communities of the university. So they say to this bus of comrades, *students you are going that side, you are going to do door-to-door there*’. This was particularly important in KZN, where the party did not absorb existing networks of activists from unions, social movements, or the ANCYL. The EFF mayoral candidate for Msunduzi municipality (interview, 12 June 2016) asserted that students from the nearby Pietermaritzburg campus of UKZN were key ground forces for door-to-door campaigns. This electoral strategy relied on branch structures possessing the membership and skills necessary to carry out campaigning activities.

### APPROPRIATION OF MOBILISATION NETWORKS

The EFF built local structures in wards and on campuses by attracting individuals who had prior experience as activists with different organisations. The EFF began as a movement of ex-ANCYL members allied with Julius Malema in 2013, and that year they held a meeting in Soweto with social movements, unions, and community organisations to discuss whether to form a political party. Members of the Pan Africanist Congress and Black Consciousness Party and movements such as the Landless People’s Movement (LPM), Anti-privatisation Forum (APF), and September National Imbizo (SNI), mingled with trade unionists from the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) and the National Council of Trade Unions (NACTU) (Robinson 2014, p. 76).

My research found that many EFF student activists had come from the ANC-aligned SASCO student movement that had controlled university student representative councils (SRCs). The human resources of these existing networks were crucial to recruitment, campaigning, and organising local direct actions such as protests, marches, and land occupations. There is also evidence that this translated into electoral gains for the EFF. Exit polls conducted during the 2016 local elections showed significant EFF support among targeted constituencies receiving nearly 30% of votes from those aged 25 to 39, 19% among students, 38% among worker protestors (mainly in the mining sector) and 34% of those living in informal housing (Paret 2016).

In the wards where I conducted research in Soweto, the local EFF organisers came primarily from social movement organisations. The area had been a hotbed of social movement activism since the early 2000s, when various movements fighting to improve service delivery and prevent evictions from informal settlements established the APF as an umbrella organisation to coordinate their activities (Sinwell 2015, p. 83). While the APF and some of its organisations were

no longer active, their former activists helped to establish the EFF's regional and branch structures, including the councillor candidate and cluster head in Protea South who had both been members of the LPM. This gave them some local credibility, organising skills, and networks of fellow activists to recruit to the organisation. In the nearby informal settlement of Thembalihle one of the EFF organisers from the APF and the Thembalihle Crisis Committee explained how he used his existing relationships to facilitate co-operation with other wards in door-to-door campaigning.

In other areas, the EFF was dominated by former ANCYL league members who had been followers of Malema when he was the president of that organisation. One such activist who founded a branch in Tzaneen (interview, 10 July 2017) explained their strategy to build the organisation:

I target public figures of the community, people who are big, who are well known... Like a certain guy I went to him because he once contested. He was expelled from the ANC and he was well loved by members of the community so I recruited him. So there are people who will come, his followers will come to the EFF.

Malema's activism in the ANCYL and previous involvement in his community's politics gave him the local knowledge and experience that informed his strategy to build the EFF branch in his ward. In the same way that the national EFF was borne of a factional struggle within the ANC, local branches such as this emerged from factional divisions at the local level which alienated ANCYL members. This dynamic was replicated in SASCO, which saw some of its members leave to establish or join EFF branches on university campuses. At the Durban University of Technology (DUT) activists left SASCO en masse after being 'defeated' by another faction, ultimately launching the EFF's campus structures (interview, EFF Student Leader, 12 May 2016).

The leadership I interviewed from two EFF branches in Marikana was based around workplace networks, consisting of shop stewards or members of the AMCU trade union in competition with the NUM. In the nearby mining village of Wonderkop, the branch was started by members of Sikhala Sonke, an organisation of women formed after the massacre of mineworkers to organise protest marches and carry out community support initiatives (Essop 2015). The EFF won that ward in 2016, and the councillor explained that she and other members of Sikhala Sonke had started the branch and were all active door-to-door campaigners before the election. These examples show the diversity of networks the EFF branches mobilised to bolster the numbers and effectiveness of newly-established EFF branch structures.

## WHY DID LOCAL ACTIVISTS JOIN THE EFF?

Motivations for political activism can be broken down into *purposive* incentives such as belief in the goals, policies, or ideology of a party; *material* incentives such as money, jobs, or favours; and *solidary* benefits such as enjoyment and sociality (Ware 1999, p. 81). Solidary benefits can also include the psychological benefits of participation, including a sense of group identity and satisfaction in contributing to the provision of collective goods (Scarrow 2015, p. 157). This means that retention of cadres is enhanced when they feel as if their party's activities are 'making a difference' in progressing towards the purposive goals that led them to join in the first place (Pettitt 2020, pp. 13-16).

### *Purposive Incentives and Framing*

Ideologically, the EFF was able to resonate with local activists by drawing on elements of Black Consciousness (BC), Pan-Africanism, socialism, and the belief that the ANC had not implemented the Freedom Charter but had sold out in the negotiations that led to the end of apartheid. The populist style of the EFF collapsed these different ideological traditions by narrating a struggle of black people against elites in government and business whom they labelled as defenders of White Monopoly Capitalism (WMC) (Beresford et al. 2023, pp. 7-8). Several local activists I interviewed had previously been members of the PAC or its related student organisation.

Frustrated by in-fighting within the PAC, the leader of the EFF branch at the UKZN campus in Pietermaritzburg (interview, 3 April 2018) was attracted to the EFF because of its Black Consciousness block that spoke to his pre-existing ideological affinities. Other activists in Umlazi (interview, 9 April 2018) and Soweto (interview, 28 June 2016) were attracted by aspects of socialism they saw within the EFF, which made them believe it would be more biased towards the poor. Although the EFF cadres from the Pan-Africanist tradition rejected some of the precepts of the Freedom Charter, the document maintained widespread credibility among many who joined the EFF from the ANC. There was widespread feeling among former ANCYL members who had left to join the EFF that the ruling party had become corrupt and supported WMC, and the new party would prioritise the implementation of the Freedom Charter.

While the Africanist, Charterist,<sup>1</sup> and socialist orientations represent different and sometimes conflicting strands of ideology, their adherents found common ground in the policy orientations the EFF expressed in its founding documents

---

1 Charterist refers to those from the ANC tradition who believe in the principles of the Freedom Charter, while the Africanist position of the PAC rejected the document.

and subsequent election manifestos. A September National Imbizo activist from Durban (interview, 28 August 2014) who attended the founding meeting in 2013 explained the adoption of the EFF's seven non-negotiable cardinal pillars:

What happened was that we had a meeting in Joburg with the EFF last year in a very interesting place called The African Freedom Station. It was to discuss the document the EFF had sent to everyone, to all the political movements, PAC, even the ANC, everybody. To say *what is to be done? These are our points, our 14 points, you can add or subtract, lets discuss it.* So they had a call, some accepted the call, some didn't. We were one of those that did. As much as we do see some problems within the EFF, we can sort them out as we move along.

These cardinal pillars take clear positions in favour of socialist policies such as nationalisation and building state capacity to provide free services and stimulate the creation of 'quality' jobs, while the reference to the land expropriation is a nod to Africanist orientations. By targeting issues that appealed to young people from these different intellectual traditions, the EFF was able to recruit activists for the party at local level.

The seven cardinal pillars also attracted some of the young black activists who felt they would benefit from EFF policies:

So when EFF came up and I saw its seven cardinal pillars and its policies and then I joined the EFF...I see there's many more things to come, especially for us as youth of SA because we need jobs, we need to go to school, we need so many things we need in SA.

(interview, EFF Activist Umlazi, 19 April 2018)

Two regional command team members in Tzaneen (interview, 10 July 2017) agreed that EFF policy orientations, above other considerations, led them to join the party:

[Activist 1:] 'As youth we realised there is something that is lacking in our community, as youth, unemployment and some issues that were not addressed well by the ruling party. So the policies then were called the seven cardinal pillars, we saw that if they were implemented they were going to work for us, we're going to get employment. [Activist 2:] In fact the policies accommodate us as youth, that's how we keep the ball rolling. So we bought their policies, that's why we joined them.



EFF activists who had been members of the ANCYL saw the EFF as a continuation of the liberation struggle from outside the confines of the ANC. They believed the EFF had greater credibility in delivering on these purposive incentives, making it a better conduit for their political voice which they felt had been ignored by the ruling party. For those sympathetic to BC, socialist, and Pan-Africanist orientations, the decision to become involved in the EFF was guided by Malema's promotion of radical politics while he was in the ANCYL, and afterwards in his new political party.

One of the key policies that appealed to those who had come from both inside and outside the ANC was land expropriation without compensation, of which Julius Malema had been a vociferous proponent when ANCYL president. Land reform was a touchstone issue among EFF activists living in informal settlements because it spoke to material needs as well as feelings of relative deprivation:

I expect that if EFF take power maybe EFF will make a plan for providing jobs because they said we need the land back. When you came here you can see they have land with nobody that side, but they have 1,2,3, 8 families in one yard [here]. Because I stay with my wife, my boy in a one room shack and they have a lot of space over there.... Since I came here they [the government] don't do anything about that land. We tried to put our shacks there but they [police] came and took our materials.

(interview, EFF activist Diepsloot, 26 May 2016)

In addition to those who had previously been involved in anti-eviction activism (LPM) or came from ideological backgrounds that prioritised the land question (PAC, BC), the EFF's position on expropriation resonated with the feelings of black youth about universities. Maringira and Gukurume's (2021, p. 492) analysis of the 2015-2016 Fees Must Fall movement argues that those seminal protests were not only about fees, but also the economic and political exclusion of black youth:

By raising the land question in the student protest movement, students bemoaned their lack of access to and ownership of the means of production as the main source of their poverty. For them, whites continue to monopolise ownership of land and other productive resources as they did under apartheid.

The EFF's framing of its policies such as land expropriation, nationalisation, and free education as the solution to inequality and the poverty of black people resonated with ideas that were already present among a segment of young people in the country.

The EFF also developed programmatic linkages to activists living in the mining communities of Wonderkop and Marikana, which helped draw in members from AMCU and Sikhala Sonke. The national leadership had been active there since Malema had been one of the first politicians to support the mineworkers after the 2012 Marikana massacre and endorse their 12 500 ZAR wage demand during the months-long 2014 strike (Essop 2015, p. 226). The EFF councillor elected in Wonderkop (interview, 17 July 2017) explained why she decided to join the party: 'Julius Malema was the first person to come to hear the problems of the community and the workers. So that was where I said *this is the right leader* and I joined EFF'. The populist style of the EFF identified 'elites' from the ANC and WMC as the common enemy of black workers, movement activists, and students, allowing them to build an activist base from these different locations in society.

### *Material Incentives – A Party for the Youth?*

As described above, local EFF activists contributed their own money during political campaigns and there was no evidence that the EFF had the capacity to deliver clientelist benefits to the lower structures of the party. At the ward level it was ANC incumbents who had the power to act as gatekeepers in the distribution of benefits such as jobs and housing, which has led to sometimes violent factional battles within the ANC (Beresford 2015, pp. 239-40). This would suggest there were more apparent material incentives for activists *not* to join an opposition party like the EFF because it would limit their ability to access these goods from local ANC councillors. For example, a former deputy secretary of an ANC branch in Soweto (interview, 24 May 2016) explained why he did not join the EFF officially until 2015: 'I was just staying because sometimes when you go look for a job and then they are the people that are running the government. You stay, hoping they will give you something'. Despite the moral failures he attributed to the ANC after Zuma's corruption scandals and the Marikana massacre, he was still reluctant to leave the party publicly because of the possibility of material benefits.

Many EFF activists were motivated by the potential for them to further their political careers within the organisation or secure a lucrative position as councillor. In Tembisa and Marikana it was realistic for the EFF councillor candidates to win positions as ward councillors, but even in eThekweni where the party had minimal support in the 2014 national elections the councillor candidates believed that they could win their wards in the 2016 elections. Candidates justified putting their own money into the campaign with the hope that they would be rewarded with a councillor's salary after the election, and expressed significant disappointment afterwards if they did not receive a paid position. For example, a councillor

candidate from Inanda (interview, 23 June 2017) felt that his contributions as a cluster head of multiple wards should have landed him a higher place on the PR councillor list, while a candidate in Cosmo City (interview, 10 August 2016) thought that he would be recognised for the impressive vote tally the EFF received in his ward.

Although the EFF's PR list was set before the election, these activists thought the party would do well enough to earn them a position or were led to believe the list would be altered based upon the electoral performance of their ward. In eThekweni this discontent boiled over with the formation of a dissident party, the short-lived Effective Economic Emancipation Party, which criticised many of the party's decisions, including claims that the party 'never supported the structures to mount an effective campaign', as well concerns about how PR seats were distributed: 'We've got proof here [that] others were promised proportional representation [PR] seats. They paid extra cash buying PR seats that never happened. They paid the money [but] they never got PR seats' (Oliphant 2016; eNCA 2016). These disputes over positions suggest employment was a major incentive among party activists, with some of those interviewed for this study deciding to leave the party when they were still jobless after the election, including two who accepted PR councillor positions with rival opposition parties.

Career aspirations are commonly understood to be a motivation for participating in politics, but this is not sufficient to understand why activists would join an opposition party with less chance to distribute these material rewards. Weber's (2020, p. 507) examination of youth political activism in Germany found that even those with strong career aspirations were equally driven by 'moral-ideological' incentives such as the ideological linkages described above, combined with a sense of duty to participate politically in order to change society in a desired direction. Conceptualising political activists as moral beings who are *also* interested in the potential for material benefits helps to understand how potential activists choose political parties. EFF activists expressed this confluence of factors when explaining why they joined the party – it represented a viable path for their career advancements within an organisation that aligned with their moral and ideological convictions.

The factional politics within ANC branches led some young activists to question both their place within the organisation and the commitment of the party to address the needs of their communities, ultimately leading them to join the EFF. Factional battles within local branches for local councillor candidate selection are part of the gatekeeper politics of the ANC which control resources, and the delegates which elect party leaders at its national elective conferences (Beresford 2015, p. 239). In KZN violence was particularly fierce, with most of 157 political assassinations from 2000-2017 targeting local ANC political figures (Mbanyele 2022). This state of affairs in the ruling party dissuaded young activists who instead

chose to align themselves with the EFF. For example, one young EFF activist in Inanda (interview, 15 July 2016) explained how she became interested in the EFF after witnessing the intra-party disputes in the ANC that led to the murder of an ANC candidate in the neighbouring ward. An EFF leader at UKZN Edgewood (interview, 13 May 2016) who was also active in her local branch explained why she saw the factionalism in the ANC as a reason not to be involved:

You need to go to the right people because if you support the ANC and you're in the wrong side then things won't work out for you as well. And with the ANC it always changes. One day this faction is doing well, the next you must leave this faction for another faction.

Those who reached adulthood after 1994 assessed the ANC by their recent experiences rather than by the liberation struggle. For them, the ruling party did not represent a safe and attractive political home, so they looked elsewhere for that. There was a sense that a new organisation was needed to challenge the older generation that had monopolised positions within the ANC.

In terms of Hirschman's *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* (1970) framework, the expulsion of Malema from the ANC was seen by activists as a decisive failure of 'voice', helping to override their loyalty to the ANC and making the exit option more attractive. An EFF activist in Mamelodi West (interview, 27 May 2016) explained:

I felt embarrassed because me I always liked ANC too much, and too much because of Julius Malema. Because I am a youth and he was a youth of ANC leader so when they expelled that guy then I see that okay, those elder people they don't want the *facts*. They said *you are young, you cannot say something*.

Similarly, an EFF provincial organiser in KZN (interview, 15 July 2016) said he did not join the breakaway COPE party in 2008 because 'we need to fix ANC problems from within the ANC, but as time went on and we realised we are not heard and it's not possible to fix ANC, it's beyond repairs'. After attempts to be heard in the ANC had failed, he saw the creation of the EFF as a viable way to continue his political trajectory within a new organisation. An EFF eThekweni regional organiser (interview, 23 April 2018) explained this thought process in determining his political future at that time:

ANC leaders were not listening, then they chased Malema out who said *Why are you excluding us?* He was only challenging this leadership saying that this is what we're supposed to do. So that is how we saw

the injustice that was happening there, and we decided we had to refocus and see who is going to best serve our interest.

While this activist also referred to the policy orientations of Malema and the EFF, his statement reveals the need of such politically-inclined citizens to feel included within an organisation. For an individual activist to have a viable career in politics there must be clear upward path for mobility in a party that caters to one's prior political preferences. In this way the purposive incentives of activists were intertwined with career objectives, especially amongst those who were already part of ANC youth structures.

The exile of Malema from the ANC presented an opportunity for these activists to leave the ruling party, but that decision required them to consider which organisation offered a brighter future. The EFF branch founder at UKZN Edgewood (interview, 13 May 2016) explained how deeply the ANC's rejection of Malema and his allies by the ANC affected him: 'Immediately when they were expelled, I felt that I was expelled too, as such I burnt my T-shirt and membership card'. For them, this represented the failure of the ANC mother body to listen to demands being made by its youth organisations. This was explained by a young EFF activist from Limpopo (interview, 10 July 2017):

We need to go back to the book and start our own things where we can be fully represented. That's when we joined EFF in large numbers. When we left ANC we didn't regret. We loved the ANC but it does not want to be with us.

Despite a deep loyalty to the ANC, such activists felt that there was no place for them and their ideological outlook within the party, thus paving the way for a generational exit from the ruling party to the nascent EFF structures. For young people who aspired to careers in politics, the EFF opened a new avenue where they felt they would be taken seriously and move forward as political activists. In contrast to the more exclusive nature of an entrenched and multigenerational party like the ANC, young activists felt the EFF had space for them to become leaders in the pursuit of the purposive goals they hoped to achieve. Indeed, the EFF has emerged as a political home for young black political activists who have helped to reshape the demographics in Parliament in 2019, with 47% of their MPs under the age of 45 compared to 25% for the ANC (People's Assembly 2021).

### *Solidary Incentives – Building a Partisan Identity and Projecting Efficacy*

Local EFF activists expressed a desire to be part of a political movement capable of producing the societal changes promised in its ideological and programmatic

platform. Comparative research has shown that party activists are often driven by such expressive desires, making them more likely to join parties that are able to fulfill this emotional need to have their voices heard in the political arena (Whiteley 2011; Huddy, Mason & Aarøe 2015). For activists motivated by this sense of civic duty, they must feel they are part of an organisation that represents their purposive interests *and* has the power to implement them. The notion of collective identity is pertinent here because it highlights the cognitive, moral, and emotional connections that bind people together to participate in collective action that are distinct from the rational self-interest of material incentives (Poletta & Jasper 2001, p. 285). Political parties may be formed around individuals with common interests, but the creation of a strong collective identity helps to sustain voluntary activity by building solidarity around beliefs in organisational efficacy and its contribution to the moral good.

In this discussion of career prospects for young activists within the EFF, there was a clear feeling among grassroots EFF activists that they had been excluded from meaningful political participation by the ANC. They did not feel that the ANC was able to make political improvements and did not feel personal efficacy in voicing their concerns in the party. In contrast, members of an EFF branch in an Umlazi ward (interview, 19 April 2018) explained why they felt empowered within the EFF:

I joined EFF because I want to be heard. ANC they're only having their own meeting there and making decision for us. They never hear our voices so that's why I joined EFF.

We do not have a voice, our voices are not heard. I wanted to work, join EFF, the Fighters, I wanted to be just like them just to make *izwe lethu* [our country] a better place.

These young activists believed their opinions were valued by the new political party, helping to satisfy a desire while augmenting a sense that their participation was fulfilling a civic duty to contribute to the betterment of their communities. The EFF tried to develop these affective linkages by consciously building a partisan identity, as explained in *The Coming Revolution* (2014, p. 5) by EFF deputy president Floyd Shivambu:

We understood economic freedom fighters to be the informal settlement dwellers, workers, communities and activists who would challenge the system every day with the aim of benefiting from the country's natural and economic resources.

EFF activists refer to each other as ‘fighters’, a collective identity formed around the party’s dress, contentious tactics, and leadership, which inculcated a belief that the organisation was a viable instrument for contributing to what they viewed as the public good.

From its inception EFF members became known for wearing red berets, hard hats, and domestic worker uniforms while attending protests, rallies, and sitting in Parliament. The berets were meant to signify their revolutionary character in the tradition of Che Guevara and Thomas Sankara, while the uniforms suggested solidarity with the interests of the black working classes (Mbetse 2015, p.41). Wearing EFF regalia in communities and campuses was identified as a crucial component of increasing visibility during consciousness raising efforts. The national leadership encouraged the weekly display of party regalia through social media under the hashtag #EFFRedFriday:

Anyone who belongs to the EFF, if you are not wearing RED today, you are a sellout. If you are not a sellout, show your colours and tell them through your colours that you are not ashamed of being part of the Red Battalion.

(EFF Instagram 2022)

Local branches also took initiatives to encourage their members to wear party colours, such as UJ Soweto Campus where members were fined R40 if they did not wear their EFF T-shirt to campus on Wednesdays and Thursdays (interview, EFF Branch Secretary, 27 May 2016).

When EFF members engaged in local protests they believed that wearing the EFF regalia gave them more power to accomplish their goals, as explained by an EFF activist in Diepsloot (interview, 26 May 2016):

We were two months without electricity, and then the lady [councillor] for ANC went there by Eskom offices [to complain]. They cried many times, but they didn’t come here to fix it. But we just called other members of EFF, one had a *bakkie* [truck], we took his *bakkie* and go to Eskom offices. He also stays in this area. We were wearing our berets and T-shirts.

This activist explained how he believed that because they went to the Eskom offices as ‘fighters’ their concerns were addressed more promptly than they would have been otherwise. The benefit of this EFF brand was also highlighted by an EFF cluster head in Protea South (interview, 2 May 2016), who had previously tried to organise a non-profit in his community:

As a NPO [non-profit organisation] your voice is very low, as opposed to you being in politics or a member of the opposition. Look what the EFF does at the Parliament. If I were to wear maybe an EFF regalia or a cap, even if I do nothing, by just walking people assume that this man, maybe he's one of the 'mad guys'... it's a privilege to be in the EFF, because whether you make sense or not, people are willing to listen.

The national leadership wore EFF regalia in Parliament and during rallies, helping to construct a strong partisan identity in the minds of supporters, opponents, and the public audience. In the party's early days in ANC-dominant KZN, wearing EFF regalia was a bold political statement for local activists:

People looked at us very brave because they were not used to the EFF and they knew very well that the EFF was showing to be against the ANC. And everywhere there's ANC so why would three people have courage to wear the EFF beret in an ANC-led ward? So they saw us as these people that were being very brave. So that's how we broke the ice and then students started to change.

(EFF organiser, UKZN Howard College, interview, 8 May 2016)

These early local leaders for the EFF explained how they would have membership forms on hand because they were inevitably approached by interested students whenever they wore their berets on campus. Other activists in the province explained how they became members of their local branch after speaking to people they observed wearing EFF regalia in their communities. This aspect of the EFF's populist style played a key role in projecting the image of solidarity and efficacy within the organisation, as well as increasing their visibility to show the party had local members on campuses and in communities.

### *Protest Tactics and Perceived Efficacy*

In addition to uniforms, scholars have found that tactics constitute collective identity, forming an important part of how activists see themselves (Poletta & Jasper, 2001, p. 292). Since its formation, the EFF has consistently organised protests and rallies to attract public attention to their political stances. In 2015 they organised the 'March for Economic Freedom' which led 40 000 supporters to the Johannesburg Stock Exchange to advocate for 'economic inclusion', while their MPs were removed from Parliament for disrupting President Zuma's State of the Nation Address each year from 2015 to 2017 in protest against alleged corruption within the government.



The national leadership of the EFF also mandated its regional bodies to organise local protests around specific issues so as to maintain the visibility of the party between election periods. In 2018 there were at least 25 marches to hospitals organised by regional EFF structures<sup>2</sup> to protest about government health care services as part of a co-ordinated campaign by the national EFF leadership. In 2018 they led protests at H&M stores across the country after deeming the company's advertising racist. This was repeated at Clicks pharmacies across the country in 2020 over its marketing of hair-care products which appeared to denigrate black hair texture. The party leadership took stances against these and other issues which had gone viral on social media, such as an allegedly whites-only matriculation party at a Western Cape high school, which led them to quickly mobilise protests at that location (Cape Argus 2021). In this way, the EFF combined social media activism with real-world protests to garner further attention for the issue – and the party – through social media networks and mainstream media exposure.

The EFF used the disruptive element of a populist style to attract individuals and networks which saw the value of protest in pursuing their political goals:

If you can look at the ideology of the EFF it's a protest movement. Where there are protests we support those protests. Where there are none, we still make them.

(interview, EFF organiser UKZN Howard College, 8 May 2016)

Even though it is sometimes violent or chaotic but it makes the voice of the EFF heard, they are the loudest voice. Whatever they say it is taken to notice because of the way they say it.

(interview, EFF Branch Secretary Hammarsdale, 5 April 2018)

These EFF activists saw protesting as a key part of the party's identity, and it helped build solidarity and feelings of empowerment among those who participated. Protests tactics are widely used in South African communities and campuses, so the EFF's tactics aligned with existing practices used by local activists and grassroots organisations.

The leadership of the EFF forged these tactics and sartorial choices into a populist style which engendered a collective identity as 'economic freedom fighters'. Julius Malema was seen as a vocal proponent of the issues that they cared about, and as someone who was not afraid to 'speak truth to power'. Although he was less popular among the general population than leaders in the ANC, DA, and

---

2 Tabulated by author from various news sources.

EFF, he had the greatest support among members of his own party (BusinessTech 2017). They believed Malema's notoriety was an effective way to draw attention to the positions he expressed. An EFF organiser in Lenasia (interview, 27 April 2016) told me: 'there must be a brand...Malema is there as a president to bring more mass to the organisation'.

The activists I spoke to believed that Malema's leadership was important because of the attention it brought to the purposive incentives that motivated their own activism. An EFF activist at the University of the Witwatersrand (interview, 5 April 2016) explained how Malema was necessary to grow the party and get it noticed, but it was his ideas around land reform, nationalising resources, and decolonisation that led her to join the party: 'For me I don't believe in Julius Malema but I believe *with* Julius Malema. So that idea that he has, I have that idea with him'. While many activists expressed affective attachment towards Julius Malema, these feelings were grounded in the political ideas he represented, and the perceived efficacy his leadership had because of the media attention he attracted compared to other opposition parties:

The party is not for Julius Malema alone, it belongs to everyone. Julius is just a great leader who must lead this party until such point until we say we don't want him....so far I don't see that happening because we still believe in him, he's a great leader.

(interview, EFF leader Tzaneen, 10 July 2017)

The national leadership of the EFF helped to create an identity as 'economic freedom fighters' through their dress, protest tactics, and support for issues which resonated with many young people in South Africa. This consistently attracted media attention and, for EFF activists, projected a sense of efficacy about the organisation's potential to win elections and contribute to political change. The 'bad manners' and sartorial displays of the EFF's populist style – led by Malema himself – helped give them an identity which differentiated them from other opposition parties and gave activists a sense of solidarity and efficacy.

## CONCLUSION

This examination of how a populist style incentivises local party activism reveals a key component of populism's mobilising potential, looking beyond the direct connections between national leaders and voters that dominate much of the existing literature. The EFF attracted activists from diverse organisational backgrounds who possessed civic skills that enabled them to be active grassroots campaigners for the party. Informal settlements in Soweto and Lenasia had rich

histories of protest movements that provided civic education to young people, while mineworkers in Marikana were increasingly politicised by union activities after the Marikana massacre (Sinwell 2015; 2016; 2023; Ngwane 2003).

The EFF was able to mobilise these people primed for political activism, along with the former ANCYL members and university students from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. This established bridgeheads in prestigious middle-class institutions like the universities of Cape Town and Witwatersrand and within more working-class student bodies like the Durban and Mangosuthu universities of technology. It was the EFF's use of a populist political style that helped it attract these different groups of activists by collapsing their world views within a simplistic frame of black 'people' vs. WMC 'elites'.

This local party infrastructure was not forged with the ethnic ties and neo-patrimonialism that have been dominant explanations of African political party growth (Elischer 2013, pp. 2-4). Instead, the EFF recruited from a generation of activists looking for an effective way to exercise their political voice and pursue their objectives for personal and collective advancement. The party appealed to purposive incentives with their invocation of common issues faced by the black majority, while also providing the material incentives of political careers among contemporary youth and the older 'youth' who had been part of Malema's ANCYL.

The disruptive element of the EFF's populist style also provided solidary incentives to participants, with the party's combative leadership, protest tactics and uniforms giving them a sense of political efficacy as 'economic freedom fighters'. In short, activists were strategic about selecting an organisation that offered them the best vehicle to *perform* their activism in ways which corresponded with their purposive motivations. The establishment of a locally-rooted partisan identity by the EFF has proven to be an important ingredient in the emergence of the first sustained black opposition party which has bridged linguistic and regional divisions in the country. While many young people in Africa's dominant party systems may reject the divisiveness and 'bad manners' of a populist political style, this study indicates its potential effectiveness in building grassroots support for competitive opposition parties.

#### POSTSCRIPT

The EFF has continued to persevere as a political party, belying initial expectations. However, the 2024 national and provincial elections revealed that its generationally based populist style limits further expansion. The party's growth trajectory continued in Mpumalanga, Western Cape Northern Cape, and Eastern Cape, while it held steady in its stronghold in Northwest, Limpopo and Gauteng provinces (IEC). This indicates a continued nationwide campaigning presence but suggests

an electoral ceiling for a party that appeals primarily to young people in a country where that demographic is underrepresented among registered voters (Bekker, Runciman & Roberts 2022, p. 305).

In KZN the EFF's support fell from 10.0% in 2019 to 2.5% in 2024 and the ANC dropped from 55.5% to 17.4% as the newly formed uMkhonto we Sizwe Party (MK) captured 45.4% of national votes in the province. MK combined elements of a populist style with the trust that its leader and former President Jacob Zuma still enjoyed in that province. With both the EFF and MK evincing aspects of an elite-led vanguardist populism to gain political power (Beresford et al. 2023, p. 4), the latter positioned itself as the voice of black Africans against WMC and the domination of Roman-Dutch law. MK used this populist framing to build local structures comprising disgruntled ANC activists, uMkhonto we Sizwe veterans, and other community members seeking change from the incumbent government (Braun 2024b). Through social media it also mobilised the online RET community – which had previously promoted the EFF – to manipulate public discourse around the elections in MK's favour (CABC 2024). The MK effectively displaced rival parties in KZN only six months after its launch, outperforming the EFF in convincing local activists and voters that it was the most viable challenger to the ruling party.

#### — REFERENCE —

- Bekker, M, Runciman, C, & Roberts, B 2022, 'Beyond the Binary: Examining Dynamic Youth Voter Behaviour in South Africa', *Politikon* 49, no. 4, pp. 297-317.
- Beresford, A 2015, 'Power, Patronage, and Gatekeeper Politics in South Africa', *African Affairs*, vol. 114, no. 455, pp. 226-248.
- Beresford, A, Beardsworth, N, Findlay, K & Alger, S 2023, 'Conceptualising the Emancipatory Potential of Populism: A Typology and Analysis', *Political Geography*, vol. 102.
- Braun, M 2024a, "'Thin' Loyalty and Declining Attachment to the African National Congress', *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, vol. 62, no.1, pp. 25-44.
- Braun, M 2024b, 'The Secret Behind Zuma and MK Party's Organisational Success', 28 May 2024. <https://www.iol.co.za/opinion/michael-j-braun-the-secret-behind-zuma-and-mk-partys-organisational-success-0fa637a0-3fa2-4787-8edb-54df5ca964e8>. Accessed 16 July 2024.
- BusinessTech 2017, 'What South Africans score Zuma, Malema and Maimane out of 10', 9 February. <https://businesstech.co.za/news/government/156269/what-south-africans-score-zuma-malema-and-maimane-out-of-10/> . Accessed 8 August 2024.

- Cape Argus 2021, 'EFF to pay for Brackenfell school protest damages after court summons', May 17. <https://www.iol.co.za/capeargus/news/eff-to-pay-for-brackenfell-school-p>. Accessed 10 June 2021.
- Centre for Analytics and Behavioural Change (CABC) 2024, 'From RET to MK Party: The Mobilisation of Existing Communities to Drive Political Messaging', [https://cabc.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/From-RET-to-MK-Party\\_The-mobilisation-of-existing-communities-to-drive-political-messaging\\_final.docx-2.pdf](https://cabc.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/From-RET-to-MK-Party_The-mobilisation-of-existing-communities-to-drive-political-messaging_final.docx-2.pdf). Accessed 12 July 2024.
- Cheeseman, N & Larmer, M 2015, 'Ethnopolitism in Africa: Opposition Mobilization in Diverse and Unequal Societies', *Democratization*, vol. 22, no.1, pp. 1-29.
- Elischer, S 2013, *Political Parties in Africa: Ethnicity and Party Formation*, Cambridge University Press, [Cambridge].
- EFF South Africa 2022, Instagram post, 25 February.
- eNCA 2016, 'EFF eThekweni Members Point Fingers at Party', September 10, <https://www.enca.com/south-africa/eff-ethekweni-members-point-fingers-...1>. Accessed 4 June 2019.
- Essop, T 2015, 'Populism and the Political Character of the Economic Freedom Fighters – a View from the Branch', *Labour, Capital and Society*, vol. 48, no. 1 & 2, pp. 212-238.
- Fölscher, M, de Jager, N, & Nyenhuis, R 2021, 'Populist parties shifting the political discourse? A case study of the Economic Freedom Fighters in South Africa', *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 59, no. 4.
- Hirschman, A 1970, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass.
- Huddy, L, Mason, L & Aarøe, L 2015, 'Expressive Partisanship: Campaign Involvement, Political Emotion, and Partisan Identity', *American Political Science Review*, vol.109, no.1, pp. 1-17.
- Independent Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC) (n.d.), *Election results*. <https://www.elections.org.za>. Accessed 16 July 2024.
- Maringira, G & Gukurume, S 2021, 'Politics, (Re)Possession and Resurgence of Student Protests in South African Universities', *Politikon*, vol. 48, no.3, pp. 486-505.
- Mbanyele, S 2022, 'What Drives South Africa's Political Violence?', *Mail & Guardian*, March 12. <https://mg.co.za/opinion/2022-03-14-what-drives-south-africas-political-...1>. Accessed 6 July 2022.
- Mbete, S 2015, 'The Economic Freedom Fighters: South Africa's Turn Towards Populism?', *Journal of African Elections*, vol. 14, no.1, pp. 35-59.
- Mbete, S 2016, 'Economic Freedom Fighters' Debut in the Municipal Elections', *Journal of Public Administration*, vol. 51, no. 3, pp. 596-614.
- Melchiorre, L 2023, 'Generational populism and the political rise of Robert

- Kyagulanyi – aka Bobi Wine – in Uganda’, *Review of African Political Economy*, vol. 50, no. 176, pp. 212–233.
- Moffitt, B 2016, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*, Stanford University Press, Stanford.
- Moffitt, B & Tormey, S 2014, ‘Rethinking populism: Politics, mediatisation and political style’, *Political studies*, vol. 62, no. 2, pp. 381–397.
- Mouffe, C 2018, *For a Left Populism*, Verso, London.
- Ngwane, T 2003, ‘Sparks in the Township’, *New Left Review*, vol. 22.
- Nyenhuis, R 2020, ‘The political struggle for “the people”: populist discourse in the 2019 South African elections’, *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, vol. 58, no. 4, pp. 409–432.
- Oliphant, N 2016, ‘EFF Rebels Form New Party’, *TimesLIVE*, November 7, <https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2016-11-07-eff-rebels-...1>. Accessed 12 December 2016.
- Paret, M 2016, ‘Local government elections 2016: Some preliminary findings from an exit poll of voters’, *Centre for Social Change*, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg.
- People’s Assembly 2021, ‘Youth in Parliament 2021’, People’s Assembly, June 21, <https://www.pa.org.za/blog/youth-parliament-2021>.
- Pettitt, R 2020, *Recruiting and Retaining Party Activists*, Palgrave Pivot, Cham.
- Poletta, F & Jasper, J 2001, ‘Collective Identity and Social Movements’, *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 27, pp. 283–305.
- Resnick, D 2014, *Urban poverty and party populism in African democracies*, Cambridge University Press, New York, NY.
- Robinson, J 2014, ‘The Economic Freedom Fighters: Birth of a Giant?’, In C. Schulz-Herzenberg & R. Southall (eds), *Election 2014 South Africa*, Jacana Media, Auckland Park.
- Scarrow, S 2015, *Beyond Party Members: Changing Approaches to Partisan Mobilization*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Shivambu, F 2014, *The Coming Revolution: Julius Malema and the Fight for Economic Freedom*, Jacana Media, Auckland Park.
- Sinwell, L 2015, ‘Social Movements, Mobilisation and Political Parties: A Case Study of the Landless People’s Movement South Africa’, In C Benit-Ghaffou (ed,) *Unpacking Community Participation*, HSRC Press, Cape Town.
- Sinwell, L & Mbatha, S 2016, *Spirit of Marikana*, Jacana Media, Auckland Park.
- Sinwell, L 2023, *The Participation Paradox: Between Bottom-Up and Top-Down Development in South Africa*, McGill-Queens University Press, Montreal.
- Ware, A 1999, ‘Activist-Leader Relations and the Structure of Political Parties: ‘Exchange’ Models and Vote- Seeking Behaviour in Parties’, *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 22, pp. 71–92.

- 
- Weber, R 2020, 'Why do Young People Join Parties? The Influence of Individual Resources on Motivation', *Party Politics*, vol. 26, no.4, pp. 496-509.
- Whiteley, P 2011, 'Is the Party Over? The Decline of Party Activism and Membership Across the Democratic World', *Party Politics*, vol. 17, no.1, pp. 21-44.

# DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT AND UNDERDEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

## *A Qualitative Study of the 2023 Presidential Elections*

**Victor Jatula**

Victor Jatula is a lecturer in press and politics at Brunel University, London

### ABSTRACT

*Discontentment with democracy in West Africa centres on abuse of power and political corruption. In Nigeria, dissatisfaction lies not just with these but also with insecurity, economic recession and the electoral process – a system fraught with complications, controversies and contradictions. Using the political economy of elections as its theoretical framework together with mixed research methods, this paper interrogates the relationship between Nigeria’s democratic culture and the 2023 presidential elections. Here I present a politicised electoral management institution, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). Its performance is shaped, not by legislative instruments and constitutional guidelines, but by a dysfunctional democratic culture that reflects the extent to which ethnicised politics, class, institutionalised loyalty and money politics determine election results and Nigeria’s version of democracy. Although fragile and prebendal, democracy continues to consolidate amidst delayed development. The paper recommends increased media advocacy for reform.*

**Keywords:** democratic culture, Nigeria, elections, money politics, consolidation

### INTRODUCTION

On 25 February 2023, Nigeria’s electoral management body, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), conducted the seventh presidential poll since democratisation in 1999. Although 18 presidential candidates, including a female aspirant, contested the election in the end it was a three horse race – the first of its kind in Nigeria’s Fourth Republic. The leading contenders were Bola Tinubu (All Progressive Congress), Peter Obi (Labour Party) and Atiku Abubakar (Peoples’ Democratic Party). As with previous presidential elections, the stake were high – insecurity, especially threats posed by Boko Haram and



bandits, needed to be tackled. Economic underperformance evidenced by high unemployment (33% overall and 42.5% among young adults), grinding poverty, skyrocketing inflation of 35% at the time, fuel shortages and naira scarcity were also problematic (Bilquin & Delivorias 2023). More than ever, Nigerians expected a transparent election whose outcome would reflect the will of over 90 million registered voters. Within West Africa, a free and fair election in Nigeria could provide a workable template for struggling democracies on the brink, or inspire Guinea, Mali, and Burkina Faso to re-democratise (Tayo 2023).

Bola Ahmed Tinubu (APC) was declared president-elect on 1 March by INEC, with just under 9 million of the total 24 million votes – the lowest since the end of military rule in 1999. Nigeria's two main opposition parties, the PDP and LP, described the election as fraudulent, marred by vote buying, systemic irregularities and technology failures, and called on INEC to overturn the results. Aggrieved parties not only expressed their disappointment with the electoral system but also sought redress at the Supreme Court. Local and international observers also raised grave concerns about the organisation, conduct and outcome of the presidential polls. The European Union Election Observation Mission in Nigeria (EU-EOM Report 2023) flagged several instances of abuse of power and privilege, the use of incumbency to influence voting outcome, and outright result manipulation. For example, the report questioned the independence of the Electoral Commission whose leadership included INEC's chairman as well as key resident electoral commissioners at federal and state levels who were handpicked by the outgoing APC president Mohammed Buhari. 'The election exposed enduring systemic weaknesses and therefore signals a need for further legal and operational reforms to enhance transparency, inclusiveness, and accountability' (EU-EOM 2023). Itodo (2023) questioned why INEC was unable to publish a comprehensive voter's register prior to and during the 2023 general elections.

Other reports such as the Centre for Democracy and Development Report by Jinadu (2023) and the Yiaga Africa Report (YAR 2023) highlighted a multitude of issues that include, but are not limited to, legal, institutional, financial and operational irregularities by INEC. For instance, lengthy dispute handling times by the commission increased uncertainty between parties as the elections drew near; special courts to deal expediently with electoral cases were not empowered to function smoothly and on time, leading to instances in which pre-election disputes spilled into the election period; INEC failed to publish publicly-available PVC data prior to election (CDD, 2023). More worrisome were issues associated with the failure of the newly introduced BVAS and iREV technologies to transmit voting results immediately after the presidential election. INEC also failed to issue consolidated official version of the laws, particularly the 2022 Electoral Act guiding its operations. INEC's Regulations and Guidelines for Political Parties were issued

in late 2022, barely four months ahead of elections. Additionally, the *Yiaga Africa Report 2023* and NDI/IRI 2023 highlighted the general lack of timely and key information, which is inconsistent with international standards on transparency.

INEC's underperformance during the 2023 presidential election was both unexpected and problematic. The body had guaranteed a free and fair election by reason of funds at its disposal (305 Billion Naira), two-decade long polling experience, new technologies (iREV and BVAS) and the 2022 Electoral Act that strengthened its operational infrastructure (Muazu 2022). However, INEC's conduct of the 2023 presidential elections reflected a long history of inconsistent, contentious, and below-average elections in 2003, 2007 and 2011 that were adjudged to have fallen short of acceptable international standards in a process was not transparent and credible (EU-EOM 2007). Elections in 2015 were less controversial, making it the first time an incumbent president lost an election (Nwagwu et al. 2022; Verjee et al. 2019; Ogbeidi 2010; Odusote 2014; EU-EOM 2011).

This paper interrogates the link between Nigeria's elections and its democratic culture in order to unpack their symbiotic relationship and deconstruct their consequences for the country's democratic future. My focus on presidential elections is informed by its stake and volatility. This is in part due to Nigeria's ethno-political and socioeconomic cleavages. In Africa, presidents wield enormous political power that shapes resource allocation, influences ethno-religious contestation for power, and determines the performance of state institutions. Importantly, therefore, this study examines the nature, dynamics and political undertones of the 2023 presidential election to determine its connections with Nigeria's democratic culture.

While there is an abundance of local and international election monitoring reports as well as scholarly literature, much of it is focused on INEC's institutional shortcomings (EU-EOM 2023), INEC's strategic plan (INEC 2022), INEC's key issues in election 2023 (Walker 2023), mitigating the risk of violence (Africa Report 2023), legitimacy (Fasakin 2023) and election logistics (CDD 2023). However, this contribution pays particular attention to democratic culture, elite capture and money politics, and their implications for democratic consolidation or otherwise. The paper contextualises the immediate post-independence era in Africa that witnessed significant violence during elections which often escalated to war in some nations. Even when democracy was reintroduced in the 1990s after long periods of military rule, Adejumbi warned that an uneasy future awaits competitive elections in Africa, indicating that democracy on the continent is bedevilled by a 'gradual but dangerous reinstitutionalisation of autocratic and authoritarian regimes clad in democratic garb who circumvent elections, distort the electoral process and manipulate the voting public' (Adejumbi 2000, p. 1). Are his warnings still useful today?

## NIGERIA'S INDEPENDENT NATIONAL ELECTORAL COMMISSION (INEC)

Free and fair national elections are rare in Nigeria. Although elections were first introduced over 100 years ago through the 1922 Clifford Constitution which allowed four elective seats into the Lagos Legislative Council, recent elections are still controversial and problematic. The first general election was conducted in 1959 by the Electoral Commission of Nigeria (ECN) to replace the outgoing colonial government. Unlike the former which was restricted to British or Nigerian men aged 21 and over who lived in Lagos and/or Calabar municipality and earned at least 100 pounds per annum, the latter included all adults over 21 (Osiki 2010). Women in Northern Nigeria were disenfranchised. Ethnic and sectional politics also marred that election and sowed seeds of discord that in part led to the Nigerian/Biafra Civil War (1967-70). Post-independent elections in 1979, 1983 and 1993 were all controversial. For example in 1979, Shewu Sagari's victory sparked nation-wide protest in the South, due to widespread claims of rigging, fraud and corruption in the North. In 1983 and 1993, military coups annulled the process and invalidated both elections (Oyeleye 1981).

Democratisation in 1999 flagged off Nigeria's Fourth Republic and symbolised a new beginning after three-and-a-half decades of intermittent military rule. A new constitution instituted balanced relations between the different branches of power as the rule of law, judicial reforms, federalism and minority protection became cemented in law. Importantly, a new electoral management body – the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) – was set up to organise all elections (Muazu 2022). It replaced the National Electoral Commission of Nigeria (NECON) set up in 1995 after 1993's aborted elections. INEC was established in accordance with Section 153(f) of the 1999 Constitution to 'organise, undertake and supervise all elections, register and monitor political parties, audit their funds, monitor political campaigns and provide rules and regulations...' (FGN 2010). These functions are underpinned by a vision to 'be one of the best Election Management Bodies (EMB) in the world that meets the aspirations of the Nigerian people' (ibid.).

However, multiple studies have indicated that from 1999 to date, INEC's ability to organise free and fair presidential elections has been debateable. The body has been at the centre of electoral controversies, disputes and voting irregularities. The 1999 presidential election between Olusegun Obasanjo (Peoples' Democratic Party) and Olu Falae (Alliance for Democracy) ended in the Court of Appeal when the former was declared winner. According to Ogbeidi (2010), both local and international observers reported large-scale irregularities amounting to 40% in 2003, and violence, poor planning and INEC's mismanagement of the

process marred that year's presidential voting (Aluko 2008). INEC again missed an important opportunity to conduct free and fair elections.

The 2007 presidential election was the most poorly organised and massively rigged exercise since democratisation, according to the Crisis Group Africa Report (2007) which indicated that INEC practically abdicated its responsibilities as an impartial umpire, was ineffective and non-transparent in its operations and acted as an accessory to active rigging, result falsification and electoral malpractice. Security officers deployed to curb violence either turned a blind eye to, and in some cases helped in the brazen falsification of results (CGA Report 2007).

The Commonwealth Observer Mission (2019) stated that 'Overall, in organisational terms, these elections fell short of the standards Nigeria had achieved in 2003 and certainly well below those to which Nigeria is committed'. The European Union Election Observation Mission (EUEOM 2007) reported that: 'The 2007 State and Federal elections have fallen far short of basic international and regional standards for democratic elections'. INEC was alert to the necessity of getting it right in 2011 but rather than consolidate democracy and facilitate development, the 2011 presidential election was a major national crisis after which violence erupted in the North (Husaini 2023). Overall, elections in 2015 and 2019 failed to ensure trust in INEC, or guarantee the public that elections were conducted transparently and progressively (Kohnert 2023).

This study links the 2023 presidential election to broader dysfunction within the Nigerian political system. It argues that INEC underperformance during the 2023 elections is not just a reflection of deeper decays within other democratic institutions but is also a mirror of Nigeria's dysfunctional political culture.

## METHODOLOGY

To interrogate the link between 2023's presidential election and Nigeria's democratic culture, qualitative research methodology was used to elicit comments and responses from randomly selected participants (Devereux 2007). First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 25 participants in Lagos in July 2023. Lagos is Nigeria's former capital, the most cosmopolitan state in Nigeria and the nation's commercial nerve centre. The city's rich multi-ethnic, multilingual and multi-cultural diversity embodies a range of Nigerians from all works of life. Although it ceased to be Nigeria's capital state in 1991, it still wields enormous political and economic clout. Lagos has the highest concentration of banks, tertiary institutions and on- and offline news media establishments. It is also the second-most populated state in Nigeria, after Kano.

For the purposes of this study 25 participants were selected randomly across Lagos Mainland and Lagos Island to represent the major geographical divide in

the state. Of these, 14 participants identified as men while the remaining 11 were women. The socio-economic background of participants also varied to include five business owners, seven civil servants, three graduate students at the University of Lagos, five reporters, two unemployed graduates and three grassroots politicians. Their ethnicity was also broadly spread, with seven Yorubas, five Ibos, three Hausa/Fulani, three Edos, two Middle Belters, three from Calabar and two from Abuja. Thematic analysis was used to filter and unpack gathered data.

Secondly, focused group discussions (FGD) were used as an additional research method to gather qualitative data. In August 2023, three FDGs, each comprising six participants, was conducted in Lagos. Of these FGD1 had six news reporters, FGD2 had six regional politicians, and FGD3 had Youth Corp members, most of whom served as polling station personnel during elections. Snowballing technique was used to assemble participants. Familiarity among them allowed for the free exchange of ideas and comments (Lunt & Livingstone 1996). News content such as polling-day irregularities, opposition party claims, security lapses prior to, during and after voting, as well as issues surrounding electronic transmission of results, was used during News Game to engage participants. News Game facilitated rich discussion during FGD (Kitzinger 2000).

Critical discourse analysis provided the analytical framework used to make sense of data. It enable comments to be contextualised in their historical, political and social settings in order to gain a proper understanding of how perspectives function (Van Dijk 2015). Data was subjected to interdisciplinary and intersectional analysis to interrogate what happened during the 2023 presidential election, why it happened and what consequence this had for democracy. All ethical procedures were adhered to. The study's purpose was communicated to participants prior to, and their consent was obtained before interviews and focused group discussions commenced. For fear of reprisals, all participants agreed to take part on condition of anonymity and confidentiality.

In sum, this section unpacked the methodological framework for this study. It adopted qualitative research tradition, focusing on semi-structured interviews with 25 candidates in Lagos but from diverse backgrounds, different genders and ethnic origins. It aligned best-practice thematic analysis as it observed all standard ethical procedures.

## FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This section situates the 2023 presidential election and INEC's role within the context of Nigeria's evolving democratic culture. It examines the failure of other democratic institutions, especially law enforcement. It also argues that while religion and ethnicity may have played decisive roles in previous dispensations,

in its current form, Nigeria's dysfunctional democratic culture shaped by money politics, the power of incumbency, elite-controlled political parties, and the use of state machinery for elite domination indicate the extent to which elections and democracy in Nigeria intrinsically reflect the Marxist conceptualisation of class, politics and underdevelopment.

### NIGERIA'S POLITICAL CULTURE

This study found that Nigeria's democracy is not based on a level playing field. Opportunities are not equal, party nomination is opaque, access to resources is uneven and there are no winners in the true sense of competitive elections. No one wins but somebody emerges as president after every general election. Six decades after independence, Nigeria's democratic culture remains topsy-turvy, regressive and dysfunctional. Steady democratic progress remains elusive, partial and fragile.

This dysfunction is a colonial legacy that became cemented during extended spells of military rule. Both periods had negative consequences for the concept of political leadership, inclusive politics, the social contract and decentralised decision-making that underpins democracy. Colonialism may have denied Nigerians adequate space and time to imbibe, cultivate and practice self-rule; but at independence in 1960 the new inheritors of state power were preoccupied with tribal politics laced with mutual suspicion and ethnic distrust, rather than laying the foundation for a new Nigeria based on equality, transparency and respect for the democratic process. Military coups, the first in 1966 and several more thereafter, restricted civil liberties, banned elections and centralised absolute power in their leadership. For more than three decades (from the 1970s to the 1990s), a tribunal replaced civil courts, coups replaced elections as military rulers exercised absolute power through decrees. A brief spell of civil rule between 1979 and 1983 was also cut short by more military coups. By 1999, when the military abdicated power, command-style laws and authoritarian fiat endured.

In essence, a significant deficit in the culture of tolerance, civility, competitive elections, fair trial and media freedom manifested in multiple forms after democratisation in 1999. The emergent ruling class were not interested in living for politics but in living from it. The mass media were either state-owned (subservient to the incumbent government) or privately-owned (controlled by advertising revenue and ownership structures). The emergent political parties were in the firm grip of former military rulers. And civil society groups were just regrouping after decades of deliberate witch-hunts by successive military regimes.

Politics became the path to personal wealth and influence, and elections were thus seen as a way to control the people and not as a means for the people to control politics. For politicians, multiparty elections are must-wins by any means possible

including rigging, voter suppression, organised chaos and violence because it is through politics that unchecked wealth is accumulated. While it is in the nature of the political class across the world to win every election, in the Nigerian case very few play by the rules, where there are rules. According to one participant, 'the only rule is to make plenty of money through hook and crook and use that ill-gotten wealth to win the next election through every conceivable means'.

### *Ethnic, Religious and Regional Rhetoric*

One such method is the use of ethnic, religious and regional rhetoric as a dividing factor for political gains. Ethnic tensions that manifested prior to, during and after the February 2023 presidential election were re-manufactured and used by the three leading candidates, Bola Tinubu (Yoruba), Atiku Abubakar (Hausa/Fulani) and Peter Obi (Ibo) in the run-up to the 2023 election. Rather than base their campaign on ideology, action plans and issues, each candidate resorted to and used their ethnicity as a means to win votes. Ethnic tensions, addressed in the 1946 Richards Constitution, were part of a larger regional crisis that the 1914 Amalgamation of Northern and Southern Protectorates attempted to resolve. Ethnic suspicions and mistrust among the major regions after independence led to the creation of the Mid-Western Region in 1963. These tensions subsequently increased and developed into Nigeria's civil war from 1967 to 1970. Further decentralisation in 1967 led to the creation of 12 states, with a further 19 in 1976, 21 in 1987, 30 in 1991 and 36 in 1996. However, the ethno/religious politics of identity has remained a delicate subject in modern Nigeria and politicians often use it to stir controversies and whip up tribal sentiments. In the 2023 presidential election, ethnicity was however not that important.

### *Money*

Money politics played a large role in shaping the 2023 presidential elections. Politics across the world is impossible without money. At federal, state and local government level, running for office is impossible without plenty of personal wealth. Financial resources serve two purposes, one, for visible projects such as political advertisements, posters, campaign logistics and mobility. Second, it is 'used to grease the campaign machinery as it exchanges hands' noted a participant. The latter purpose also has two parts: the first is logistics, as money is used to pay party representatives in polling units, wards and in local council stations within each jurisdiction.

Party agents are paid, not by the political party but by each politician, to engage in grassroots campaigns and monitor political developments of interest

to the paying candidates. According to one participant, 'Agents that oversee units and wards are also paid. In the same breath, INEC officials, police officers, polling station staff, area boys (thugs) are bribed! Each politician is essentially paying for the whole machinery to work on their behalf.' And more often than not, it is a race for the highest payer. In addition, more money is spent to buy influence, to persuade voters and 'sort out' officials. This comment and many more that validate it suggests that elections are won not on campaign rhetoric or ideological leanings (while these are important in themselves) but through plenty of money exchanging hands: aspiring politicians to party agents, community leaders, INEC officials, the police and non-state actors. Money therefore determines to a significant extent who the public votes for.

These financial arrangements are put in place by every candidate keen on winning. In the West, politicians are able to raise campaign funds from public and corporate bodies. In Nigeria, it is the opposite; politicians give money to key officials to get attention. As one participant stated, 'the sad reality is that politicians "invest" during elections and reap the rewards in office'. Politicians within the same party may pool resources to form an alliance or go it alone. Either way, money enables a system through which the rich and powerful colonise the political space for their reproduction. Without adequate, personal financial resources, it is practically impossible to run for office. In spite of the 2022 Electoral Act that spelt out limits of campaign finance, findings indicate that the 2023 presidential election was marred by vote buying, widespread bribery and INEC's inability to monitor party finance. In the same breath, the Act enabled big parties with huge resources to dominate the political scene but made small and emerging parties with minimal resources less able to compete at national level.

### *Incumbency*

The power of incumbency is another determiner of political culture, and its influence in the 2023 presidential election was no less significant. The government of President Muhammadu Buhari (2015-2022) significantly shaped the outcome of the 2023 presidential election in favour of his party, APC. He did so through access to enormous financial resources with which they could oil the machinery of politics. The former president, along with his party members in the National Assembly (Nigeria's parliament), also disrupted the political landscape with legislation such as the 2022 Electoral Act that capped campaign spending for the presidency at 5 billion naira (8 million USD), an amount beyond the reach of new political parties.

Other methods included unparalleled media coverage online and on private and state-owned media companies (unmatched by other parties), and the new naira policy that had a crippling effect on transportation and logistics during elections.



Elections, being a one-day event, served the interest of incumbent politicians who were able to provide necessary and adequate funds to oil the election machinery and control the state apparatus. According to another participant, 'In some states however the incumbent was not ready to "play politics – use money to get things done" and lost the election'. During the 2023 election, whoever was able to throw money at the electorate often won. Politicians and other stakeholders are aware of the one-day nature of event and are pragmatic about winning the polls to control state resources for four years.

Distinct from previous elections, the 2023 presidential polls were unique as a three-horse race. Peter Obi's Labour Party, unlike PDP and APC parties, did not spend as much money during its election campaign because the Nigerian youth supported his candidacy. People preferred him to Tinubu and Atiku, not because Obi is not part of the political class but because he was perceived to have more integrity, was more vocal about corruption and more sympathetic to the plight of young Nigerians (Fasakin 2023). He represented something that people yearned for (change) and wanted (a new Nigeria). A symbiotic relationship between him and the youth developed that gave him grassroots support and national appeal online.

### *State Machinery*

State machinery is the fourth determiner. This includes state security apparatus like the Nigerian Police Force, INEC officials, polling station personnel, Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), Independent Corrupt Practices and other related Offences Commission (ICPC), State Secret Service (SSS), Road Safety, the justice system, state-owned and private mass media stations, including social media handles. Findings indicate that the 2023 election was not significantly shaped by ideology or religion (though they played a part) but by money and whoever had enough of it to manipulate the machinery of the state. According to a participant:

with cash, APC and PDP bent the system to Tinubu and Atiku's favour. It is no coincidence that the presidential polls result in many polling stations across the nation, especially in Lagos, was not uploaded to the national result portal as promised by INEC. Those that were uploaded were stations where Tinubu or Atiku won.

The same participant added, 'It is also no coincidence that police officers were complacent and even looked away when thugs of APC disrupted proceedings at polling stations in which they perceived that PDP or Labour Party was perceived to be in the lead'.

An appendage of the state machinery are non-state actors – thugs, community leaders and political influencers such as Asari Dokunbo, founder of the defunct Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force, and Musiliu Akinsanya popularly known as MC Oluomo, head of the Lagos state branch of the National Union of Road Transport Workers – who used whatever means, often illegal, to win elections. The mass media, print and broadcast, were co-opted and also functioned as part of the machinery through advertising, ownership or political alliance. According to a participant, 'The machinery of the state – police, INEC... meant to ensure a level playing field in the interest of public progress has been made morally and politically corrupt. They are politicised!'

Political parties also exert a heavy influence on the system. All parties have laws and manifestos that are meant to guide their affairs. Unlike in Europe and the US where conservatives and liberals or democrats and republicans are radically and ideologically different, in Nigeria, most parties do not have an ideological structure or strong philosophy. On paper, the party structure is logical and transparent but in practice, this is not the case. The major players in each party are politicians with financial clout (former vice presidents, ex-governors, old ministers); corporate businessmen and former military officers; Godfathers (in Nigerian parlance) who circumvent party rules and abide by no rule or ideology. For example, PDP party rules stipulate 'that a member must be card carrying for three years before they can seek for nomination but when a few politicians with money join a party, they are exempted and allowed to run for office.' Their mission is to win at all costs. This explains why an average politician in Nigeria will decamp from a losing party to the winning one at the slightest opportunity. An example, according to a participant:

one such politicians is Femi Fani Kayode who in the last decade had gone back and forth from PDP to AD/APC and back almost every four years. Even Peter Obi left PDP for LP to pursue his political ambition. Unhappy people in LP will move to another party.

While it is not a crime for politicians to cross the carpet, it is symptomatic of politics without principles. Parties are therefore fragmented and weak; but as fragmented and weak as they are, their candidates' form the pool from which the public elects government officials.

Again we see money and power as the basis of party politics, as parties with financial resources dominate the political landscape. The policy of most parties is to attract or retain as many well-resourced members as possible in order to raise substantial resources to compete on the national stage. The problem with such a system is that these investors are in politics to maximise their investment. Their

primary concern is not public service or procedural elections but to gain access to state power through politics.

The electorate are the final determiner but they have the least influence. Although democracy, according to Abraham Lincoln, consists of government of the people, for the people and by the people, one participant commented:

during the 2023 presidential election, popular vote was not that important. Not because Nigeria has an Electoral College like they do in the United States but because votes don't count that much as yet. The system is rigged.

Another participant noted:

The Nigerian Constitution says that the winner must win in 2/3 of the nation, what transpired in 2023 presidential election is that the person who emerged as winner did not get majority vote. He was not the preferred candidate. Support for Peter Obi was overwhelming across the nation, especially in the South. Obi commanded the respect and support of people from all walks of life, particularly young Nigeria but votes were suppressed, voters were intimidated, results were manipulated and results were forged!

That said, the electorate still have a part to play in elections and Nigerian politics but their influence is not yet as important. Nigeria's democracy is yet to reach a stage where people decide who is elected. While elections have become periodic and normalised, the context in which they are conducted is heavily shaped by money politics and organised chaos. This echoes findings by Kew & Kwaja (2018). In the future, Nigeria's democracy may reach that point but it is not there yet. The general consensus by participants is that subsequent elections will be better than the 2023 elections. The reality of this optimism remains doubtful in the short run.

#### THE POWER ELITE AND NIGERIA'S DEMOCRATIC CULTURE

Nigeria's ruling class belongs to a variety of political parties but they have no allegiance to any one particular party. For them, political parties, elections and democracy are a means to an end (political power) and not ends in themselves. The ultimate end is to consolidate their economic and political interest through access to the nation's commonwealth. They comply with few rules. The only rule they fully obey is self-made, a victory-at-all-cost rule geared towards winning, if possible, all the time. Nigeria's ruling class is neither interested in developing

Nigeria nor keen to follow due process. Their main interest is in exploiting as much of state resources as is possible for primitive wealth accumulation.

Greed is the defining character of the ruling class everywhere; but in Nigeria, they have captured key democratic institutions that could have served as checks on concentrated political power. Nigeria's elite class has captured the system in its totality and continues to consolidate that capture. They control the machinery of the state through incumbency and the control of major political parties; they have the economic and political power to play money politics and control the mass media to the extent that information available to the public is within the framework of what they allow. It is impossible therefore to separate the political class from the media because, directly or otherwise, they own most legacy media organisations.

The same is true of the police force. According to a participant:

The Nigerian Police are compromised. Promotion within the force is based on connection, loyalty and allegiance. What this means is that the top hierarchy of the police are cheerleaders for politicians, especially those in government. You can hardly find a Commissioner of Police who does not have a godfather.

Although activism on social media platforms poses a threat to elite dominance, this power elite across Africa in general and Nigeria in particular is the same. They are driven principally by greed, and to perpetuate this greed, they have created a system in which the people's ability to access comprehensive information, express themselves, and demand transparency and accountability, is bogged down and weak.

In light of the above, participants disagreed with claims that a low voter turnout is a consequence of voter apathy. Assertions that suggest voters failed to turn out due to frustration with democracy is too simplistic. Four key factors provide a more cogent and logical explanation. Firstly, significant disruption fuelled by petrol and naira scarcity in the run-up to the elections was due not only to policy flaws but also impacted negatively on transportation, logistics, and the free movement of voters and voting materials across Nigeria.

Secondly, with high hopes in the 2023 elections, civil society engagement, especially among youths in the South, increased exponentially. In total, 93 500 000 registered to vote, an increase of 9.5 million from 2019. Of newly registered voters 77% were youths between the age of 18 and 34. Males made up 53% overall while women constituted 48%. Of the 94 million registered voters, only 87 million collected their permanent voters card (PVC) due to INEC's inept logistics and human errors. On top of these two factors, chronic economic hardship served as

a push factor for Nigerians to vote. Findings indicated that many voters spent much of the day waiting for between 12 and 15 hours to vote. Some eventually did, but many more returned home frustrated.

Third, technical glitches in electronically transmitting election results from polling stations to the control centre must have accounted for missing figures and incomplete data. According to a participant, 'electronic transmission of results failed during presidential election but worked when parliamentary results of elections held on the same day.'

Fourth, insecurity, ballot box snatching, attacks on opposition voters, the failure of the police force (participants claimed they stood idly by as chaos ensued) and vote suppression all reflect an alternative reality behind the numbers. According to a participant:

A Nigerian newspaper puts deaths from the 2023 elections at 39 while the European Union Election Observer Mission claimed 21. Either way, people came out to vote during this election. Across my area, particularly in my polling unit, people turned up in high numbers. Turnout this year was way more than in 2015 and 2019 but did their vote count?

Participants also collectively challenged claims that INEC's underperformance during the 2023 presidential poll was entirely institutional, logistics or technology related. Evidence of delayed poll openings, failure to upload results and result falsification in some states coupled with INEC's failure to act transparently indicated gross incompetence on the part of INEC; but most participants asserted that the APC-led ruling party used significant political power, especially money and the power of incumbency, to emerge as winner. Through state resources, APC dominated all state and non-state media establishments both through executive fiat (state) and paid advertisement (see EU final report); they controlled state security apparatuses who were complacent when thugs, party-sponsored thugs, rampaged opposition strongholds, stole election boxes and disrupted voting in several polling stations. Neither the police nor APC politicians condemned these thugs. The APC also bought votes both remotely and directly at polling stations. They not only made a mockery of the financial caps imposed by the Electoral Act 2022 but demonstrated that this rule applies to everyone other than the APC. If these assertions are true, they corroborate other claims that suggest that the 2023 presidential election results were doctored and manufactured.

Democracy cannot thrive in Nigeria or elsewhere on the continent if civil society in general and the political class in particular ignore, are unaware of or

fail to abide by the core principle of democracy – rules and guidelines. When democracy is seen as an end in itself (a way to monopolise power to the exclusion of other groups in society) or as a set of institutions, but negates the rule of law, transparency, the separation of power and the institutions that facilitate them, democracy will benefit only a section of society. This will lead to public discontent and trigger its self-destruction. Military coups in Burkina Faso (2020), Mali (2020), Chad (2021), Guinea (2021), Sudan (2021) and Niger (2023) indicate the extent of democracy's vulnerability and volatility in West Africa. As things stand, '... political leaders in Nigeria embrace democracy and enjoy the legitimacy it confers without subjecting it to the demands of democratic practice' (Idada & Omoregie 2017, p.7).

Egharrvba (2018) contends that democracy in its functional form has yet to thrive in Nigeria due to the nature of Nigeria's rentier state, in which the elite struggle for state power. Democracy is thus not a means for public good but a struggle to control the means of production. He argues further that poverty is now weaponised to the extent that the system is collapsing internally and externally. Social morality is sinking so fast that it is now a race to the bottom. According to one participant:

At the top, Nigeria's system is so corrupt that the important thing to national leaders is primitive wealth accumulation through any means possible- fraud, certificate forgery, election rigging... and as the public witness this, they are directly and indirectly told that probity, uprightness and values are useless. The system is shaping the public to the extent that rules don't matter anymore.

According to another participant,

In Nigeria today, where and how you make money are not the questions, the important thing is to make money anyhow. The common saying is 'don't investigate my wealth today because you did not investigate my poverty yesterday'.

Today, the average Nigerian is desperate for money to the extent that kidnapping is rife, as are blood rituals, online love scams, credit card fraud, drug trafficking, human sacrifice, and the manufacture of fake drugs. Very few are interested in following due process. Very few care about the consequences to the public. It is a race to the bottom. The alternative is to relocate abroad.

## DEMOCRACY AND CONSOLIDATION

The 2023 presidential election was a missed opportunity to improve on previous elections. The 2022 Electoral Act, though imperfect, is an improvement. The Act is positive but the major actors are not. Mechanisms within the system to regulate itself are still weak yet most participants are optimistic that democracy as a system will work.

A few however assert that liberal democracy is too expensive, too easily influenced by the ruling class and not effective. They lean towards Marxist interpretations of elections and its symbiotic link with class and power. They contend that democracy is an ideology, a system that perpetuates and reproduces the elite class in power. It is designed to ensure the rule of the most powerful under the guise of popular consent. It is a political apparatus designed to ensure the rule of special interest. Elections, according to them, are inherent contradictions in that they appear to suggest political equality between the proletariat and bourgeoisie but in reality this is not the case. Elections are part of the superstructure built on the state's class relations (economic structure) through which power changes hands between or among competing political parties controlled by the dominating class. Elections are seemingly run with an assumption that the public exercise their civil and political rights when voting; but in practice, the dominated class have little control over political parties, are presented with only a narrow choice of candidates at election time and in many cases are only presented with limited information available in mainstream mass media owned and controlled by the dominating class (Lodge 2016, p. 12).

Suggested alternatives to Western democracy are varied and imaginative. To catch up with the West, Nigerians need to address obstacles, especially political deficits that hinder democracy from producing dividends. In nations with multiple ethnic groups in which politics is ethnicised and ethnicity is politicised, a rotational presidency based on community congress on one hand and on clear-cut ground rules on the other is an alternative (Husaini 2023, p. 10). At least, this may eliminate the fear of domination or cry of exclusion from groups in the margin. The first option is the proportional electoral allocation process in which elective public offices are distributed based on the number of votes received by each candidate.

Another option is regionalisation or region-centred democracy, a system in which each region, not necessarily states, will have a government, separate and different from the national government. The regional government oversees the development within its geographical jurisdiction. Finally, in the politics of consensus democracy representatives are randomly selected from a pool of eligible candidates without general elections. It is believed that such a system would reduce, if not eliminate, the election-related violence that has come to define and

characterise elections in Nigeria. These ideas are short on detail but they open up conversations to make democracy work better in Nigeria.

### CONCLUSION

From an institutional framework, two decades of democratic rule, occasioned by regular, periodic multiparty elections and evidenced by political stability is a milestone; nonetheless, elections alone are now inadequate and insufficient to address the developmental end for which democracy exists. Democracy is not a machine that runs by itself once the proper principles are inserted. Rather, it is a system driven by people at all levels of society, committed to resolving social, political and economic conflict by dialogue, election and consensus. In theory, a democratic system is government of the few, for the few and by the few; but in practice, it is government of the people, by the people for people-centred and development-driven goals. People are the end to which politics (democracy) is a means. Government, opposition parties, the mass media and civil society are the ultimate guardians of their freedom. All stakeholders within a political context must forge a path to defend their inherent dignity and their inalienable human rights on the basis of equality and justice. People and groups do not derive or depend upon government for their existence, legitimacy or authority.

Governments exist to serve citizens, not subjects. This social contract between citizen and state is fundamental to democracy. Electoral norms in Nigeria do not align with international best practice but are a product of manipulation that encompasses fraud which undermines the process. The power of incumbency is strongly linked to Nigeria's inability to conduct free and fair elections, as is money politics. Nigeria may slide back into political strife, military rule and dictatorship if elections are not revisited, and this will lead Nigeria to a dead end. As indicated by the Brookings Institution, democratic governments across Nigeria must commit to and invest in accountability and transparency in order to create an enabling governance system geared towards improving effectiveness and poverty eradication. Without democratic dividends, social upheavals may well overthrow democracy.

### — REFERENCE —

- Adejumobi, S 2000, 'Elections in Africa: A Fading Shadow of Democracy?', *International Political Science Review*, vol. 20, no. 1.
- Africa Report 2023, *Mitigating Risks of Violence in Nigeria's 2023 Elections*, International Crisis Group, Belgium.



- Aluko, M 2008, *Monitoring Nigeria's Elections: The Carter Formula*. <<http://www.dawodu.com/aluko39.htm>> (accessed 20 September 2023)
- Bilquin, B & Delivorias, A 2023, *Nigeria: Situation Ahead of the 2023 General Election*. European Parliament Research Service EPRS.
- Centre for Democracy and Development 2023, *Understanding the 2023 Nigerian Presidential and National Assembly Elections*, CDD-EAC, Abuja.
- Commonwealth Observer Group 2019, *Nigeria General Elections: A Report*, The Commonwealth, Abuja.
- Devereux, E 2007, *Media Studies: Key Issues and Debates*, Sage Publications, London.
- Egharrvba, ME 2008, *The State and the Problems of Democracy in Nigeria*. Available at: [https://www.academia.edu/28412603/THE\\_STATE\\_AND\\_THE\\_PROBLEMS\\_OF\\_DEMOCRACY\\_IN\\_NIGERIA](https://www.academia.edu/28412603/THE_STATE_AND_THE_PROBLEMS_OF_DEMOCRACY_IN_NIGERIA)
- EU-EOM 2007, Elections fail to meet hopes and expectations of the Nigerian people and fall far short of basic international standards. Available at: [https://www.eods.eu/library/PS%20NIGERIA%2023.04.2007\\_en.pdf](https://www.eods.eu/library/PS%20NIGERIA%2023.04.2007_en.pdf)
- EU-EOM 2007, *Nigeria: Final report of the EU Election Observer Mission*, European Union, Brussels.
- EU-EOM 2011, *European Union Election Observer Mission in Nigeria: Final Report*, European Union, Brussels.
- Fasakin, A 2023, 'Nigeria's 2023 Presidential Elections: A Question of Legitimacy for the Tinubu Administration', *Journal of African Elections*, vol. 22, no. 2.
- Federal Republic of Nigeria Official Gazette 2010, *Federal Electoral Act 2010*, Federal Government Printer, Abuja.
- Hoffmann, L 2023, *Nigeria's Election Result Put Disenfranchisement in the Spotlight*, Chatham House, London.
- Husaini, S 2023, *Nigeria's 2023 Election: Democratic Development and Political Fragmentation*, French Institute of International Relations, Abuja.
- Idada, W & Omoregie, O 2017, *Democracy in Nigeria: Problems, Challenges and Consolidation*. Available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329107737\\_Democracy\\_in\\_Nigeria\\_Problems\\_Challenges\\_and\\_Consolidation](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329107737_Democracy_in_Nigeria_Problems_Challenges_and_Consolidation)
- International Crisis Group 2017, *Nigeria: Failed Elections, Failing State?*, International Crisis Group Africa Report No. 126, 30 May.
- Itodo, S 2023, 'Elements of Voter Suppression and Manipulation have plagued the Elections—Itodo', Arise Television, 26 February. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bL0fTvHBzuc&t=185s> (accessed July 22, 2023).
- Jinadu, A et al. 2023, *Understanding the 2023 Nigerian Presidential and National Assembly Elections*, Centre for Democracy and Development, Abuja.
- Kew, D & Kwaja, C 2018, 'Civil Society in Nigeria', In C Levan and P Ukata (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Nigerian Politics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

- Kitzinger, J 1990, Audience Understandings of AIDS Media Messages: A Discussion of Methods, *Sociology of Health & Illness*, vol. 12, no. 3, pp. 319-3.
- Kohnert, D 2023, *The Aftermath of Nigeria's 2023 Presidential Elections and its Impact on the Sub-region*. MPRA, Hamburg.
- Lodge, T 2016, 'Sliding Back or Moving Forward? A Critical Review of the Current State of Democratic Development in Africa', In K Matlosa, S Ndlovu, R Kasenally, & T Lodge, *Democratic Development in Africa*, EISA, Johannesburg.
- Lunt, P & Livingstone, S 1996, 'Rethinking the Focus Group in Media and Communications Research', *Journal of Communication*, vol. 46, no. 2.
- Muazu, A 2022, *INEC Strategic Plan 2022-2026: Consolidating Free, Fair, Credible and Inclusive Elections*, Independent National Electoral Commission, Abuja.
- Nwagwu, EJ, et al. 2022, 'Vote Buying during 2015 and 2019 General Elections: Manifestation and Implication on Democratic Development in Nigeria', *Cogent Social sciences*, vol. 8, no. 1.
- Oduote, A 2014, 'Nigerian Democracy and Electoral Process since Amalgamation: Lessons from a Turbulent Past', *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, vol. 19, no. 10, pp. 25-37.
- Ogbeidi, M 2010, 'A Culture of Failed Elections: Revisiting Democratic Elections in Nigeria 1953-2003', *Historia Actual Online*.
- Osiki, O 2010, 'Gold, Guns & Goons: The Complexity of Electoral Irregularities in Nigeria 1999-2007', *Information, Society & Justice*, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 151-163.
- Oyeleye, O 1981, *The Nigerian 1979 elections*, Macmillan Nigeria, Lagos.
- Tayo, T 2022, *The Stakes are High as Nigeria Prepares for 2023 Elections*, Africa at London School of Economics, London.
- Van Dijk, T 2015, 'Critical Discourse Analysis', In D Tannen, H Hamilton, & D Schiffrin, (eds), *The Handbook of Critical Discourse Analysis*, Wiley Press, London.
- Verjee, A, Kwaja, C & Onubogu, O 2019, *Nigeria's 2019 Elections: Change, Continuity and the Risk to Peace*, US Institute of Peace, Washington.
- Walker, N 2023, *Nigeria: 2023 President Elections*, House of Commons Library, London.
- Yiaga Africa 2023, *Dashed Hopes? Yiaga Africa Report on Nigeria's 2023 General Election*, Yiaga Africa, Abuja.

# WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN NIGERIA'S 2023 ELECTIONS

## *A Micro-level Analysis*

***Adedeji Victor Adebayo and Molatokunbo A. S. Olutayo***

Adedeji Victor Adebayo is a lecturer in the Department of Peace, Security and Humanitarian Studies, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria

Molatokunbo A. S. Olutayo is an associate professor, IAS Gender Studies Programme, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria

### ABSTRACT

*This study investigates a micro-level dimension of women's participation in Nigeria's electoral politics. It focuses on a particular local government area: Ikere, in Ekiti state in southwestern Nigeria, during the 2023 general election. The paper uses a qualitative approach to analyse the contributions of women towards the successes of their political parties at the polls, although they have not had full opportunity to contest as candidates. Key informant and in-depth interviews were conducted with respondents who were purposively selected from the leadership of political parties, academia, market and religious institutions, as well as interested onlookers. Additionally, campaign and mobilisation processes were observed during the period of this election. The study concluded that the wait for cultural and socio-economic development to turn in favour of women's numerical increase might not offer any realistic hope. However, the adoption of discretionary affirmative action strategies by party leaders could have a reverse effect and also reinforce prejudice.*

**Keywords:** gender, electoral politics, ethnography, political parties, women's representation

### INTRODUCTION

Throughout the course of history, different groups of people have been incorporated into political structures on the basis of criteria such as gender, ethnicity or social status (Hoodfar & Tajali 2011). Women make up approximately half of the world's total population and have also achieved equal citizenship status with men

in many countries. However, in the political context, women lack full inclusion in the basic leadership processes whether at the grassroots, regional or national levels (Eniola 2018; Okoosi-Simbine & Obi 2020). This underrepresentation is worldwide such that, until recently, major political figures in Africa were presumed to be men. Only with the emergence of scholarship on the politics of gender representation toward the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the discourse on women's representation addressed by political scientists (Childs & Lovenduski 2013). This field of research gained prominence within political science and other cognate disciplines, at times appearing to be over-researched. Yet, every election cycle continues to provide new insights for the understanding of women's struggle to attain equality in political representation.

The persistent asymmetry of gender representation continues to constitute a serious impediment to human development in Africa (Montgomery 2017, p. 226). Even though some indicators for measuring gender equality are improving, for example the decrease in the prevalence of early marriage and female genital mutilation across Africa (Farouki et al. 2022, pp. 8, 13-16), there is limited progress on the strategic needs and structural issues at the roots of gender inequality, such as unfair social norms and attitudes and a low level of political representation. In most countries, elective offices and gender parity have not enjoyed a strong relationship (Inter-parliamentary Union 2023; Bauer 2019). While some national governments and international bodies have been proactive in their commitment to improving women's representation through different measures of affirmative actions, discrimination along gender line continues to exist. Nowhere is this example more obvious than in Nigeria where women's inclusion occupies a shrinking political space in almost every election cycle (Nwankwor & Adebayo 2021, pp. 559-560; Independent National Electoral Commission 2023, para. 109).

Nigeria has had over two decades of uninterrupted democratic governance since 1999, yet women in Nigeria still grapple with political marginalisation as their voices are hardly ever heard and they seem to have reached a glass ceiling. Their upward political mobility seems, by all account, to be a difficult task. This insignificant descriptive representation of women has been identified as one critical issue which needs to be focused on in order to reverse the socio-cultural and institutional discrimination against them (Mofoluwawo 2014, p. 169). Attention to this situation has encouraged the Nigerian government to introduce enabling policies for women to participate in electoral politics as active participants rather than as onlookers. For example, in 2006 the government introduced a national gender policy to augment gender deficits, including the political representation of women. Also, the country's national conference held in 2014 articulated a robust recommendation to address structural gender inequalities in areas such

as education, commerce, agriculture and politics (Nigerian National Conference Report 2014).

However, an analysis of the trend of political development still reveals that women continue to have a negligible role in politics. According to Ekundayo and Ama (2014, pp. 74-75), the minimal presence of women in some elective offices does not reflect their numerical strength. It also fails to register any achievement in policy advancements on women's issues (Adebayo 2023, pp. 103-104). Interestingly enough, women continue to participate actively in electoral politics and the activities of political parties, but more as mobilisers, support staff and voters (Olutayo & Adebayo 2017, p. 270).

Alliyu's (2016) contribution to the discourse on women in electoral politics and Osori's (2018) experience which was succinctly captured in her book, *Love does not win Elections*, distinguished patriarchal societal structure as an essential framework for analysing gender inequalities across social strata, including politics or any power-structured relationship. The strength of patriarchy which basically allocates resources disproportionately along gender lines, and in favour of men, has continued to have a great impact on women's political prospects. For this reason, throughout history women have had to struggle to be enfranchised, an evolution of their electoral rights which is reflected in the suffragettes' movement.

This study discusses a micro-level dimension of women's participation in Nigeria's electoral politics both through the lens of women mobilisers and women as a mobilised group. It focuses on a particular Local Government Area (LGA): Ikere LGA in Ekiti state, southwest Nigeria, in the 2023 general election. It offers an analysis of the contributions of women towards the electoral successes of their political parties, while they have never really had full opportunities to contest as candidates. The exception is in a few cases when women were arbitrarily imposed by party leadership structures in an attempt to appear gender-sensitive and women-friendly. This affirmative action strategy by party leaders composed almost exclusively of men has been variously criticised as discretionary, ambiguous and sometimes leading to irreconcilable disaffection within the party (key informant interview 2023). Ironically, this attempt at redress has been counterproductive, thereby reinforcing the prejudice it was meant to address.

Ekiti State was created as a federating unit on 1 October 1996 and is the youngest of the six states in the southwest geopolitical zone. The Federal Republic of Nigeria is made up of 36 states (federating units) and a federal capital territory, all of which are grouped into six geopolitical zones (South-West, South-East, South-South, North-Central, North-West and North-East). Geopolitical zones do not constitute formal administrative units; rather, they are clustered for administrative and resource allocation convenience such that no part of the country would feel left out or marginalised. Remarkably, in Ekiti state, the level of women's political

representation has been progressing, especially since the beginning of the last decade. This, to many political observers, is connected to the enterprising attributes of one notable figure, Bisi Adeleye-Fayemi, a feminist activist and twice first lady of the state. Passionate about women's development and political inclusion, her activities in this regard can be traced to her time as the Director of Akina Mama wa Afrika, an international development organisation for African women, among many other feminist engagements (Falola 2021, par 4, 9). According to the result of Nigeria's 2023 general election, Ekiti state now has the highest number of female lawmakers in any state (sub-national) level both in the southwest geopolitical zone and in the country (*Daily Trust* 2023). The table below gives the breakdown of women's representation in all six states in Nigeria's South West geopolitical zone, where women's representation is the highest.

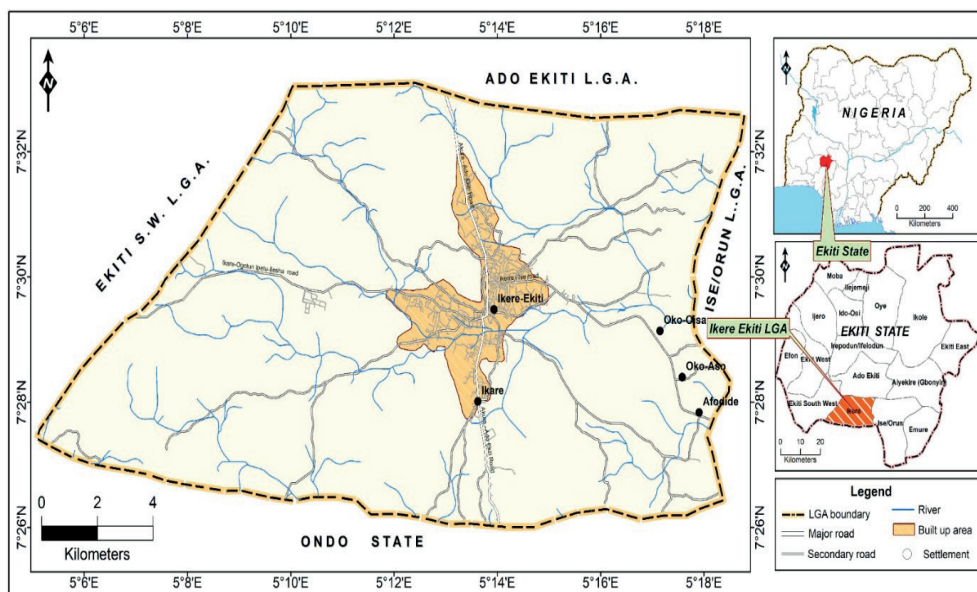
**Table 1: Distribution of women's representation in the HoA in the six states of the southwest geopolitical zone of Nigeria from 1999 to 2023**

State	Number of Seats	Number of Women Elected							State Total
		1999	2003	2007	2011	2015	2019	2023	
Lagos	40	3	2	5	7	4	3	4	28
Ekiti	26	0	1	0	4	2	4	6	17
Ogun	26	0	1	2	2	2	4	2	13
Ondo	26	0	1	1	1	2	1	3	9
Oyo	32	0	0	1	1	2	1	2	7
Osun	26	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	2
<b>Total</b>	176	3	4	7	11	8	11	17	76

Source: Legislative records in the selected HoAs and INEC database

Ikere Local Government Area (LGA) where this study was carried out is one of the 16 LGAs which makes up Ekiti state. Also, as one of the six LGAs in the Ekiti South Senatorial District where women's representation remains highly visible across the three arms and levels of government, the LGA has the highest population after Ekiti South-West LGA (City Population Administrative Division, 2022). In addition, the Ikere LGA occupies a more strategic location in terms of proximity to the state capital, Ado-Ekiti (see the map of study location in Figure 1) where resources and strategies for party activities are mobilised. This LGA has also produced the highest number of deputy governors (four) in the state since the beginning of Nigeria's Fourth Republic in 1999 (Nairaland Forum 2017;

Politicians Data 2018; Modern Ghana 2013; Government of Ekiti State 2024). The third republican governor of the old Ondo state from which Ekiti state was carved out in 1996 was also from this LGA (Agency Report 2020). See Figure 1 below for a map of the study area.



**Figure 1: Map of Ikere Local Government Area, Ekiti State, Nigeria**

Source: ©Adedeji Victor ADEBAYO

This article begins by analysing the role of women as political mobilisers. It then proceeds to discuss women as a specific target of election mobilisation. Finally, it explores the vulnerability of women to material gifting strategies of politicians in a clientelist political configuration such as Nigeria (Omobowale & Olutayo, 2007; Roelofs, 2018; Stockemer & Amaechi, 2023). The study employs a qualitative approach to elicit data that engaged the research objectives. A semi-structured interview guide was developed to allow for flexibility and to adapt to unanticipated responses, which in many instances led to follow-up questions. In all, we conducted 24 interviews. These included seven key informant interviews with the leaders of the major political parties – four from the All Progressives Congress (APC), one from the People’s Democratic Party (PDP), two from the Labour Party (LP), and seventeen in-depth interviews with members of academia,

market women and religious leaders, as well as interested onlookers who were not affiliated to any political party. All of them were purposively selected. In addition, three rounds of observations were conducted.

The first observation was carried out at the local secretariats of the aforementioned leading political parties during the week of the national elections (presidential and national assembly) held on Saturday 25 February 2023. Also, a polling unit in Agbado Oyo area of the LGA was observed from the start of the voting exercise until the ballots were counted and results announced. Another round of observation was repeated for the state (sub-national) election<sup>1</sup> which was conducted on Saturday 18 March at the same location.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Anne Phillips' (1995) theory of the politics of presence was utilised to align this study with an existing body of knowledge. The central tenet of this theory speaks to the essence of ethnic or gender composition of elected legislative bodies. It describes these compositions as a legitimate democratic concern which must never be overlooked. As such, a proportionate representation based on these attributes is essential (Phillips 1995, p. 1). Therefore, in the specific case of gender, this theory suggests that women should represent women's interests because they are in the best position to do so. This argument is premised upon the differences between men and women in their everyday life experiences (Wängnerud 2009; Phillips 1995), owing to the fact that, to some extent, female lawmakers share the experiences of other women.

While there are some arguments which underplay the importance of gender in legislative policymaking, and claim that legislative assemblies influence politicians more than politicians influence them, there are more agreements in research that gender has an important role to play in shaping legislative policymaking. According to Lovenduski and Norris (2003), what varies is the level of impact. As research has demonstrated that female politicians support the interests of women, literature on women's political participation highlights the need for electing more women to positions of power across all branches of government (Wängnerud 2009). Moreover, it is believed that women legislators embrace priorities which deal with issues of women, children, and family; and

---

1 Only the House of Assembly (an autonomous sub-national assembly) election was conducted in Ekiti State in the general elections of 2023. While elections have been held every four years since 1999, gubernatorial elections in some states now fall outside the regular election cycle (Off-Cycle Elections) due to verdicts from the judiciary which has annulled some election results and helped reclaim mandates in specific cases. One of these is Ekiti State's gubernatorial election which was held on 18 June 2022.



that generally, women favour more liberal welfare policy preferences than men. Importantly, expanding women's political representation has been observed to ensure noticeable gains for democratic governance. Such gains include citizen's needs-centred policy development, cooperation across party lines, and more sustainable peace (National Democratic Institute 2012).

The choice of this theory is predicated on the premise of its fundamental suppositions which provide reasons for the numerical presence of women on legislative policy outcomes. An important question which Phillips raises is how men legitimately accommodate the representation of women, especially on specific women's issues (Phillips 1995). This concern has given rise to a measure of reforms in some democracies across the world, as with the gender quotas. These have also been embraced and adopted by a number of African countries including Algeria, Côte d'Ivoire, Eritrea, Kenya, Morocco, Mozambique, Rwanda and Uganda (Dimitrova & Obasanjo 2019, p. 173; Bauer 2019, p. 4). Remarkably, developing countries have outpaced the more developed democracies in the drive for increased women's representation (Bauer & Burnet 2013). For example, Rwanda currently ranks top of the list in its share of women in national parliaments in the world (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2023). This is due largely to the adoption of gender quota legislation (Clayton, Josefsson & Wang 2016, pp. 1-2).

The volume of research examining the dynamics and impact of gender quotas has also increased and indicates that, rather than waiting for cultural and socio-economic development to turn the tide in favour of women's numerical increase, this affirmative action strategy has the potential to increase the number of women in the legislature quite significantly over a short period of time. Also, by acknowledging the importance of numerical presence on legislative outcomes, the theory of the politics of presence establishes a link between descriptive representation (who holds office) and substantive representation (policies initiated and laws passed).

However, this study notes that this affirmative action policy, which is usually meant to counter the effect of discrimination and underrepresentation, could also reinforce prejudice within an under-represented group. This is particularly the case when grievances regarding the political recruitment process as a democratic feature of fairness and impartiality implies, are not taken into account.

The following section demonstrates how women contribute to political parties' successes at the polls, but that they have never really had a full opportunity to contest or negotiate their candidacies except in cases of discretionary imposition by party leaderships.

## WOMEN AS MOBILISERS

Despite various international corrective measures, the underrepresentation of women has remained a global phenomenon. This has continued to have a negative impact on the rights of women and how such rights are respected. With regard to political power dynamics in a democracy, particularities within the context of political parties and an individual country's culture account for the number of women with political representation. According to Hoodfar and Tajali (2011) a country's gender ideology, cultural and social barriers and institutional or structural barriers are the factors that affect women's upward political mobility. Studies have also observed political party leaderships to be composed almost exclusively of men (Adebayo 2023; Aluko 2015; Eniola 2018; Erlich & Beauvais 2023). These men could conveniently dictate who gets what, except in few cases where deliberate efforts have been initiated to ensure gender equality in party executive committees as in the case of Demos (a Romanian political party) (Bogdan 2018). Women have generally had to play by the rules of men both within political parties and at governmental levels in order to survive (Chowdhury 2018).

In Nigeria, women hold only about six per cent of elective positions (Nkereuwem 2023). In this specific political context, cultural and social barriers appear to be enduring. As can be gleaned from the interviews conducted with party leaders, equality between men and women remains inconsistent with the cultural and social practices of the people where men are required to fulfil a traditional role of main financial provider (Kim & Luke 2020). This is an important component of hegemonic masculinity which reinforces men's dominance and the subordination of women. In the words of one of these party leaders (interviewed on 23 February 2023):

There is no equality. You are trying to drive at equality between man, no no... I will not allow, and I won't subscribe to that. Because if you want to preach equality, will equality come to role[s] being played in a family? No matter how rich a woman is, she will still rely on her husband when it comes to the payment of school fees of children and the rest... There is nothing you can do without consideration being given to tradition and culture. If culture is still there in place (sic), I doubt if that will happen.

The perception of this financial role, including that of protection and leadership in the home, has continued to privilege men as the head of the household and, by extension the community, prioritising women's roles essentially as mothers and wives above all other duties (Hoodfar & Tajali 2011).

Moreover, as pointed out by Nkereumen (2023), it is important to understand the attrition rate of women in Nigeria's electoral politics from the intricacies of the pre-election phase where the supply of female candidates is limited, rather than the end of the electoral cycle. An interview with yet another party leader (on 24 February 2023) succinctly captures this from a psychological dimension:

Let me say, in this part of the world, that inferiority complex is still noticeable among women that are still aspiring to political office. And like I used to say, power is not served *a la carte*. You must work for it, you agitate for it, you grab it. But women just believe that, because I am a woman, if I am contesting, they should just leave it for me... Let us even rate it now. How many women are contesting for this House of Assembly election in Ekiti state?

This finding is consistent with Lawless and Fox's (2012) and Kevane's (2014, p. 269) studies which noted that women are more likely to see political environments as being biased against them, and as such, are less likely to present themselves, be nominated, and be elected for political office.

Moreover, in Nigeria, political parties usually make provision for the office of women leaders in party leadership. Their responsibilities are largely concerned with galvanising women's support and guarantee their unwavering loyalty for electoral success (interview with woman leader of one of the political parties in the Ikere LGA, 23 February 2023). In most cases, this is the only area women are found to occupy across the different levels of a typical Nigerian political party leadership. As a result, women constitute an infinitesimal minority whose opinion can have little impact, especially in terms of candidates' selection. However, in preparing for any election, it was observed that women's capacity to mobilise candidates is highly exploited. For example, during our observation of a specific party secretariat on the eve of the national election, several women (and a few men) were seen providing logistics to mobilise party loyalists by distributing consumer goods. On the day of election, some women were also observed to be serving as party agents for their respective political parties.

With respect to candidates' selection, this study reveals that becoming a candidate at the local level requires more than active involvement in party activities in a registration area (ward) or the strength of local popularity. As noted by a former chairman of a major party, such matters are not discussed at local meetings but at stakeholders' meetings. These are usually convened in state capitals, outside the domain of these registration areas which are at grassroots level. These meetings are mostly informal and are sometimes held in hotels during

hours which are not convenient for women to attend due to family responsibilities and societal stereotypes.

Here, modalities of primary election exercises are worked out and issues of women's representation are discussed when it is considered necessary to enhance the image of the party as being gender sensitive and women friendly. However, this is usually done in a masculine milieu where only the male perspective determines what is good for the women. In an interview conducted on 24 February 2023, the interviewee commented:

... [in a] general meeting, we discuss mutual [issues], we discuss how we can win elections. Then the progress of the party, how we will be able to counter the opposition, all those things... Or if there is [any] empowerment [programme], we will discuss how it will get across to all other areas. But to be a candidate, you cannot discuss it during general meetings. Stakeholders meeting, you attend it. The stakeholders meeting at times, you do it in the night. At times wee hours of the day, like 12 'o' clock [am]. Before morning, everybody has [sic: everything would have been] settled.

Besides, the few women (usually women leaders) who are called to join stakeholders' meetings have noticeably become reinforcers of these patriarchies. Rather than working for the interests of women by amplifying issues of concern to them, they have often been accused of complicity in the exclusion of women by the party's leadership structure. When asked about this complicity, a women leader responded, '*well, there is nothing I can do*'. In an interview conducted on 30 October 2022, she emphasised further that it is important for a potential female candidate to take time to investigate the position of the party leadership before obtaining the nomination form to formalise her intention, otherwise her effort might be wasted. In her words:

The party may decide not to sell form to just anybody [out of the aspiring female candidates]. So, after much deliberation, they will call those candidates '... we are taking [selecting] only one person... and you are two or three vying for this thing [position], so let's wait for the party[']s decision' (sic). So, after much deliberation, party may take a step. Out of five of them, we pick one. So, it is that one they pick [select] that will go and obtain form, not all of them, in order not to waste their money. So, we adopted that system in the last dispensation.

Why would some women become a willing tool in the hands of men who continue to perpetuate patriarchal hegemony? The very weak numerical presence where

only one or few women are part of a political party's decision-making is unlikely to sway positions in women's favour. More so, it appears as though women have not yet transformed from being a class 'in itself' to a class 'for itself'. This was clearly demonstrated by the #EndSARS protest in 2020 mass protest by Nigerian youth against police harassment and brutality. Peter Obi's Obidient movement<sup>2</sup> in the build-up to the general elections of 2023 also shared a similar trajectory.

Also, the experience of Sarah Jubril, a PDP female presidential aspirant who received only a single vote in the 2011 primary elections, still resonates with many. This raises questions regarding the philosophy, purpose and mechanism which drive the quest for women's upward political mobility, especially by women (Obot 2020; *PM news* 2011). Women thus remain at the mercy of the patriarchal party structure which has continued to marginalise them in decision-making roles. However, this accusation of complicity requires vital clarification in order not to essentialise women as perpetual enemies. Women do not necessarily form a category of common interest. They are individuals who have different personalities, trajectories and ideas about governance, and it is not out of place for them to disagree on what the configuration of governance should be, how it is to be run or by whom.

Interestingly, some women have been able to occupy elective positions as indicated in Table 1. However, the processes leading to the emergence of these women as party candidates are increasingly a subject of concern and scrutiny. Expressing this concern, a party leader (interviewed on 24 February 2023) noted:

During [administration withheld], they ceded some number of councillors to women, number of local government chairman[ship] and vice chairman[ship] to women. The house of assembly member, they could say, ok, four or five, may be women... So so constituency (sic: a specific constituency), we need a woman so that the men will not compete with them there.

Further interrogation has demonstrated a puppet and reward arrangement. On assumption of office political godfathers and party leaders, including state governors, also claim a party leadership role and could offer loyal female supporters party tickets to contest in elections. They have been seen to instrumentalise gender inclusivity rhetoric whenever they want to impose female candidates whom they consider could be useful to advance their political objectives.

In explaining how political parties select candidates in a primary election, a politician and former state lawmaker highlighted three strategies. Firstly, there is a consensus arrangement whereby party leaders use background checks and

---

2 For more information on the Obidient Movement, see <https://obidient.org>

interviews to select a sole candidate whom others are obliged to support in the main election (Bakare 2022; Sahara Reporters 2022). Secondly, a political party may adopt a delegate system of indirect primary election whereby party executives or special delegates are selected to vote for party candidates. Lastly, there is the direct primary election where all registered members of a political party are eligible to vote in a primary election.

While noting that none of these strategies is immune from the influence and manipulation of party leaders and clientelist gimmicks such as bribery, for example, this politician argued that the delegate system could be conveniently organised and supervised, unlike the direct primary system. In his words (interview on 23 February 2023):

It depends on what the leaders want, and they have their ways of choosing what system to adopt. For the direct primary system, it is always difficult. Crises, ballot stuffing, chaos, resource stealing. The party might not be able to give account. Even if there are cases of rigging in the delegate system, it will still be better when compared to the problems associated with direct primary system.

He noted further that party leaders who have vested interests in specific female candidates usually favour the adoption of a direct primary system where the process is usually expected to be rowdy and violent. Once this happens, organisers of the primary election are called to retreat to the party secretariat where party leaders can then conveniently make arbitrary decisions and field their preferred candidates. Another party executive (interviewed on 24 February 2023) claimed that:

This [personality withheld], to a reasonable extent, even if it is not democratic enough... But they made sure of one thing. Anywhere that woman is contesting for any position, it is that woman. But like I said, they wouldn't allow that to emerge through a democratic process. They will just hijack... They will just write the name of the woman that she is the winner of the election... because that one is a man, and the other contestant is a woman, or because there is a vested interest in someone.

While the call for women's inclusion has been justified on many grounds (Muleya 2012; Kevane 2014), findings from this study revealed that a tendency to abuse this inclusive arrangement has often accompanied the process.

Scholars studying the role of women in electoral politics have noted that the process of candidate selection within political parties and the type of electoral

systems adopted for elections have huge impacts on women's electoral successes, and an increased number of women in political assemblies. Extensive research in this area has therefore led to the recommendation of a fast-track approach through gender quotas (Hoodfar & Tajali 2011; Bauer & Burnet 2013; Bauer 2019; Lawless & Fox 2012). Although the international experience is uneven, this measure has increased women's share of the global parliamentary representation by 70% (Rosen 2017). Adopting this approach either by setting a percentage within political parties, as in a voluntary political party quota, legislative quota or reserved seat (Hoodfar & Tajali 2011) could help redress the disaffection which discretionary affirmative action by party leaders sometimes generate.

### WOMEN AS A MOBILISED GROUP

Do women vote as much as men do or do they constitute a larger percentage of voters? Perceptions are that there is a higher turnout rate of female voters. However, in the context of this study, we have decided to tread with caution. Although an empirical analysis such as that by Holman, Schneider and Pondel (2015) confirms higher women's voters' turnout in US elections, information available in the public domain in Nigeria shows the population of men to be slightly higher (Statista 2023). Also, according to INEC's voters' registration record, there are fewer women voters (47.5%) as against the men's 52.5% (Nkereuwem 2023). Additionally, as there is no statistical evidence to show that women vote more or less often than men, we rely on our observation to conclude that they vote just as often as men do. Nevertheless, many of our interviewees alluded to the seriousness with which women go about their civic responsibility, specifically voting. According to a party leader interviewed on 23 February 2023:

How many of the men come out during elections? Some of the elites, they prefer watching television than coming out to vote during election. But the women, irrespective of their status, they have to... You will see, by tomorrow, when you are going to the field, you will see more of the women than men. A lot. We have one [polling station] at Eleyo here, we have one at the Palace here and they have one at Sawmill [another location], so there are three [polling units] along this street [road]. Before you get to NITEL [another location down the road], there are about four.

On the day of election, we observed early arrivals of elderly men and women at the polling unit. Many of these elders voted and left almost immediately. Young and middle-aged men and women, some of whom also came early were seen

to be discussing several issues, including the current election. Male and female party agents alike were also present to monitor the election process and to reach out to eligible voters whom they had canvassed, to ensure that they did get out to vote. While it is illegal for campaigning to continue in the 24 hours before the commencement of voting (Electoral Act 2022), this practice was observed by both female and male political party agents as the voting proceeded.

Few scholars have drawn attention to the importance of courting female voters. These works have revealed the use of identity in their voting decision (Brians 2005, pp. 357-375; Abdullah 2012, pp. 36-40). As noted by Mansbridge (1999, pp. 628-657), attempts by campaigns to woo female voters can have implications for women's substantive and descriptive representation. Therefore, understanding the reactions of women is crucial to predict 'current and future political context' (Holman, Schneider & Pondel 2015, p. 817). The role of gender in politics has been emphasised often enough to target women strategically in order to gain their support. Campaign strategists have specifically targeted female voters as this type of identity-based targeting could resonate with their affective orientation (Holman, Schneider & Pondel 2015, p. 816). Unlike issue-based targeting which tries to evaluate candidates regarding the kind of attention and agenda they are likely to support, identity-based targeting appears to be accorded greater attention.

This study reveals that political parties exert significant effort to reach out to female voters by lobbying women leaders within their parties and market leaders as well as women associations outside these parties. They do this not only by word and in print, but with cash and material gifts as well, a common practice associated with clientelist politics (Hicken & Nathan 2020). According to Mansbridge (1999), public statements of appeal to women's identity are often used to emphasise that a candidate running for office has the ability to represent female voters. Holman, Schneider and Pondel (2015) narrated how several United States politicians specifically target women in their campaign with sophisticated analytics to enhance their chances of either winning their votes or derailing the chances their opponent will benefit from such advantage. Candidates have been observed canvassing expressly for women's votes only, addressing not only specific issues concerning women, but also those affecting the general public good. This is because candidates target more groups than just women. However, capturing women's interests has remained an important priority for political candidates.

#### VULNERABILITY OF WOMEN TO MATERIAL GIFTING STRATEGIES

Women bear the greater part of the burden of reproductive labour – apart from child bearing and raising, this includes domestic activities such as cooking,



cleaning, washing and the general maintenance of the home. Political parties' campaign machinery capitalises on this in order to garner support from them by offering cash, food items and other house utensils. Observation revealed that apart from cash gifts handed out or promised on the day of elections, items such as clothes, detergents, liquid soap, salt, tomato paste, rice, beans, gari<sup>3</sup> and Maggi<sup>4</sup> were distributed to voters on the eve of the first round of the elections. These products are basic consumer goods; no matter how inexpensive, they are a pricey commodity for the poor, many of whom were women who valued them because of their benefits. Women's groups have provided a fertile ground for clientelist politics. Roelofs (2019, p. 416) in her analysis of programmatic and patrimonial politics in Nigeria noted how TraderMoni<sup>5</sup> was deliberately used by the incumbent prior to the 2019 national elections. Women were in most cases the recipients of these soft loans which were heavily criticised as a form of sophisticated vote-buying because of the proximity to the election period. As this study demonstrates, more often than not campaign strategies in Nigeria would encompass women's empowerment (Mimiko 2007) by capitalising on their material deprivation. On the eve of the presidential election in February 2023 cartons of material goods were distributed, with women leaders essentially coordinating this activity.

Although poverty is experienced by both men and women, global tendencies suggest that women are the most affected by it (Lesetedi 2018). Women have been observed to be more vulnerable due to societal stereotypes, cultural norms and life course events which often do not enhance their potentials (Bako & Syed 2018). Women have been limited by the kind of resources and support systems available to them, regardless of how capable, resourceful and productive they might be (Nwankwor, Manda & Nkereuwem 2022). Specifically, women-headed households are more likely to suffer deprivation and severe economic marginalisation (Lesetedi 2018). For these reasons, the importance of gender analysis has been consistently emphasised as a key element in development process. In a patriarchal society such as Nigeria which privileges men and where investment in women remains underwhelming (Nwankwor, Manda & Nkereuwem 2022), women face multiple layers of challenges in lifting themselves out of poverty. Many do not appear to be self-sufficient enough to make independent choices either within the political party structure or as voters.

---

3 Cassava flour is commonly used in making a particular type of swallow food referred to as eba.

4 A commercial seasoning.

5 In 2016, the Federal Government of Nigeria launched a government enterprise and empowerment programme, TraderMoni. The initiative was designed to boost the Nigerian economy and help petty traders expand their business through access to collateral free loans.

## CONCLUSION

Although women's political representation has been studied extensively, the enduring skewed gender representation in political governance has ensured that it remains a topic of scholarly attention. To this end, the study employed a micro-level approach by focusing on a specific Local Government Area – constitutionally the lowest tier of government in Nigeria. Whereas some of the findings about women's political participation could be seen as a given, a qualitative analysis of women's political recruitment as articulated in this study provides more nuance to the concerns. While women are, in most cases, relegated to being spectators rather than being active political participants, there are those who have attained important elective positions. However, this is through a patriarchal structure activated by political party leaders and godfathers who attempt to appear gender sensitive and women friendly.

The study analysed the strategies for selecting party candidates. It notes how none of these strategies is totally free from the influence and manipulation of political party leaders and clientelist gimmicks. As a result, these leaders can field candidates, especially women candidates, in whom they have a vested interest.

This study further highlights the role of women as political mobilisers whose capacity to rally voters is exploited during elections. Also, it observes that while women have been credited for the seriousness with which they perform their civic responsibility of voting, there is still no statistical analysis of gender to show whether they vote more or less often than men do. Because our observation is also limited in this regard, we have concluded that women vote just as often as men. Finally, the study revealed how political parties' campaign machinery capitalised on the experience of poverty, which most affects women, to garner their support by offering consumer goods and cash incentives.

## Acknowledgements

This study was conducted within the framework of the *Observing the election process in Nigeria Project* supported by the French Institute for Research in Africa (IFRA-Nigeria).

We would like to thank Mr Julius Tolulope Omoyeni of the Department of Peace and Security Studies, Bamidele Olumilua University of Education, Science and Technology, Ikere-Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria, for his assistance during this study's field work. We are also grateful to Dr Barbara Morovich (IFRA-Nigeria) and Dr Côme Salvaire (Postdoctoral Fellow, IRD/Les Afriques Dans le Monde, Sciences Po, Bordeaux, France) for their comments and suggestions on the earlier version of this article.

## — REFERENCE —

- Abdullahi, D 2012, 'Good governance as panacea to the socio-economic crises in Nigeria', *Journal of Business and Management*, vol. 2, no. 3, pp. 36-40.
- Adebayo, A V 2023, 'Women's political representation in selected houses of assembly in southwestern Nigeria, 1999-2023', Thesis (PhD), Department of Peace, Security and Humanitarian Studies, Faculty of Multidisciplinary Studies, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria.
- Agency Report 2020, 'Ex-Ondo governor, Bamidele Olumilua, is dead', *Premium Times*, 4 June, <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/regional/ssouthwest/396084-ex-ondo-governor-bamidele-olumilua-is-dead.html?tztc=1> Accessed 12 September, 2023
- Alliyu, N 2016, 'Patriarchy, women's triple roles and development in Southwest Nigeria', *International Journal of Arts and Humanities*, vol. 5, no. 4, pp. 94-110.
- Aluko, Y 2015, 'Gender and women's political leadership in Nigeria', *The Nigerian Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*, vol. 9, pp. 37-55.
- Bakare, M 2022, '2023: Tinubu support group opposes consensus, North-east presidential candidate', 19 May, 2022, <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/more-news/530930-2023-tinubu-support-group-opposes-consensus-north-east-presidential-candidate.html>
- Bako, M J & Syed, J 2018, 'Women's marginalization in Nigeria and the way forward', *Human Resource Development International*, pp. 1-19.
- Bauer, G 2019, 'Women in African Parliaments Progress and Prospects', *The Palgrave Hand Book on African Women's Studies*, pp. 1-18.
- Bauer, G & Burnet, J E 2013, 'Gender quotas, democracy, and women's representation in Africa: Some insights from democratic Botswana and autocratic Rwanda', *Women's Studies International Forum*, vol. 41, pp. 103-112.
- Bogdan, S 2018, 'What you need to know about the new left party that wants to fight Dragnea and CpF', <https://www.vice.com/ro/article/9kvbxd/noul-partid-de-stanga-care-vrea-sa-lupte-cu-dragnea-si-cpf> Accessed 15/10/2020.
- Brians, C L 2005, 'Women for Women? Gender and Party? Gender and Party Bias in Voting for Women Candidates', *American Politics Research*, vol. 33, no. 3, pp. 357-375.
- Childs, S & Lovenduski, J 2013, 'Political Representation', in G. Waylen et al. (eds), *Oxford Handbook of Gender and Politics*, Oxford University Press, [Oxford?].
- Chowdhury, N J 2018, 'Who Speaks for Women in Parliament? Patriarchy and Women MNAs in Pakistan', In N. Ahmed, *Women in Governing Institutions in South Asia: Parliament, Civil Service and Local Government*, Palgrave Macmillan.
- City Population, 2022, Nigeria: Administration Division, [https://citypopulation.de/en/nigeria/admin/NGA013\\_\\_ekiti/](https://citypopulation.de/en/nigeria/admin/NGA013__ekiti/) (Accessed 15 August 2023).

- Clayton, A, Josefsson C & Wang V 2016, 'Quotas and Women's Substantive Representation: Evidence from a Content Analysis of Ugandan Plenary Debates', *Politics and Gender*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Daily Trust 2023, 'State Assembly Seats: Kano, Borno, Sokoto, 10 Others "Exclude" Women As Men Clear 95% In 36 States', 25 June, <https://dailytrust.com/state-assembly-seats-kano-borno-sokoto-10-others-exclude-women-as-men-clear-95-in-36-states/> (Accessed on 25 June 2023).
- Dimitrova, V & Obasanjo, I 2019, 'Do parliamentary gender quotas decrease gender inequality? The case of African countries', *Constitutional Political Economy*, vol. 30, no.2, pp. 149-176.
- Government of Ekiti State, Nigeria 2024, 'Office of the Deputy Governor', <https://www.ekitistate.gov.ng/executive-council/office-of-the-deputy-governor>, Accessed 1 April, 2024
- Ekundayo, A & Ama, B 2014, 'Nigerian Women and Political Participation: The Way Forward', *International Journal of Educational Foundations and Management*, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 71-81.
- Eniola, B O 2018, 'Gender Parity in Parliament : A Panacea for the Promotion and Protection of Women's Rights in Nigeria', *Frontiers in Sociology*, vol. 3. no. 34, pp. 1-7.
- Erlich, A & Beauvais, E 2023, 'Explaining women's political underrepresentation in democracies with high levels of corruption', *Political Science Research and Methods*, vol. 11, 804-822.
- Falola, T 2021, 'Bisi Adeleye-Fayemi: Women's rights activist and community mobiliser', *Premium Times*, <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/opinion/466639-bisi-adeleye-fayemi-womens-rights-activist-and-community-mobiliser-by-toyin-falola.html?tztc=1>
- Farouki L, El-Dirani Z, Abdulrahim S, Akl C, Akik C & McCall SJ 2022, 'The global prevalence of female genital mutilation/cutting: A systematic review and meta-analysis of national, regional, facility, and school-based studies', *PLoS Med*, vol. 1, no. 9: e1004061.
- Federal Republic of Nigeria Official Gazette 2022, *Electoral Act*. The Federal Government Printer, Lagos, Nigeria, FGP 85/52022/650. <https://placng.org/i/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Electoral-Act-2022.pdf>
- Hicken, A & Nathan, NL 2020, 'Clientelism's Red Herrings: Dead Ends and New Directions in the Study of Nonprogrammatic Politics', *Annual Review of Political Science*.
- Holman, MR, Schneider, MC & Pondel, K 2015, 'Gender targeting in political advertisements', *Political Research Quarterly*, vol. 68, no. 4, pp. 816-829.
- Hoodfar, H & Tajali, M. 2011, *Electoral politics: Making quotas work for women*, Women Living Under Muslim Laws, London.

- Independent National Electoral Commission 2023, [https://www.inecnigeria.org/?page\\_id=7246](https://www.inecnigeria.org/?page_id=7246) Accessed 14/07/2023.
- Inter-Parliamentary Union 2023, [ipu.org](http://ipu.org) Accessed 06/04/2023.
- Inter-Parliamentary Union 2023, [https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking/?date\\_year=2024&date\\_month=06](https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking/?date_year=2024&date_month=06)
- Kevane, M 2014, *Women and development in Africa: How gender works*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder, Co.
- Kim, J & Luke, N 2020, 'Men's economic dependency, gender ideology, and stress at midlife', *Journal of Marriage and Family*, vol. 82, no. 3, pp. 1-23.
- Lawless, J & Fox, R 2012, 'Men Rule: The Continued Underrepresentation of Women in U. S. Politics', Women and Politics Institute, School of Public Affairs, Washington D. C.
- Lesetedi, G N 2018, 'A Theoretical Perspective on Women and Poverty in Botswana', *Journal of International Women's Studies*, vol. 19, no. 5, pp. 193-208.
- Lovenduski, J & Norris, P 2003, 'Westminster women: The politics of presence', *Political Studies*, vol. 51, no.1, pp. 84-102.
- Mansbridge, J 1999, 'Should Blacks Represent Blacks and Women Represent Women? A Contingent Yes', *Journal of Politics*, vol. 61, no. 3, pp. 628-57.
- Mimiko, NO 2007, 'Party formation and electoral contest in Nigeria: The Labour Party and the 2007 election in Ondo state', *Journal of African Elections*, vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 114-133.
- Modern Ghana 2013, 'Ekiti 2014: Who Is Bisi Omoyeni?' [www.modernghana.com/news/507331/ekiti-2014-who-is-bisi-omoyeni.html](http://www.modernghana.com/news/507331/ekiti-2014-who-is-bisi-omoyeni.html) Accessed 12 September, 2023.
- Mofoluwawo, EO 2014, 'Social, Cultural and Economic Discrimination to Women Participation in African Politics: The Case of Nigeria', *International Journal of Learning and Development*, vol. 4, no.1, pp. 169-175.
- Montgomery, M 2017, 'Colonial legacy of gender inequality: Christian missionaries in German East Africa', *Politics and Society*, vol. 42, no. 2, pp. 225-268.
- Muleya, J 2012, *Gender and peace building*, University for Peace, Ciudad Colón, Costa Rica.
- Nairaland Forum 2017, 'Brief Profile of HE Surv Abiodun Aluko', 8 February, <https://www.nairaland.com/3617006/brief-profile-he-surv-abiodun> Accessed 12 September, 2023.
- National Democratic Institute 2012, *Tunisia's National Constituent Assembly: Gender Assessment*, National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, Washington, D.C.
- Nigeria. National Conference 2014, *Final draft of conference report*, Federal Government of Nigeria. <https://nigeriareposit.nln.gov.ng/server/api/core/bitstreams/c12fe35b-be65-4f88-a1ad-e8d3352b081d/content> (Accessed 18/11/2023).

- Nkereuwem, E 2023, *Why women haven't been successful in Nigerian elections*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, pp. 1-14.
- Nwankwor, C & Adebayo, A 2021, 'Women legislators in legislative policymaking in Africa', In G Onyango, (Ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Public Policy in Africa*, Routledge, Milton Park, UK.
- Nwankwor, C, Manda, C & Nkereuwem, E 2022, *An evaluation of Bloomberg philanthropies women's economic development intervention: Rwanda, Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD.
- Obot, M 2020 'Sarah Jubril, president candidate on four occasions', *Voice your stories blog* <https://www.voiceyourstories.com/sarah-jibril-a-woman-who-has-contested-for-presidency-four-separate-occasions>
- Okoosi-Simbine, AT & Obi, NN 2020, 'Women in Political Parties in Africa', In O Yacob-Haliso & T Falola (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of African Women's Studies*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.
- Olutayo, MAS & Adebayo, AV 2017, 'An Analysis of Women's Electoral Participation in Nigeria's 2011 and 2015 General Elections in Ado-Odo/Ota Local Government Area, Ogun State, Nigeria', *Journal of Management and Social Sciences*, vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 269-282.
- Omobowale, A & Olutayo, A 2007, 'Chief Lamidi Adedibu and Patronage Politics in Nigeria', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 45, pp. 425-446.
- Omotola, J S 2007, 'What is this gender talk about after all? Gender, power and politics in the contemporary Nigeria', *African Studies. Monographs*, vol. 28, pp. 33-46.
- Osori, A 2017, *Love does not win elections*, Narrative Landscape Press, Lagos.
- Phillips, A 1995, *The Politics of Presence*, Clarendon Press: Oxford.
- Politicians Data 2018, 'Dr Kolapo Olubunmi Olusola' <https://politiciansdata.com/content/dr-kolapo-olubunmi-olusola/>, Accessed 12 September, 2023
- PMNews 2011, <https://pmnewsnigeria.com/2011/02/03/serah-jibrin-my-defeat-will-haunt-womenfolk/> Accessed November 18, 2023.
- Quadri, MO 2018, 'Women and political participation in the 2015 general elections in Nigeria: fault lines and mainstreaming exclusion maryam', *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa*, vol. 20, no.1, pp. 261-275.
- Roelofs, P 2019, 'Beyond programmatic versus patrimonial politics: contested conceptions of legitimate distribution in Nigeria', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 57, no. 3, pp. 415-436.
- Rosen, J 2017, 'Gender quotas for women in national politics: A comparative analysis across development thresholds', *Social Science Research*, vol. 30, pp. 1-20.
- Sahara Reporters, 2022, 'All Ruling APC Presidential Aspirants Except Tinubu Agree To Support Consensus Candidate – Screening Committee', 4 June, <https://saharareporters.com/2022/06/04/all-ruling-apc-presidential-aspirants-except-tinubu-agree-support-consensus-candidate-%E2%80%93>

- Statista 2023, *Total population in Nigeria from 2011 to 2021 by Gender*, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/967908/total-population-of-nigeria-by-gender/#:~:text=This%20statistic%20shows%20the%20total,to%20approximately%20107.83%20million%20inhabitants>. Retrieved 9 July, 2023.
- Stockemer, D & Amaechi, O 2023, 'Why do Voters Accept Bribes? Evidence from Edo State in Nigeria. Representation', *Journal of Representative Democracy*, 1-21.
- Wängnerud, L 2009, 'Women in Parliaments : Descriptive and Substantive Representation', *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 12, pp. 51-69.

# WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN ETHIOPIA'S 2021 ELECTIONS

## *The Role of Political Parties*

*Seblewongiel Kidanie and Eden Hailu*

Seblewongiel Ayenalem Kidanie is an assistant professor in the Department of Social Work, Faculty of Social Sciences, Bahir Dar University, Ethiopia  
ORCID <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7259-830>

Eden Fesseha Hailu is an assistant professor in the School of Law at Bahir Dar University, Ethiopia

### ABSTRACT

*This study examines the role of Ethiopia's main political parties and the participation of women during the three stages of the 2021 election cycle – the pre-voting, voting and post-voting periods. Four political parties – Prosperity, Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice, National Movement of Amhara, and ENAT – were selected and their party manifestos and reports analysed. Interviews were conducted with 12 individuals representing political party leaders and women candidates. Reports of the National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) and the media are also included. Data is thematically grouped and interpreted using a conceptual construct of political parties' role in promoting women's political representation as developed by UNDP and NDI. The findings revealed the paradoxes and inconsistencies of political parties' ideologies and strategies which affect women's participation in party politics and the subsequent election outcome. This paper recommends that, given the absence of a quota system to guarantee adequate women's participation in elections, political party self-regulatory measures could offer an alternative option to increase the political participation of women in Ethiopia.*

**Keywords:** election cycle, party politics, women parliamentarians, Ethiopia

### INTRODUCTION

Ethiopia has had only three decades of democratic elections, despite having had elections since the monarchical feudal system which lasted from 1270 to 1974



(Ayele 2022; Teshome-Bahiru 2009). In 2021 Ethiopia held its most recent general elections under extremely challenging circumstances which made it very difficult for female politicians to participate. The circumstances prevailing during the 2021 general elections made a normally challenging situation even more difficult. Ethiopia was facing a plethora of problems both internally and externally: the COVID-19 pandemic forced the general elections to be postponed for a year; inter-communal conflicts and armed clashes made it impossible to hold elections in various parts of the country; and the relations between the federal government and the Tigray Liberation Front deteriorated into a full-scale armed conflict after 4 November 2020. The conflict caused a devastating humanitarian crisis in the country. Major opposition parties in the Oromia region boycotted the elections, complaining about an uneven playing field (Ayele 2022, p.1).

Political parties vary significantly in the extent to which they seek to promote the participation of women as party members, in leadership positions, in recruiting women as party candidates, and in how they address women's interests (Kantola 2019, p.5). Internal party organisation and strategy shape the party-candidate relationship with respect to gender (Aldrich 2020, p. 677). Despite the importance of their active and equivalent participation, women are still underrepresented in party politics and face numerous challenges, including discrimination against their promotion within some parties (Hussain et al. 2021, p. 103). Gender biases in candidate selection processes and the lack of political opportunities inside political parties remain a challenge for women (Dessie 2021, p. 9).

Ethiopia introduced a multi-party system following the 1991 regime change. Subsequently, dozens of political parties have been established, but little has been known about the nature and type of the party systems in general, and how they are promote women's participation in particular. Studies conducted on the political participation of women in Ethiopia (Dessie 2021; Kassa 2015; Tegegn 2008; Richards 2020, p. 4) have emphasised the various socio-cultural barriers and national policy measures for the active and meaningful political participation of women. However, little is known about how political parties' ideology, structure, strategies, and approaches may affect their political representation. This paper seeks to fill that gap.

Using data from the 2021 elections, this study analyses how political parties in Ethiopia attempted to achieve gender balance during the electoral cycle. The research seeks to answer the following key research questions:

- 1) how do political parties' internal party organisation, such as party ideology, organisational structure, women activists, and party rules consider women's political representation?

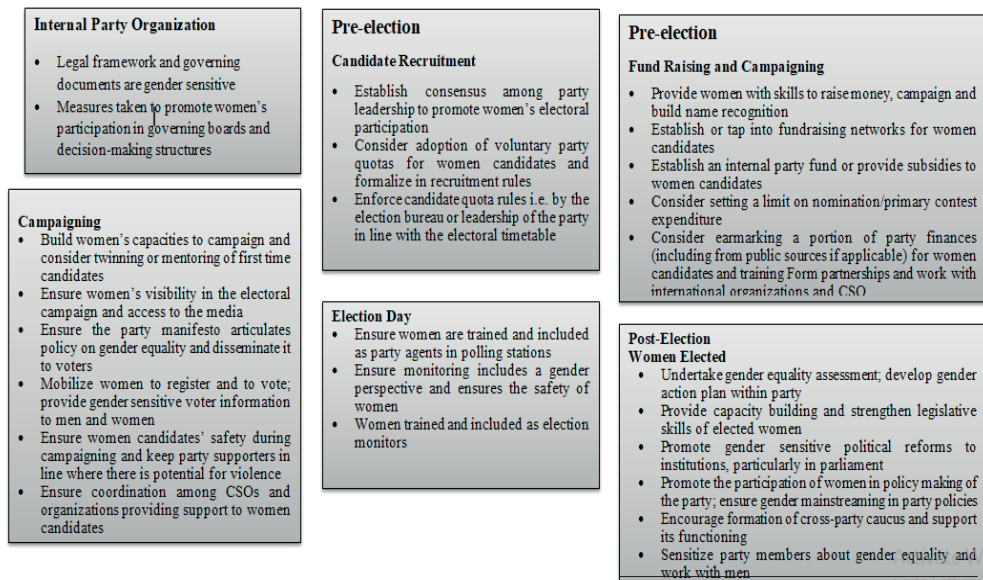
- 2) how do political parties consider women in candidate recruitment, fundraising, and campaigning during the pre-election phase?
- 3) how were women candidates treated during the election phase?
- 4) what does the post-election result indicate about women candidates and political party representation?

## METHODOLOGY

The study is based on combined methodologies of qualitative interviews with political party representatives and a desk review of secondary data from the election manifestoes, legal and policy documents, and election reports of four political parties. The study did not benefit to any extent from previous local studies, and pioneered an analysis of the four parties. These were carefully selected taking into account the number of women candidates they had recruited for the 2021 Ethiopian general elections, their ideological differences, and their geographic coverage during the elections. The political parties are: Prosperity Party (PP) (the ruling party), Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice (EZEMA), National Movement of Amhara (NAMA), and ENAT Party (literally 'Mothers' Party').

As a check on whether promises made in party documents are translated into practice and to assess if there are undocumented approaches taken by the parties to promote women's political representations, 12 individuals representative of political party leaders, and women candidates recruited for the 2021 elections, were interviewed. In addition, election status updates and results from the National Election Board of Ethiopia are followed and thoroughly analysed.

Data is thematically grouped and interpreted using a conceptual/theoretical construct of political parties' roles in promoting women's political representation, as developed by UNDP and NDI (Ballington et al. 2012, pp. 2-3). According to Ballington, the effectiveness of the political parties in promoting women's involvement in the political process can be assessed in relation to the measures parties take across the specific phases of the electoral cycle – the pre-electoral, electoral and post-electoral phases – and to the organisation and financing of the parties (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework developed by the UNDP and NDI to Assess Role of Political Parties to Promote Women's Political Representation.**

Source: Ballington et al. 2012, pp. 2-3

This paper consists of four sections: first, it presents the historical overview of women's political participation in Ethiopia since the monarchical feudal period, with special emphasis on the formation of political parties and the role of women. Second, the article considers six main reasons why women should be represented and should actively participate in politics in general and political parties in particular. These arguments are based on traditional representation, justice, experience, interests, symbolic (that is as role models), and finally democratic representation. Next, the role of four political parties in promoting and enhancing women's political participation in Ethiopia is discussed by assessing their internal party organisation, pre-election candidate recruitment, funding and campaigning on election day itself, and the post-election period. Finally, the paper concludes with lessons to be considered for the next elections.

**THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF POLITICAL REPRESENTATION FOR WOMEN**

The *traditional argument* in this regard is that promoting women in politics and decision-making roles is based on the obligation to comply with international human rights. Ethiopia is a signatory to major international treaties guaranteeing

gender equality and rights. Moreover, article 35(3) of the 1995 Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) Constitution posits that the historical legacy of inequality and discrimination suffered by women in Ethiopia should be taken into account, and women are entitled to affirmative measures. The purpose of such measures shall be to provide special attention to women so as to enable them to compete and participate on an equal basis with men in political, social and economic life as well as in public and private institutions. Affirmative measures to assist women are also one of the integral requirements of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), to which Ethiopia became a signatory in 1981. These stipulations on affirmative action are included in Ethiopia's 1995 Constitution.

The Africa Report indicated that the government of Ethiopia passed an omnibus election law in August 2019; however, key components related to increasing women's participation in politics were voted down. These components included quotas for female candidates in each party, clauses related to violence against women in elections (VAWE), and prioritising female candidates if they received the same number of votes as male candidates (Kiruga 2019). More importantly the law does not make it mandatory to prioritise female candidates if they received an equal number of votes as male candidates.

Secondly, the *justice argument* postulates that since women account for half of the total population they have the right to be represented. In Ethiopia, women account for 51 per cent of the population; however, they have traditionally been underrepresented in decision-making processes at all governance levels and have also been dominated by men and marginalised politically, socially, economically, physically and psychologically (Kassa 2015, pp. 3-4). According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2022 (Galal 2024) Ethiopia has an overall gender gap index score of 0.71, ranking 74 out of 146 countries. Gender disparity is largely notable in political empowerment (0.42) with a low share of political participation by women. Thus the justice argument is cited most frequently by the government of Ethiopia in its policy documents to explain the need for women's participation in Ethiopia's parliament and decision-making positions.

Third, the *experience argument* suggests that the different experiences women have means that their politics differ from men. The Beijing Platform for Action (PFA 1995, para. 181-182) stated that:

women's equal participation in decision-making can also be seen as a necessary condition for women's interests to be taken into account. The presence of women enriches debate through redefining political priorities and addresses women's gender-specific concerns, values and experiences, and provides new perspectives on mainstream political issues.

Ethiopia is a multi-ethnic, multilingual and culturally diverse country. Female legislators who belong to various ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds can bring a wide array of issues to parliament and propose solutions accordingly.

Fourth, according to the *interest argument*, women need to be represented to articulate women's specific needs and interests. People's interests and priorities are often shaped by their respective social, economic and ethnic differences. Thus, political parties and electoral systems which enhance or limit the ability of women in government to promote their own interests, can be crucial in allowing women access in equal numbers (Caul 1999, p. 82).

Fifth, the *symbolic argument* says that female politicians act as role models for all women, and will attract other women to the political arena (Kassa 2015, p. 3). The participation and representation of women also symbolises a greater legitimacy of public institutions and changes people's perception of politics as an exclusively male domain (Haack 2014, p. 40). In Ethiopia, the vast majority of women are still living in poverty in deprived socioeconomic conditions. The minority of those who are in leadership positions might not reflect the full picture of women in the country (Gobaw 2017, p. 29). However, the political presence of only a few women is expected to impact on citizens' political attitudes by proving that women are just as capable as men of governing and of fighting for good governance. They provide a role model for female citizens and signal the accessibility of the political system for all social groups (Ashenafi 2009).

Finally, the *democracy argument* asserts that the equal representation of women and men enhances the democratisation of governance. The full and equitable participation of women in public life is essential to building and sustaining strong, vibrant democracies. Women are also seen as less corrupt and more focused on societal welfare; in other words, they are seen as an expression of 'good governance' (Goetz 2007, p. 88). The presence of women in Ethiopia's legislative organs and political parties helps to compensate for past and present injustices, provides a voice for overlooked interests, and contributes to the overall legitimacy of democratic institutions (Kassa 2015, p. 2).

In summary: the arguments discussed above generally fall into two broad categories, the descriptive and the substantive representation of women. Descriptive representation indicates a widely acceptable share of seats in parliament as a measure of political inclusion in society for a category such as women. On the other hand substantive representation deals with women's interests, gender equality and the rationale behind women's representation. A core idea in this strand is that there are certain interests and concerns that arise from women's experiences and that these will be inadequately addressed in a politics dominated by men. Societies will not achieve equality between women and men by simply disregarding gender-related differences (Kassa 2015, p. 6).

Political parties have responded in different ways to demands for gender equality. Not all have taken positive steps, either because of an inherent conviction about their political rights or out of a desire to incorporate specific gender interests, but also as part of an electoral calculation to increase their party's base of political support. Parties which have accepted a composition based on gender have done so with different degrees of commitment and compliance. As a result, parties differ in the number of female candidates on their slates and the number of women holding leadership positions in their executive bodies.

### HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Ethiopian women have played an undeniable role in the country's public life during the monarchical and subsequent eras from the Solomonic dynasty until 1974; for example Queen Sheba of ancient Abyssinia; Princess Yodit of the Zagwe dynasty (960-1000 C.E.); Queen Eleni (1450-1522); Princess Workit and Princess Mestayit (1769-1855); Empress Mentewab I of the 18<sup>th</sup> century; and Empress Tayetu Betul, consort of Emperor Minilik II, held key roles and made decisions on political issues in Ethiopia (Eresso 2021, pp. 2-3; Kebede 2020, p. 563).

During the Italian occupation (1935-1941), women fought against Italy and their role in the public arena began to increase (Adugna 2001, p. 7). The Ethiopian Women's Charitable Organization was established in 1933 and started to provide training and treatment for war victims. The first nation-wide Ethiopian Women's Welfare Association was established in 1935 by Empress Menen to raise funds and projects for women (Eresso 2021, p. 6).

In the late 1960s, the monarchy was facing intense pressure from various quarters to open up and become a political democracy (Teshome-Bahiru 2009, pp. 61-62). The Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM), the All Ethiopian Socialist Movement (MEISON) and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) were formed in 1965, 1968 and 1972 respectively (Gudina 2007, p.6). In the 1960s and 1970s there were about 356 female students in universities and the majority had joined active opposition parties such as EPRP and MESON. University students initiated a movement called a 'battle against ignorance and exploitation', aiming to enlighten fellow female students about gendered thinking that excludes women from political engagement. Following the crackdown on the student movement, some female students left the country and joined overseas student unions, including the Ethiopian Student Union in Europe (ESUE) and the Ethiopian Student Union in North America (ESUNA) (Eresso 2021, p. 7).

Subsequently, women had an active presence in the 1974 uprising against the monarchical regime. Thousands of women raised their voices in the mass movement that claimed 'land to the tiller'. During this time women also challenged

the monarchy by demanding equal pay for equal work and participated in the public discourse on gender inequality. During the Derg regime (1974-1991) there was increased politicisation of women's demands that resulted in the formation of the Women's Coordinating Committee (WCC) in 1975. Women from both the EPRP and MEISON joined the committee (Eresso 2021, p. 7). However, the Derg regime was based on Marxist ideology, and it did not guarantee either electoral democracy or multi-party participation. A complex political differentiation had further aggravated the political fragmentation and its polarisation led to the formation of different liberation movements (Gudina 2007, p. 8). It was only in 1994, after the fall of the Derg regime in 1991, that Ethiopia introduced multiparty politics.

To conclude this section, it is clear that despite unfavourable conditions women have been active political participants in Ethiopia. In the 1980s they took part in the Workers' Party of Ethiopia during the Derg regime, women's associations, women's committees, and different ethnically-based liberation fronts. Thirty per cent of the Tigray Liberation Front were female, both combatants and leaders of battalions (Veale 2003, p. 29). When the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) came to power in 1991, prominent women politicians, both those in favour of or opposed to the EPRDF, entered the political arena. According to the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia report, the number of women in the Ethiopian parliament has grown gradually, from two per cent in 1995 to 38 per cent in 2021. The first woman speaker of the House of Peoples Representatives (HoPR) was elected in 1995.

Despite the involvement of women in political parties and leadership positions in Ethiopia, women's leagues in political parties, mainly the ruling parties, have faced several criticisms. Women's leagues in political parties often serve as symbolic gestures and have limited decision-making power within the party and the broader political system. This can result in women being involved in the party mainly for ceremonial roles rather than having a real impact on policy and governance. There is still significant underrepresentation of women in higher leadership positions within the party and government. The broader challenges faced by women's leagues reflect broader concerns about genuine gender representation, political participation, and the effectiveness of political parties, which in turn has an impact on changing power dynamics or addressing gender inequality in the country.

#### POLITICAL PARTY PROMOTION OF WOMEN IN THE 2021 ELECTIONS

This section addresses the role of political parties in promoting and enhancing women's political participation in Ethiopia, using the 2021 elections as a case study. The section analyses the extent to which the four political parties ENAT

(‘Mothers Party’ in Amharic), Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice (EZMA), National Movement of Amhara (NAMA), and the ruling Prosperity Party (PP) have embraced women’s participation in politics. The analysis is based on the United Nations Development Programme’s work on *Empowering Women for Stronger Political Parties* (Ballington 2012 et al. pp. 2-3) which has recommended the following targets that political parties can take to empower women:

- 1) foundation strategies for internal party organisation
- 2) strategies in the pre-electoral period
- 3) strategies in the electoral period, and
- 4) strategies in the post-election period.

For convenience, this article will divide the phases into internal party organisation and the three phases of the political cycle in separate sub-sections below.

### *Internal Party Organisation*

The political parties in Ethiopia have struggled to effect change in terms of economic, political and social issues. However, the role of the parties in promoting women’s participation remains to criticise, to offer alternative policies, and to replace the ruling party with a new mode of administration. According to Ballington et al. (2012, p. 4) the official statements of a political party indicate how they provide a framework supporting gender equality. More importantly, they provide the party’s vision and the rules the party has adopted. The internal strategies that parties can adopt include adjusting party ideology, rule, party internal structure, and women’s activism.

### *Party Ideology*

Party ideology reflects the governing principles of the parties. The different ideological orientations of the four parties under review are as follows:

The Prosperity Party adopted ‘Civic nationalism economic liberalism’ as its ideological basis, according to its 2021 Election Manifesto. This aspect of civic nationalism contrasts with the ethnic nationalism of its predecessor, the EPRDF Party. Secondly, PP adheres to traditional liberal values of freedom, tolerance, equality, and individual rights. The party endorses an economic liberalism based on an individualistic market economy and private property.

The ENAT party’s name literally means ‘Mother Party’. Although it was severely criticised for allegedly harbouring a hidden agenda to return religion to the political arena, the party adopts a conservative stance on culture, identity,



values, religion, and history on matters of individual rights and economic freedom; and social democratic principles for social justice and fair distribution of wealth (*Capital* 2022). According to the party leader, the party accepts the prevalence of social injustice, including unequal women's political representation.

EZMA party, on the other hand, regards social justice and Ethiopian nationalism as its founding ideology. According to an interview with the party leader in *The Reporter Magazine* (2021), EZEMA would like to substitute the prevailing ethnic nationalism with civic nationalism, but it goes further to encompass social justice issues. With the general assumption that widespread injustices are prevalent, it approaches the issue of women's political representation under the wider scope of ensuring social justice in Ethiopia. The emphasis it gives to social justice can also be inferred from the use of 'social justice' in the party's title.

The National Movement of Amhara (NAMA) incorporates the notion of social justice as a principle but in the context of Amharan ethnic nationalism. As an ethnically-based party, the party's focus is to ensure the Amhara people's fair, just, and equitable share in the country's political power, resource, and burden distribution (NAMA Manifesto). Since NAMA has adopted an egalitarian concept of ethnicity from the perspective of group identity, it does not specify whether or how it specifically promotes women's political representation.

### *Party Rule*

None of the four political parties that we studied has an explicit rule that reserves a certain portion of seats for women candidates. The Prosperity Party (PP) followed the standard practice of its predecessor the EPRDF, which had an unwritten rule that 30 per cent of its candidates should be women. Having evolved from the ruling EPRDF party for three decades, the PP has better organised women and youth structures from federal to district level, though it has been highly criticised for using government structures for party purposes. The PP, the ruling political party in Ethiopia established in 2019 as a successor to the EPRDF, has adopted the women's and youth leagues of the previous EPRDF party structure (Prosperity Party Bylaw Article 15(1) and Article 33(5)).

Nonetheless, its bylaw regarded the women's and youth leagues as only 'supporters' of the party (Prosperity Party Bylaw Article 33(5)). This implies only a supportive but not a decision-making role of women in the party structure. On the other hand, its programme and party manifesto make declarations about efforts to ensure women's political participation and decision-making (Prosperity Party Election Manifesto 2021). The programme and the manifesto promise to ensure and enhance women's economic and social empowerment and fight gender-based violence and other factors inhibiting women from being active citizens in every spectrum.

EZEMA has explicitly mainstreamed the gender issue in its policy directions on the economy, culture, health, and education. However, it does not refer to women's political participation either in its manifesto or in a personal interview (on 19 August 2021) with R Tafesse, one of its female candidates for the National Parliament. Moreover, EZEMA's policy document also asserts a need to fight against gender-based violence (EZEMA Manifesto 2021).

On the other hand, NAMA has specifically included affirmative action measures to enhance women's education and participation opportunities (NAMA Manifesto 2021). Nonetheless, its policy directives on the economy, health and education have not included gender issues.

Lastly, the personal interview with K Atnafu, ENAT's head of internal management and organisation on 16 September 2021, revealed that the party's legal documents and policy developments are designed to address the inclusivity of women but that this is not articulated in detail in the party's documents.

### *Party Structure*

Internal party structure provides a general framework to assess whether a party promotes women's political representation. In order to understand the internal organisational structure of Ethiopian political parties it is imperative to examine the party's governing documents, as well as policy developments (Ballington 2011). The following sections assess whether the parties have designed a women's wing structure; and how women's participation in party conventions illustrates party strategies to promote women's participation in the internal party structure.

Of the four parties, only EZEMA has adopted decentralised party decision-making, candidate nomination and institutionalised candidate recruitment process. As the interview with Tafesse revealed, EZEMA designed a bottom-up approach to party decision-making and candidate nomination. The interviewee indicated that the party has adopted the mandatory recruitment of two women of the four candidates (one for the parliament and three for the state council) in each electoral district.

NAMA and ENAT have adopted a centralised decision-making and candidate nomination process which may provide a favourable foundation for including women on a proportional basis. Nevertheless, the candidate recruitment process for both parties was not merit-based, but rather depended on the bureaucratic discretion of the party leaders which in effect undermines the number of women to be represented.

In the Prosperity Party, the chain of the party decision-making structure is at five levels (local sub-district, district, zone, region and federal levels). However, the party's ultimate decision-making power resides in federal and region level

councils (Prosperity Party bylaw 2021). It adopts a centralised decision-making process and candidate recruitment is at federal and regional level.

### *Women's Activism*

Women participate as party activists when a political party designs a women's wing, and sections and targets are set aside for women's participation in party conventions (Ballington et al 2012, p. 4). According to the interviewees Atnafu and Tafesse, EZEMA and NAMA have designated strategically-positioned women's wings led by women that involve all levels of party decision-making. However, ENAT has failed to adopt most of the strategies deemed necessary for promoting women's representation at party structure level. EZEMA has reserved two executive committee seats for the women's affairs department at district, zone, regional, and federal levels. In the case of the PP, apart from recognising the women's league of the previous EPRDF as a 'supportive structure', it does not establish or designate seats for women's affairs in its internal party organisation and central committee.

None of the four parties has set targets for women's participation in party conventions. Generally, the analysis of the four political parties indicates the existence of party-level differences in terms of internal party organisation designed to promote women's political representation.

When Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, the leader of the Prosperity Party, took power in 2018, he advocated a more inclusive approach to governance. He appointed women to half the cabinet positions. He also nominated a woman as his first chief justice, identified a woman to become the first woman president, and an exiled woman opposition leader was appointed to become chair of the National Election Board of Ethiopia. Women also constitute 30 per cent of the judiciary.

### ELECTION CYCLE

#### *Pre-Election Candidate Recruitment, Funding and Campaigning*

The role of political parties in promoting women's political representation is assessed through candidate recruitment, funding and campaigning strategies during the pre-election period. In principle, if the party leadership reaches a consensus to increase women's electoral participation, the party enforces a voluntary quota, places women in winnable and safe constituencies, offers incentives to attract women, coordinates with CSOs to support women candidates, and gains support from men (Ballington 2011, pp. 21-28). In relation to funding, the party should enhance money-raising skills, establish fundraising networks for

women, introduce internal party funds, subsidise women candidates, earmark a portion of party finances for women candidates, and form partnerships and work with CSOs and international organisations (Ballington 2011, pp. 28-32). During the campaign period, parties are expected to equip women with the support of CSOs; ensure their media visibility; ensure that the party manifesto articulates policy on gender equality and distributes it to voters; ensure the safety of women candidates during the campaign; and mobilise women voters by providing gender-sensitive voter information (Ballington 2011, pp. 3-37).

Assessing the four political parties against these indicators shows their differences. Even though all the parties have reached a consensus about increasing women's electoral participation, differences are seen in the steps taken to realise it. As interviews with party leaders reveal, except for NAMA, the other three parties claimed that they have introduced an informal quota system for two female candidates out of five candidates at each district level, though this is not specified in their party constitutions.

Nonetheless, whether the quota adopted by the parties has made a difference can be determined by the number of women candidates recruited for the 2021 elections. The International Republican Institute (IRI) and National Democratic Institute (NDI) report (2022) shows that a total of 9 000 candidates representing 47 parties and 125 independent candidates was registered for the 2021 general elections. The PP had the largest number of candidates with 2 432 registered, followed by EZEMA with 1 385 candidates registered, ENAT with 573 candidates registered, and NAMA with 491 candidates registered, respectively. Overall, the participation of women candidates decreased from 29 per cent in 2015 to 21 per cent in 2021. In total 1 976 women were registered as candidates by political parties and six women were registered as independent candidates (Table 1).

**Table 1: The number of candidates and the women's portion recruited by four political parties for Ethiopia's 2021 elections**

Name of Parties	No of Party Members	No. of Candidates for the Federal Parliament				No. of Candidates to the City and State Councils			
		M	F	Total	Women's proportion (%)	M	F	Total	Women's proportion (%)
PP	38 815	298	209	507	41	1337	954	2 291	41.6
EZEMA	3 860	338	13	351	3.7	1003	163	1 166	14
NAMA	11 866	152	1	153	1.4	345	14	359	3.8
ENAT	1 183	169	10	179	6.4	360	44	404	10.9

Important implications can be drawn regarding the number of women candidates recruited by the four parties for the 2021 elections. First, in Ethiopia, political parties' adoption of a voluntary quota for women is not guaranteed to ensure and promote women's political participation and representation. The ruling party, the PP, has developed an informal quota system for the lower houses. Although EZEMA has adopted a voluntary quota of two out of five candidates (which is 40%), women consist of 3.7% and 14% of the number actually recruited for the parliament and state councils respectively. On the other hand, parties' failure to adopt a voluntary quota system for women's representation publicly does not necessarily mean that party is unfavourable for women. This is inferred from the PP's number of women candidates. As shown in Table 2, the PP nominated about 41 per cent of women candidates for the 2021 elections without openly adopting a voluntary quota for women.

As the interviewees revealed, women candidates in the ruling party have already gained in popularity as they have assumed public office for some time. Despite criticism by its opponents, the ruling party recruits more women by using existing, well-established government structures and resources. On the opposition side, as interviews revealed, women are reluctant to join because of a political space that does not favour women and a hostile public attitude towards women in opposition parties. Moreover, the extremely volatile security situation due to the war between the federation and its regional allies and the armed TPLF group in northern Ethiopia could be one potential factor for the decline of women candidates' representation for the 2021 election. According to the IRI and NDI report (2022), this insecurity due to violence has specific and disproportionately negative effects on the participation of women and other marginalised groups, and poses grave concerns about potential human and political rights violations in and outside the election context.

In the *candidate recruitment* phase, parties have shared their active engagement in providing training, establishing a partnership with CSOs, and support from men for their women candidates. The training focused mainly on leadership and public speaking skills. The support of men for women was evidenced during the election campaign, whereby a few men accompanied and campaigned for the female candidates. However, in terms of equipping women with campaigning capacity, no party has provided them with any training. EZEMA has arranged experience-sharing sessions between experienced candidates and novices. However, most ruling party PP candidates were officials hence they had experience in leading public meetings and were familiar with public speaking.

In terms of *funding*, there are no special arrangements for financing and building name recognition of women candidates by political parties. Apart from funding/CSO support of women training on matters mentioned above,

there is also no specific effort made at the party level to support women during campaigning. Special financial support is designed by the government to fund political parties. The number of female candidates the party nominates is one of the criteria to determine the amount and eligibility for the funding (Proclamation No.1162/2019 Article 100(2c)). According to the IRI and NDI (2022) report, some political parties adopted specific gender policies; however, only 13 parties successfully reached the 20 per cent threshold of registered women candidates to qualify for additional funding. As a result, some opposition parties were criticised for not having a genuine intention of increasing women's representation, but of recruiting women only for the financial incentive during election.

According to the IRI and NDI report (2022), representatives of major opposition parties highlighted a skewed funding field in which the ruling party has more than the normal advantages of incumbency, in part due to the country's political history. Opposition party leaders noted the lopsided support of the business community, citing the example of a fundraising event organised by the PP at the Millennium Hall on 15 March. The prime minister, his cabinet members and a wide range business persons were in attendance and the party raised over ETB 1.5 billion (about USD 35 million). Opposition parties also alleged that the business community could not support them openly, fearing retribution. Most parties complained about the ruling PP's misuse of state resources and abuse of office for campaign purposes from local to federal level. The unpunished abuse of state resources has been described as a common problem in previous and current elections.

Regarding the provision of safety for women candidates during *campaigning*, the ruling party PP relied primarily on the state security apparatus. Opposition parties generally assigned women to campaign with men, and in the urban centres (Atnafu 2021; Derese 2021; Kebede 2021; Tafesse 2021). The parties have adopted two different approaches to providing gender-sensitive voter information for women voters. The ruling PP has explained its efforts to ensure women's representation in its cabinet and women's assumption of key government positions. It has provided statistics indicating that women are assuming key government positions under its administration, and almost half of the government cabinet members are women (The Prosperity Party Election Manifesto 2021). On the other hand, opposition parties have focused on asserting that women are still subjugated in Ethiopia. They provided information to the voters about how women are marginalised from substantive political representation, the ramification of gender-based violence, the economic dependency of women, and their commitment to address traditional challenges that undermine women's roles.

While the majority of women candidates face disproportionate barriers in contesting elections, women candidates from opposition parties and independent

women candidates reportedly faced additional challenges during campaigning. As the campaign season began, candidates from two opposition parties, NAMA and EZEMA, were assassinated (*Borkena* 2021). The NAMA candidate Berihun Asfaw was running for Benishangul-Gumuz state council, while Girma Moges was EZEMA's candidate for a parliamentary seat. Each political party alleged that the assassinations were politically motivated (Ayele 2022).

According to the IRI and NDI report (2022), women candidates from opposition parties were frequently the target of intimidation, threats, and campaign interference by security forces as well as members of the ruling party. Independent women candidates faced a range of additional difficulties in the collection of signatures and financial impediments resulting from late disbursement of state campaign subsidies. Interviews with leaders of opposition political parties revealed that some women candidates withdrew during the election campaign because of family pressure, including the threat of divorce by their husbands. Some women candidates have also faced sexual harassment in door-to-door campaigning. The repressive political culture of the country might contribute to fewer women candidates being recruited by opposition parties even though some have party policy in favour of women's representation.

The variation was also manifested in terms of *media visibility* of women. The extent of women's participation in the 2021 elections debates broadcast by the mainstream media illustrates the difference in media visibility. For instance, the Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (EBC) organised debates on different social policies with two candidates representing each party in each debate. In almost all the debates, one of the two debaters of PP and EZEMA were women. In the case of ENAT, women participated in very few sessions. NAMA was not represented by women at all during the debate streamed by EBC. Even in the women and youth policy debate, NAMA was represented only by male politicians.

### *Election Day*

According to Ballington et al. (2012, pp. 34-36), on election day political parties have to promote women's political representation. This includes ensuring that women are trained and assigned to polling stations as party agents and participate in election monitoring, which includes gender perspectives and women's safety. Party representatives confirmed that they have appointed women as party agents in polling stations, and affirmed that the bulk of women had taken part in election monitoring which was uncommon in previous elections. There was a prevailing sense of apprehension that the election would involve disturbances and therefore a low voter turnout was expected. According to the official report of the National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE), turnout in the 436 constituencies where elections went ahead was in the region of 90 per cent.

### *Post-Election Period*

Of the 20 national and 26 regional parties that competed in Ethiopia's 2021 elections, three national parties – PP, NAMA, EZEMA – and two regional parties managed to secure seats in the Federal Parliamentary Assembly (see Table 3). According to the official reports of NEBE, PP won 96 per cent of the seats in Parliament (454 seats). The NAMA won five seats, EZEMA won four seats, Gedeo People's Democratic Party won two, and four independent candidates also won seats in the Federal Parliament. Of the parties considered for this study, 37.8% of the female candidates from PP have won seats; only one female candidate from NAMA has joined the regional council; all four EZEMA candidates who have won seats are men. ENAT, the Mother's Party, failed to secure a single parliamentary seat. There are two possible justifications for this failure to secure a single seat in either the federal and regional parliaments. First, it was a new party, established only a few months prior to the 2021 elections. Second, the party was considered to be dominated by religious ideology rather than taking a 'pro-mothers agenda' as its name claims.

**Table 2: Distribution of parliamentary seats for the 2021 general elections**

Political parties winning Seats	Seats in HoPR	Women in the HoPR
Prosperity Party (PP)	454	176 (37.8%)
National Movement of Amhara (NAMA)	5	1
Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice (EZEMA)	4	0
ENAT Party	0	0
Other regional parties	3	1
Independents	4	0
Total	470	

Source: <https://nebe.org.et/>

EZEMA was expected to be the second major political party in terms of seats won. However, to the surprise of many this party lost in all but four constituencies. However, EZEMA party has left a good impression for its progressive citizen-based ideology and has been proactive in bringing women into public debates during the election campaign. This could be due mainly to the current ethnic-based ideology which has dominated the Ethiopia politics. The very tense ethnic politics in Ethiopia is one of the possible challenges to bring the issue of other ideologies into the political space. Lately, the winning ruling party has made a



political decision to offer more open seats to selected failed leaders of opposition parties from EZEMA and NAMA, who are now appointed as ministers of Higher Education and Innovation respectively.

**GENDER COMPOSITION OF LEADERSHIP POSITIONS IN FEDERAL AND REGIONAL OFFICES AFTER THE 2021 ELECTIONS**

In October 2021, the House of People’s Representatives held the sixth round, first year, first special session. Accordingly, the prime minister proposed 22 ministerial positions (of these, seven ministers are women) which have been approved by the Parliament with two votes against and 12 abstentions. The cabinet proposal saw the changing functions and jurisdiction of a number of ministries and government institutions, and for the first time included three opposition figures in ministerial positions. Women were appointed to ministerial offices such as Health; Transport and Logistics; Labour Skills; Women and Social Affairs; Irrigation and Lowland Areas; Planning and Development; and Urbanisation and Infrastructure. Moreover, women were assigned as directors in more than eight federal offices and as team leaders in 19 offices.

Regional bureaus led by women also vary, from two in the Amhara region to six in the Harari regional council. Bureaus of Women, Children, and Youth Affairs are led mainly by women in different regions. Other regional bureaus led by women include Agriculture, Justice, Health, Urban Development, Road and Construction, and the Civil Service Commission (see Table 3).

**Table 3: Composition of the Federal and Regional Offices Heads and Deputy Heads by Gender**

	Council	No of Positions	Directors/ Heads		Deputy Heads/ Team Leaders		Sectors that assigned Women Leaders
			F	M	F	M	
1	Addis Ababa	18	8	21	19	23	Directors for bureaus of Tourism; Water irrigation, & Energy; Health Insurance Agency, Business Investment; Education; Social Security; Geospatial Information Institute

2	<b>Afar</b>	18	3	15	6	20	Directors for bureaus of: Women, Children and Social Affairs; Attorney; Technique and Enterprise Develop- ment
3	<b>Amhara</b>	23	2	21	3	18	The speaker of the council Directors for bureaus of: Women, Children and Social Affairs; Civil Service Com- mission
4	<b>Gambella</b>	17	1	14	3	11	The speaker of the council Directors for bureaus of Women, Children and Social Affairs
5	<b>Harari</b>	14	6	8	1	13	Directors for bureaus of: Agriculture; Women, Children and Social Affairs; Urban Development, Road and Construction; Employ- ment, Skills, and Enterprise; Civil Service
6	<b>Oromia</b>	19	3	16	8	25	Heads of bureaus of: Justice; Culture and Tourism; Women, Children and Social Affairs
7	<b>Sidama</b>	17	5	12			Heads of bureaus of Health; Women, Children and Social Affairs; Urban Develop- ment; Employment, Skills, and Enterprise, Planning and Development
8	<b>SNNPRs</b>	20	3	22	14	25	Heads of bureaus of: Women, Children and Social Affairs; Communication; Planning and Development
9	<b>SWEPRs</b>	20	4	16	10	43	-Finance and Economy Office -WCYA, Revenue Authority -Enterprise and Industry Office
10	<b>Somali</b>	9	4	5	-	9	Bureau of Mines, Innovation and Technology, Women and Social Affairs, Vice Spokesperson of the Council

11	Dire Dawa C/A	14	3	11	-	-	Head of Bureaus of Education, Health, Finance and Economics
12	Addis Ababa C/A	25	1	1	16	7	Mayor of Addis Ababa, Deputy Mayor, General Manager of Addis Ababa Head of bureaus of: Housing Development and Administration; Communication; Regulatory Authority of Government; Development Organizations; Culture Arts and Tourism; Peace and Security Administration; Design and Construction

Source: Data from Federal and Regional offices in 2021

**Table 4: Summary of Strategies to Promote Women’s Political Participation among the Four Political Parties**

Political Party Interventions		Name of Political Parties			
Phases	Strategies	PP	EZMA	ENAT	NAMA
Internal Party Organization	Legal framework & governing documents are gender sensitive	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Measures taken to promote women’s participation in governing boards & decision-making structures	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Women’s wing or section established is strategically positioned within the party	✓	✓		✓
	Targets set for women’s participation in party conventions				
	Gender equality perspective mainstreamed into policy development	✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>Candidate Recruitment</b>					
Pre-election	Establish consensus among party leadership to promote women’s electoral participation	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Consider adoption of voluntary party quotas for women candidates and formalise these in recruitment rules		✓	✓	

Phases	Strategies	PP	EZMA	ENAT	NAMA
Pre-election	Consider nominating % women candidates	✓	✓		
	Enforce candidate quota rules i.e. by the election bureau or leadership of the party in line with the electoral timetable	-	-	-	-
	Place women in winnable positions on party lists, or in winnable/safe constituencies	-	-	-	-
	Identify incentives to attract women and encourage them to join the party, such as capacity building or advocacy	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Ensure coordination with CSOs and organisations providing support to women candidates	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Form strategic partnerships and gain support from men		✓	✓	
	Funding and campaigning		✓	✓	
	Provide women with skills to raise advance funds, campaign and build name recognition				
	Establish or tap into fundraising networks for women candidates such as Emily's List and Wish List				
	Establish an internal party fund or provide subsidies to women candidates				
	Consider setting a limit on nomination/primary contest expenditure	NA	NA	NA	NA
	Consider earmarking a portion of party finances (including from public sources if applicable) for women candidates and training		✓	✓	✓
	Form partnerships and work with international organizations and CSOs		✓	✓	✓
<b>Campaigning</b>					
Pre-election	Build women's capacities to campaign and consider twinning or mentoring first time candidates		✓	✓	✓
	Ensure women's visibility in the electoral campaign and access to the media	✓	✓	✓	✓

Phases	Strategies	PP	EZMA	ENAT	NAMA
Pre-election	Ensure the party manifesto articulates policy on gender equality and disseminate it to voters	✓	✓	-	✓
	Mobilise women to register and to vote; provide gender sensitive voter information to men and women	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Ensure safety of women candidates during campaigning and keep party supporters in line where there is a potential for violence	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Ensure coordination among CSOs and organisations providing support to women candidates	-	✓	✓	✓
<b>Election Day</b>					
Election	Ensure women are trained and included as party agents in polling stations	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Ensure monitoring includes a gender perspective and ensures the safety of women	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Women are trained and included as election monitors	✓	✓	✓	✓
Post-election	Undertake gender equality assessment; develop gender action plan within party	-	-	-	-
	Provide capacity building and strengthen the legislative skills of elected women	✓	-	-	-
	Promote gender sensitive political reforms to institutions, particularly in parliament	✓	-	-	-
	Promote the participation of women in party policy making; ensure gender mainstreaming in party policies	✓	-	-	-
	Encourage formation of cross-party caucus and support its functioning	-	-	-	-
	Sensitise party members about gender equality and work with men	-	-	-	-

Source: Interviews with party leaders and women candidates and review of party manifestoes and other relevant documents

## CONCLUSION

Since the adoption of constitutional democracy and a multi-party system in Ethiopia's 1995 Constitution, the issue of women's political representation has become a topic of scholarly discourse in Ethiopia. Nonetheless, as this article has shown, the existing discussion is limited to the government's role in promoting, and socio-economic factors promoting or hindering women's representation. The role of political parties in promoting women's political representation has been overlooked. The analysis of the Ethiopian political parties in the 2021 elections reveals discrepancies in the measures taken by political parties to promote women's parliamentary representation.

There are party-level differences and inconsistencies in the measures taken within and between parties in the entire election cycle. What is common to the political parties studied here is the existence of a common sense agreement to the relevance of a gender-sensitive party policy document, but without the formal rule that reserves a certain portion for women candidates. Party differences are also observed in terms of mainstreaming the gender issue in policy documents. All the parties discussed in the paper, with the exception of the ENAT Party, have a structure for a women's wing without setting targets for women's mandatory participation. Party-level differences are observed in the structure and extent of women's participation in party decisions. Except for EZEMA, they have adopted centralised decision-making but failed to adopt an institutionalised rule-based candidate recruitment policy in their organisational structure.

Regarding candidate recruitment, there is consensus among all parties on the need to increase women's electoral participation; however, there are many variations in the different measures taken. Although not legislated for, parties such as the PP and EZEMA have adopted an informal voluntary quota for women candidates but there were constraints in enforcing this. However, none of them has adopted women-focused strategies to assign women to winnable and safe constituencies.

Nor have any of the political parties in the study designed a special funding scheme for women. Little effort was made to build any recognition of women or equip them with campaigning skills. However, the Prosperity Party benefitted from its position as the ruling party in government, hence its women candidates were public officers and had prior experience of managing public meetings. Of the opposition parties, only EZEMA had arranged for new women candidates to share a platform with experienced candidates. Unlike the ruling party, opposition parties have established a strategic partnership with CSOs to empower women candidates with the necessary skills and knowledge to campaign. Moreover, fundamental differences were reflected in the media visibility of women during the election campaign. Women were seen on election day as party agents in the

polling stations and election monitors. Despite all its ups and downs, the ruling Prosperity Party won the election with an overwhelming majority.

Recent legal and institutional changes at the Ethiopian National Election Board include an additional subsidy for political parties that register a minimum percentage of women as candidates or as party leaders. There is also an allocation of free airtime for political parties that have incentivised, even with a limited effect, contributions for the promotion of political participation of women in the 2021 elections. In addition, the appointments and election of women to high-level offices, including Ethiopia's president, president of the Supreme Court, and chairperson of the NEBE, are seen as positive signs of more gender-inclusive politics. However, at party level, women's political participation is still influenced by several factors. These include party ideology, access to government institutional structures and resources, funding opportunities, attitudes of the public towards opposition parties, and access to media for campaigning.

Nationwide, the postponement of the election beyond the terms of parliament and state councils (as provided in the Constitution) due to COVID-19, and the subsequent deadly internal conflict, all complicated the situation in the country. These had a negative impact on the election outcome in general and participation of women in the election process in particular.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The issue of women and politics in Ethiopia should extend beyond increasing women's representation. There is a need to examine which women are represented as well as the degree to which women are actively engaged in different political parties before, during and after the-election.

Bylaws of political parties guide the recruitment and engagement of women in politics. There are differences and inconsistencies among the policies developed and measures taken within and between parties regarding women's participation in election. The relevance of gender-sensitive party policy documents and a genuine interest to support women beyond reserving seats or certain portion for women candidates needs critical attention. Reviews of these bylaws and programmes by political parties are thus timely.

There is also a need to review policy and legal frameworks at national level. The Ministry of Women and Social Affairs should adopt a strategy that recognises active and genuine representation and participation of women in party politics prior to election year. The National Electoral Board of Ethiopia should review electoral laws and directives and should adopt a strict supervision of women's engagement in the election cycle before, during and after the event.

Women's engagement in politics requires active and continuous advocacy from multiple actors. There is a need for robust evidence generation that enhances the understanding of party politics and women's active participation in elections. The government, CSOs, NGOs, and political parties should collaborate in advocating for genuine women's representation and participation in the upcoming elections, and on increasing the diversity consciousness of frontline actors and women at large.

### Acknowledgement

This work is part of a postdoctoral study at the Institute of Social Studies (ISS) of Erasmus University Rotterdam (EUR). The study was supported by a project titled: 'Strengthening of Law, Democratization and Media in Ethiopia' (LA\_DEM\_MED) in collaboration with Orange Knowledge Programme (OKP) at the Institute of Social Studies (ISS) of Erasmus University Rotterdam (EUR).

We thank Ida Sabelis (PhD) (retired) Associate Professor at Organization Sciences, Faculty of Social Sciences, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam; Wil Hout, Ph.D., Professor of Governance and International Political Economy International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), Erasmus University Rotterdam; Henk van den Heuvel, Ph. D., Director CIS, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam; Prosper S. Maguchu, Project Manager CIS Centre for International Cooperation, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam; Kalewongel Minale, Ph.D., coordinator of the project 'Strengthening of Law, Democratization and Media in Ethiopia' (LA\_DEM\_MED) at Bahir Dar, Ethiopia, for their assistance and effective facilitation of the project.

### — REFERENCES —

- Adugna, M 2001, 'Women and warfare in Ethiopia', *Gender Issues Research Report Series*, vol. 13, pp. 1-41.
- Aldrich, AS 2020, 'Party organization and gender in European elections', *Party Politics*, vol. 26, no. 5, pp. 675-688.
- Ayele, ZA 2022, 'COVID-19 and Ethiopia's Sixth General Election', 30 March *International Idea*, <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/covid-19-and-ethiopias-sixth-general-election-en.pdf>. Accessed 8 Jun. 2022.
- Ashenafi, M 2009, 'Participation of women in politics and public decision making in Ethiopia', *Forum for Social Studies*, vol. 5.
- Ballington, J, Davis, R, Reith, M, Mitchell, L, Njoki, C, Kozma, A & Powley, E 2012, *Empowering women for stronger political parties: A Guidebook to promote women's political participation*. United Nations Development Programme, [n.p.].



- Borkena 2021, 'Ethiopian opposition member killed in Bishoftu (Debre Zeit)', 15 February. <https://borkena.com/2021/02/15/ethiopian-opposition-member-killed-in-bishoftu-debre-zeit/>. Accessed 7 January 2022.
- Borkena 2021, 'Amhara opposition candidate slain in Benishangul Gumuz region of Ethiopia', 10 April <https://borkena.com/2021/04/10/candidate-amhara-opposition-slain-in-benishangul-gumuz-region-of-ethiopia/>. Accessed 7 January 2022.
- Capital 2022, <https://www.capitalethiopia.com/interview/the-electoral-race-enat-party/>. Accessed 7 July 2022.
- Caul, M 1999, 'Women's representation in parliament: The role of political parties', *Party politics*, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 79-98.
- Derese, L 2021, The 2021 Ethiopian Elections Enat Party's Woman Candidate for the National Parliament. Personal Interview, 18 August.
- Dessie, WA 2021, 'Women and Ethiopian politics: Political leaders' attitude and views on women's effectiveness', *Cogent Social Sciences*, vol. 7, no. 1948653.
- Eresso, MZ 2021, 'Women in Ethiopia', In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*, Oxford University Press.
- Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (EBC) 2021, 'Political Parities' Debate on Women and Youth Affairs', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eigr17oS5TM>. Retrieved 23 October 2021.
- Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice (EZEMA) 2021, *The 2021 Election Declaration Document*, Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice, Addis Ababa. <https://ethzema.org/>. Accessed 3 April 2022.
- Galal, S 2024, 'Gender gap index in Ethiopia 2016-2022', <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1253979/gender-gap-index-in-ethiopia/#:~:text=In%202022%2C%20Ethiopia%20had%20an,out%20of%20156%20countries%20globally>. Retrieved 27 August 2024.
- Gebru, SG 2014, 'Political parties, party programmaticity and party system in post-1991 Ethiopia', *European Scientific Journal*, vol. 10, no. 16, pp. 417-440.
- Gobaw, MK 2017, 'Women's Role and Their Styles of Leadership', *International Journal of Educational Administration and Policy Studies*, vol. 9, no. 3, pp. 28-34.
- Goetz, AM 2007, 'Political cleaners: Women as the new anti-corruption force?' *Development and change*, vol. 38, no. 1, pp.87-105.
- Gudina, M 2007, 'Party politics, political polarization and the future of Ethiopian democracy', *Horn of Africa*, vol. 28, pp. 18-46.
- Haack, K 2014, 'Breaking barriers? Women's representation and leadership at the United Nations', *Global Governance*, vol. 20, no. 1, p.37.
- Hailu, EF 2017, 'Who speaks for whom? Parliamentary participation of women in the post-1991 Ethiopia', *Journal of Developing Societies*, vol. 33, no. 3, pp. 352-375.
- Hussain, M, Noor, S & Behan, RA 2021, Women's Participation in the Political Process: a Comparative Analysis of India and Pakistan, *Women (1997-2032)*, vol. 13.

- International Republican Institute (IRI) & National Democratic Institute (NDI) 2021, *Ethiopia National Elections Report*. [https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/leome\\_report\\_of\\_the\\_june\\_21\\_elections\\_final\\_final.pdf](https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/leome_report_of_the_june_21_elections_final_final.pdf). Accessed 8 June 2022.
- Kantola, J 2019, 'Women's organizations of political parties: Formal possibilities, informal challenges and discursive controversies', *NORA-Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, vol. 27, no. 1, pp. 4-21.
- Kassa, S 2015, 'Challenges and opportunities of women political participation in Ethiopia', *Journal of Global Economics*, vol. 3, no. 4, pp. 1-7.
- Kiruga, M 2019, 'Ethiopia passes new laws ahead of 2020 elections', *The Africa Report*, 29 August, [www.theafricareport.com/16693/ethiopia-passes-new-laws-ahead-of-2020-elections/](http://www.theafricareport.com/16693/ethiopia-passes-new-laws-ahead-of-2020-elections/).
- Kebede, A 2020, 'Women's Political Participation in Ethiopia from ancient times to the present', *International Journal of Research in Social Sciences*, vol. 10, no. 2, pp.188-197.
- National Movement of Amhara [NAMA] 2021, *Election Manifesto*, Addis Ababa.
- National Election Board Ethiopia [NEBE] 2021, *Ethiopia Election 2021*. <https://nebe.org.et/en>. Accessed 7 June 2022.
- Prosperity Party Bylaw (Unofficial) 2021, Addis Ababa. <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/PP-bylaws-2.pdf>. Accessed 20 March 2021
- Prosperity Party Election Manifesto 2021, *The Reporter*, Addis Ababa, <http://archive.ethiopianreporter.com/>. Accessed 8 August 2021.
- Richards, R 2020, 'Barriers to women and girls' participation in electoral processes in Ethiopia and policy responses', *Helpdesk Report, Knowledge, evidence and learning for development (K4D) Independent Research Consultant*, vol. 5. Accessed 8 June 2022.
- Tegegn, M 2008, 'Power politics: Kinijit in the 2005 elections', *Journal of Developing Societies*, vol. 24, no. 2 , pp. 273-306.
- The Ethiopian Electoral and Political Parties Proclamation No.../2019. 2019. <https://chilot.me/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/The-Ethiopian-Electoral-and-Political-Parties-Proclamation.pdf>. Accessed 8 June 2022.
- Teshome-Bahiru, W 2009, 'Ethiopian opposition political parties and rebel fronts: past and present' *International Journal of Social Sciences*, vol. 4 no. 1, pp. 60-68.
- The Reporter*, March 2021, 'Elections 2021: already favoring the ruling party?' <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/11035/>
- Veale, A 2003, 'From child soldier to ex-fighter. Female fighters, demobilisation and reintegration in Ethiopia', *Institute for Security Studies Monographs*, vol. 85, pp. 25-64.

Zewde, B 2002, *A history of modern Ethiopia, 1855–1991*, Ohio University Press, Athens, OH.

Zewde, B 2008, 'The Challenge of the New Millennium: Renaissance or Reappraisal?', *International Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, pp. 33-47.

## BOOK REVIEW

***Who will rule South Africa? The Demise of the ANC and the Rise of a New Democracy* by Adriaan Basson and Qaanitah Hunter, Flyleaf Publishing and Distribution, 2023. ISBN 978-1-998956-982; ebook ISBN 978-1-998956-920**

This useful analysis of the current state of South Africa politics suggests four possible outcomes of the forthcoming election in May 2024. These are as follows: first, although the ANC holds on to its majority by winning just over 50% of popular support, it will emerge weakened, thus igniting the internal flames of rebellion against party leader, President Cyril Ramaphosa. Second, the ANC receives below 50% but more than 45% of the vote, propelling it into opposition with one or more smaller parties, which will thereby gain unprecedented political leverage. Third, its support plunges to just above or just below 40%, which because coalition with multiple smaller parties would be unsustainable and messy, might lead it into a potentially more stable coalition with the EFF; or, at a long shot, with the DA. Fourth, although highly unlikely, the DA-encouraged Multi-Party Coalition (or ‘moonshot pact’) performs so well electorally, that it unseats the ANC completely.

‘Whichever of the above scenarios plays out’, argue the authors, the 2024 election will end the one-party grip on South Africa’, plunging South Africa into a new era of uncertainty (p.198). The authors admit that that they are not sure whether this will be ‘better or worse’ for South Africa. This is rather at odds with their optimistic subtitling of their book as presaging ‘the rise of a new democracy’. They do not say so explicitly, but it becomes evident that in their estimation, if South Africa is to embark on a less corruption-ridden and pro-growth and pro-democracy future, it will have to come about as the product of an ANC-DA coalition, whatever the difficulties this will encounter. The alternative they fear, especially if the ANC teams up with the EFF, is that the election will lead to South Africa sliding more deeply into the maw of ‘kakistrocracy’ (‘government by the worst in society’).

Pre-election books always risk becoming ephemera, blown away by the movement of time once the election results are known. Written by two of South Africa’s most highly respected journalists, this offering is well worth the read and deserves to avoid that fate. Granted, its scenarios are unexceptional, but they are well informed. Part One of the book provides an overview of the ANC’s descent into a welter of corruption, from the moment of the notorious 1998 arms deal, through to its brutal exposure by the report of the Zondo Commission. Part Two

provides a useful overview not only of the ascent of Cyril Ramaphosa to the ANC presidency but of the way his presidency operates, offering much insight into how his reluctance to engage in confrontational politics has shaped his temporising with the various factions within the party, and the seeming paralysis of the state he runs. Part Three focuses on the campaigning of Paul Mashatile for the post of deputy president, posing worrying questions about his financial integrity given the very real prospect that he may rise to the presidency if Ramaphosa is displaced by the ANC following a poor election result.

The book is wrapped up by a detailed discussion of the four scenarios listed above, these enriched by careful analysis of how the ANC's domination has been weakened by its loss of support in the 2021 local government elections, and it being either ejected from office or clinging on to rule in major cities by its formation of shaky coalitions. Its focus on the prospect of South Africa entering 'coalition country' is supplemented by useful summaries of the recent trajectories of both the DA and EFF, the ANC's two major rivals for power, along with brief introductions to the various smaller parties on the bloc.

This book is written in a highly readable style. It's well informed about the internal party dynamics of all three major parties, even if these are jazzed up with quite a lot of unsourced political gossip. However, as it was published in late 2023, it has missed out on the formation of the MK party. By early pre-election publication, the authors must have known that they were taking a risk, and in this case, their gamble has rather blown up in their faces, as MK was a major player in the election with worrying consequences not only for the ANC but also for the future of democracy. Nonetheless, this book will still be well worth a read after the results of the election are out, and the authors are to be congratulated for their courage to stick their necks out.

*Roger Southall  
Emeritus Professor in Sociology,  
University of the Witwatersrand*