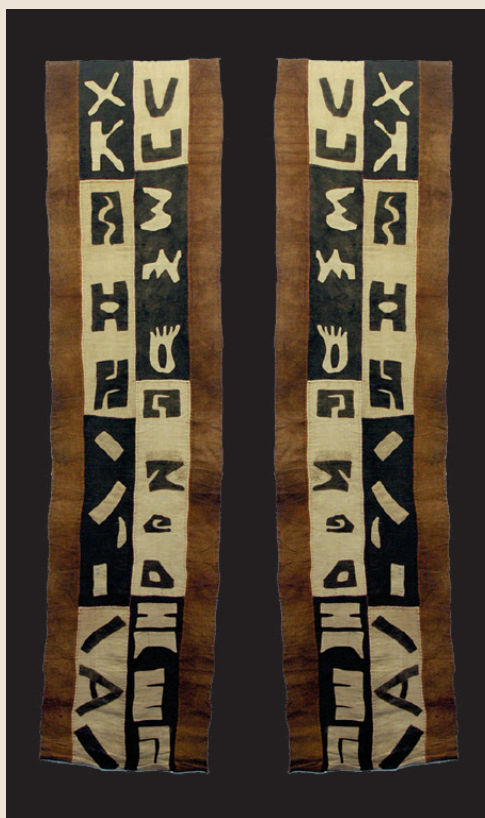
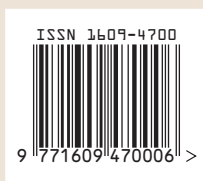




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ELITE CUES AND CITIZENS' DOUBTS ABOUT ELECTION INTEGRITY:

Preliminary Results From Africa

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines doubts about electoral integrity in African countries. We focus on the supporters of losing candidates and build on growing research on this topic from other contexts. Our cross-national analysis shows that cues by elites regarding a contest significantly shape the perceptions of their supporters. Where losing candidates reject an election result, their supporters are highly likely to question the integrity of the election. This is true even when controlling for the freeness and fairness of the election as assessed by international observers. Overall, the results suggest that losing candidates have substantial ability to shape the stability of democratic rule.

Keywords: elites, rhetoric, electoral integrity, voter perceptions

INTRODUCTION

Events in the United States on 6 January 2021 and protests in Brazil in late 2022 and early 2023 demonstrated how disbelief in the integrity of election results among large segments of a population can threaten democratic stability. A growing body of research examines this phenomenon, seeking to unearth the factors that drive doubts about electoral integrity. Over the last decade, such scholarship has flourished, and there is now a well-established body of knowledge on the topic.

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Yet, even with this work, there remain limits to scholarly understanding. Cross-national research on the phenomenon has been rather scarce (Mauk & Grömping, 2024, p. 968), and we do not know how transferable the results are across contexts. In addition, the importance of key variables that operate at a national level rather than the individual level remain underexamined. By expanding the domain of analysis to more than 30 African countries, most of which were not included in previous cross-national work, we address such limitations.

Our commentary builds on prior research, offering preliminary results from a study on perceptions of electoral integrity in sub-Saharan Africa. We explore the impact of factors that could lead opposition supporters to view an election as fraudulent. These include cues by elites, dimensions of the information environments in which voters are embedded, and levels of polarisation. Our key control variable was international observers' evaluations of the freedom and fairness of elections. Our findings echo those from important research in the United States and other cross-national work (see Berlinski et al., 2023; Hernández-Huerta & Cantú, 2022; Lyons & Workman, 2022). Doubts about the integrity of elections among opposition sympathisers are more prevalent where the losers of electoral contests challenge the results.

Exploring Factors at the National Level

In this analysis, we are interested in examining the impact of national-level variables, while controlling for the de facto freedom and fairness of elections as assessed by third-party observers. We focus on how such national-level variables affect the extent to which election losers, in the aggregate, voice doubts about electoral integrity. As Kerr et al. (2024) usefully instruct, current scholarship brings attention to two kinds of factors as potential drivers of citizens' doubts about electoral integrity. The first are individual-level factors. Some research highlights that citizens' objective experiences of electoral processes, such as the nature of their encounters with poll workers, can shape their assessments of an election (Hall & Monson, 2009). Other work in this category focuses on subjective factors such as voter bias, reasoning and cognitive processes. Important research has examined winner and loser effects, wherein the key factor is whether the voter's preferred candidate prevailed. More recently, research has focused on individuals' ideological leanings and media consumption habits (see Rossini et al., 2023; Van Ham et al., 2025).

The second type of factor operates at the national (or 'contextual') level. Scholars have found, for instance, that the de facto quality of an election (Mauk & Grömping, 2024) or electoral administration (Kerr, 2024) can shape citizens' perceptions of electoral integrity. More recent inquiry looks beyond these

conditions to examine an even wider range of contextual variables, particularly influences that issue from voters' political and informational environments. Given that post-election political instability can emerge where elections have otherwise been assessed as free and fair, understanding such influences is important. For reasons we describe below, our approach centred chiefly on these types of national-level factors. Specifically, we analysed cross-national data to assess how key national-level variables shaped aggregate perceptions of electoral integrity, when the objective or de facto quality of elections was held constant. We focused on three such factors, generating hypotheses concerning each.

Factors that Influence Voters' Perceptions

The first factor we examine concerns cues from political leaders about the freeness and fairness of electoral contests. A growing body of research indicates that elite rhetoric about elections can affect the perceptions of people aligned to those elites. Focused on the United States, Lyons and Workman (2022) and Berlinski et al. (2023) found that claims of voter fraud by prominent politicians decreased citizens' confidence in the integrity of election results. Cross-national research exploring the dynamics in Latin American countries also found that losing elites who refused to accept the election results eroded their supporters' trust in the elections (Hernández-Huerta & Cantú, 2022; see also Van Ham, 2025). Building on such work, we hypothesised as follows:

H1: In settings where losing candidates openly challenge and refuse to accept the election results, higher proportions of opposition supporters will question the integrity of recent elections.

The second factor we studied concerns voters' informational environments. Research by Blanchar and Norris (2021) and Grant et al. (2021), for example, indicates that exposure to and consumption of partisan media increased the perception of electoral fraud among voters who backed Trump in the 2020 US elections. Mauk and Grömping (2024) similarly found that high levels of exposure to disinformation led to doubts about election integrity among the losers (see also Rossini et al., 2023).

In this vein, we focus on two issues. The first is the extent of internet use in society, which expands people's exposure to and consumption of partisan messaging and misinformation. The second is the quality of media outlets in a country, especially the extent to which the media are corrupted in ways that could undermine the neutrality and objectivity of their reporting. Our second and third hypotheses were as follows:

H2: In settings with high levels of internet use, higher proportions of opposition supporters will question the integrity of recent elections.

H3: In settings with high levels of media corruption, higher proportions of opposition supporters will question the integrity of recent elections.

Our third factor concerns the extent of polarisation in countries. Research suggests that partisan identification and political homophily – which means affiliating mainly with like-minded people – can increase partisan-motivated reasoning. In turn, partisan-biased logic affects people's assessments of electoral integrity (Blanchar & Norris, 2021; Van Ham et al., 2025). Polarisation implies both a hardening of party identities and increasing homophily. We therefore hypothesised as follows:

H4: In settings with high levels of polarisation, higher proportions of opposition supporters will question the integrity of recent elections.

A National Aggregate

As the hypotheses imply, our focus was on how opposition supporters – the apparent 'losers' of electoral contests – across various African countries have assessed the integrity of elections. Our analysis examined the *aggregate* percentage of opposition supporters who claimed that a recent election was not free and fair. This use of national-level aggregates as the dependent variable stands in contrast to the conventional approach, which treats individuals as the unit of analysis so that specific drivers of individual doubts about electoral integrity can be examined. While we have employed that approach in other work, our focus here on national-level aggregates is intentional.

By focusing on the aggregate percentages of opposition supporters who doubt electoral integrity, we target a phenomenon that is related to, but distinct from, individual-level assessments; furthermore, it has potentially significant consequences. Simply put, as the percentage of people who doubt electoral integrity rises, so too does the potential for system-destabilising consequences. For example, post-election violence in Kenya in 2007 and in Gabon during 2016 occurred in the context of widespread doubts among the opposition about the integrity of electoral contests in those years. In both cases, more than 40% of opposition supporters maintained that the respective elections were not free and fair. Keeping such destabilising consequences in mind, it is critically important to understand the drivers of such aggregate outcomes.

VARIABLES AND DATA

To measure our dependent variable, we relied on data from Afrobarometer surveys that were conducted after specific elections, using Rounds 3 through 9. Our data thus covered surveys conducted from 2005 to 2022 and for which results were available through the end of 2023. We identified two groups of survey respondents who could be considered supportive of or sympathetic to the opposition. The first was those who indicated they trusted the opposition ‘a lot’ or ‘somewhat’. The second was respondents who distrusted the president, indicating that they had either ‘no’ or ‘little’ trust in the president. Although these groups are intuitively related (and strongly correlated), they are nonetheless distinct. We ran analyses with each group to check for robustness.³ We assessed the percentage of each group that, in response to an Afrobarometer question about the freeness and fairness of the most recent election, deemed the contest not to have been free and fair. As evident from the first two rows of Table 1, there was considerable variation in how opposition supporters evaluated the freeness and fairness of specific electoral contests.

Building from our hypotheses, our first independent variable reflects whether opposition candidates indicated that they accepted or rejected the results of elections. To assess this, we initially used data from the Perceptions of Electoral Integrity project,⁴ which contains a variable indicating whether parties or candidates challenged the results. However, in light of limitations with this data, we turned to additional sources to crosscheck and complete our dataset. These included accounts from Africa Confidential,⁵ Freedom House’s (FH) ‘Freedom in the World’ reports, Wikipedia and news accounts accessed through Nexis Uni. We called this variable ‘opposition challenge’ and coded it as 0 or 1, with 1 indicating that the leading opposition candidate openly challenged and refused to accept the results.

Our second hypothesis focuses on levels of internet penetration. To capture this variable, we drew from World Bank data and included the level of penetration for the year in which the Afrobarometer survey was conducted.

Our third hypothesis focuses on corruption within media outlets. For this variable, we used data from the V-Dem dataset.⁶ V-Dem engages country experts to assess various aspects of a country’s political environment annually. We used the V-Dem scores for the variable ‘media corrupt’, which reflects the extent to which media professionals ‘accept payments in exchange for altering news coverage’.

3 Measuring opposition affiliation after the election was not ideal but was the best path with the existing data.

4 See <https://www.electoralintegrityproject.com/pei>

5 See <https://www.africa-confidential.com/news>

6 See <https://v-dem.net/>

V-Dem scores the measure on a scale of 0 to 4, with higher scores indicating less corruption. We included the variable for years in which the Afrobarometer survey was conducted.

For our fourth hypothesis, we again drew from V-Dem, which has a measure called ‘political polarisation’ that reflects ‘the extent to which political differences affect social relationships beyond political discussions’. We included the variable for the years in which the Afrobarometer survey was conducted. V-Dem scores polarisation on a 0–4 scale, with higher scores indicating greater polarisation.

We also included several control variables, and the first deserves special emphasis. Given that our goal was to understand citizens’ perceptions of electoral integrity while holding constant the de facto quality of the elections, we needed a measure of the de facto quality. We drew from two sources. The first was FH’s assessments of specific elections, which is a component of the FH annual evaluations of countries included in the reports. FH scores this 0–4, with higher scores indicating a better quality of elections. We labelled this variable ‘FH freedom and fairness’.

Table 1: Summary Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
<i>Dependent Variable</i>					
Election not free and fair (among opposition trusters)	120	0.15	0.12	0	0.52
Election not free and fair (among presidential non-trusters)	122	0.21	0.14	0.02	0.53
<i>Independent Variables</i>					
Opposition Challenge	121	0.46	0.5	0	1
Internet Penetration	121	18.89	18.6	0.39	72.31
Media Corruption	122	2.6	0.54	1.33	3.79
Political Polarisation	122	2.21	0.76	0.56	3.94
FH Freedom and Fairness	89	2.23	1.26	0	4
V-Dem Freedom and Fairness	123	2.52	0.86	0.32	3.88
Human Development Index Score	122	0.52	0.09	0.35	0.81
Executive Election	123	0.77	0.42	0	1
Ethnic Fractionalisation	121	0.68	0.2	0.06	0.93
Margin of Victory	120	36.74	26.69	0.46	100
Boycott	122	.12	0.32	0	1

The FH data extend back only to 2012, which truncated our dataset. We thus ran additional analyses using data from V-Dem, which includes the measure ‘election free and fair’. V-Dem scores this variable the same way (0–4), and we labelled it ‘V-Dem freedom and fairness’.

Our other controls included factors considered in other cross-national studies on citizens’ evaluations of electoral integrity (e.g., Mauk & Grömping, 2024). These included the country’s level of development, measured on the UNDP’s Human Development Index (HDI); whether the election was for the executive; Alesina et al.’s (2003) measure of ethnic fractionalisation; the winner’s margin of victory; and whether or not the election was boycotted, which we obtained from the same sources that provided data on the acceptance of election results. Table 1 shows the summary statistics for our variables.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

We obtained data from 35 countries across seven rounds of the Afrobarometer surveys.⁷ Thus, our dataset was a panel, and each entry corresponded to a country-round referring to a specific election (e.g., Kenya 2007 or Malawi 2019). We estimated the effects of the independent variables using cross-sectional time-series regression. We had no reason to suspect that any one country was driving the results, so we did not use country dummy variables.

Table 2 shows the results of four models. Models 1 and 2 pertain to the group of respondents who trusted the opposition, whereas Models 3 and 4 pertain to respondents who distrusted the president. Models 2 and 4 substituted the FH freedom and fairness control variable with the equivalent V-Dem measure, which increased our sample size and provided a check for robustness.

Our findings suggest clear support for the first hypothesis. When a losing opposition politician challenged the election result, a larger percentage of their supporters viewed the election as fraudulent. This result held for both groups, namely those who trusted the opposition and those who distrusted the president. Even more strikingly, the result was significant when we controlled for the de facto quality of elections as assessed by third-party observers. Indeed, in Model 1, opposition challenges were significant, whereas the FH freedom and fairness of elections was not. As discussed below, elite rejections of results also have an important *substantive* impact on citizens’ assessments.

Regarding our other hypotheses, the results were somewhat less striking. Although we expected that greater internet penetration, media corruption and polarisation would all increase opposition supporters’ perceptions of electoral fraud, our estimates for these variables were insignificant. These findings suggest that such factors do not meaningfully influence citizens’ perceptions.

⁷ See <https://www.afrobarometer.org/>

Table 2: Regression Results: Perceptions of Election Fraud

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Sub-sample	Trust the Opposition	Trust the Opposition	Distrust the President	Distrust the President
Opposition Challenge	0.079*** (.021)	.060*** (.021)	.114*** (.020)	.078*** (.020)
Internet Penetration	.001 (.000)	.000 (.000)	.001 (.001)	.000 (.001)
Media Corruption	-.020 (.030)	.005 (.022)	-.028 (.029)	.009 (.025)
Political Polarisation	.008 (.016)	.007 (.015)	.013 (.017)	.013 (.016)
FH Freedom and Fairness	-.020 (.016)		-.024* (.013)	
V-Dem Freedom and Fairness		-.062*** (.017)		-.077*** (.016)
Human Development Index Score	0.127 (.188)	.066 (.181)	.085 (.193)	.015 (.172)
Executive Election	-.007 (.028)	-.014 (.020)	-.022 (.026)	-.019 (.022)
Ethnic Fractionalisation	-.018 (.071)	-.013 (.064)	.050 (.060)	.048 (.051)
Margin of Victory	-.001** (.000)	-.001*** (.000)	-.001** (.000)	-.001*** (.000)
Boycott	.076*** (.028)	.045* (.027)	.095*** (.035)	.080** (.037)
Number of observations	82	114	83	115

Note: Robust standard errors are shown in parentheses

***p<.01, **p<.05, *p<.10

Three other findings are noteworthy. First, as the margin of victory increased, perceptions of electoral fraud decreased. This pattern suggests that close election results may generate suspicion. Second, boycotts had a significant relationship with citizens' evaluations of elections. Like messages from elites alleging fraud, opposition boycotts of elections cast doubt on the integrity of a contest. Finally,

the finding regarding our most powerful control variable, the de facto quality of elections as assessed by FH and V-Dem, was highly relevant. Three of the four models indicated that citizens were more likely to judge an election as fraudulent if third-party observers did the same. This is, of course, an intuitive result.

We turn now to the *substantive* impact of these factors. Table 3 provides estimates of how the independent variables affected the overall percentage of a country's opposition supporters who viewed an election as fraudulent, when other variables were held constant at their mean values.

Table 3: Substantive Effects Based on Table 2 Estimate

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Opposition Challenge	7.9%	6.0%	11.4%	7.8%
FH Freedom and Fairness	n/a	n/a	-9.6%	n/a
V-Dem Freedom and Fairness	n/a	-22%	n/a	-27.4%
Margin of Victory	-9.5%	-9.5%	-9.5%	-9.5%
Boycott	7.6%	4.5%	9.5%	8.0%

Note: The table shows the percentage change in perceptions of elections as not free and fair, given the minimum to maximum change (see Table 1 for reference) for each independent variable. Estimates for variables not significant in Table 2 are omitted.

As the estimates indicate, when losing politicians challenged the election results, the percentage of opposition supporters who doubted the freeness and fairness of elections increased by between 6 (Model 2) and 11.4 (Model 3) percentage points. The effect of these loser challenges was not as large as that of the de facto quality of elections as measured by V-Dem (Models 2 and 4) but was larger than the effect of the FH estimates (Model 3). These findings imply that opposition challenges can appreciably increase citizens' doubts, even when elections are assessed as free and fair by third-party observers.

We mentioned above that close election results appear to drive up perceptions of fraud. However, the range for this variable may have led to an overestimation of the relative impact of the margin of victory. Boycotts also substantially increased people's misgivings about an election. Nonetheless, only one model indicated that the impact of boycotts was greater than the effect of elite rejections of the election results.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our results confirm that elites who challenge and reject election results have a substantial influence on how their supporters view the integrity of the election.

Given that perceptions of electoral fraud are associated with political instability, this finding highlights that elites have considerable power to undermine democratic rule.

Future scholarship should continue ongoing comparative work on this important topic. Further broadening the scope of analysis, as we have done here, could help affirm existing insights or reveal other potential drivers of doubts about electoral integrity. Beyond broadening, investigations also need to be deeper. Multi-level analyses of national and individual factors have revealed important insights (e.g., Van Ham et al., 2025; Mauk & Grömping, 2024), and more work of this nature could explore key issues, such as how elite cues interact with individual media consumption patterns. In addition, cross-national studies could focus on whether – and why – doubts may dissipate or become less acute over time. Given the potential consequences that doubts about electoral integrity hold for political stability, such work will be quite valuable.

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ELECTIONS DO NOT MAKE A DEMOCRACY: *The Transition in Chad*

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ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on the electoral process that was undertaken to finish the transition in Chad, which is the only Sahel state to have held elections after a putsch. The president is now internationally recognised as the elected president, and the transition is complete. At the same, time human rights violations and the lack of democracy are obvious in all decisions – yet these issues do not receive comment by the international community.

Keywords: *Chad, transition, elections*

INTRODUCTION

Military leaders in the Sahel countries that have experienced coups d'état in the last five years have all made the same promise: they did not come to stay. Chad is the only country that has officially completed its post-coup transitional period by establishing a constitutional order and holding elections. However, given the electoral process and current political situation in Chad, including human rights violations, I argue that those elections, and the fact that the president and parliament were elected in general elections, do not automatically mean the country is now on the path to democracy. Rather, the country shows a democratic backsliding (Waldner & Lust, 2018). Indeed, international legitimisation as a reward for holding elections has given the current regime in Chad free rein – not only to crack down on the opposition and disregard human rights, but also to install the president for life.

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DEATH OF IDRIS DÉBY

The transition in Chad began with the unexpected death of long-time President Idriss Déby Itno in April 2021. He died while the *Front pour l'Alternance et la Concorde au Tchad* (Front for Change and Concord in Chad, FACT) was trying to advance towards N'Djamena (Dickow, 2021). The *Conseil Militaire de Transition* (Military Transitional Council, CMT) unconstitutionally seized power and appointed Déby's son Mahamat as president. Mahamat Déby has held onto power ever since.

Phases of relaxation and suppression alternated during the transition. It is not exaggerated to argue that what began as seeming liberalisation, at least compared to the late Déby's authoritarian rule, ended with the same inhumane forms of rule as in the past, under the new leadership. The following discussion illustrates the stages that unfolded from the outset, with the apparent ultimate goal being the establishment of an autocratic system as a continuation of the late Idriss Déby's autocracy.

FROM LIBERALISATION TO SUPPRESSION

Following the unconstitutional coup d'état by the CMT and the appointment of Mahamat Déby as a transitional president, Chadians experienced a phase of relative liberalisation and 'the impression of ... compromise and consensus' (Lacher, 2022). The transitional authorities loosened the control over various opposition groups that were established political parties and civil society organisations. These groups were given the liberty to express themselves politically; in addition, the ban on assembly was lifted, and demonstrations were permitted.

Despite these moves, the already weak political opposition became even weaker. During my interviews with members of the Chadian civil society and politicians in March 2022, I was told that the rapprochement between the transitional authorities and some opposition members merely led to the latter being co-opted into roles within the transitional bodies. The rapprochement included movements that are, in the Chadian context, called 'politico-military' movements; these had operated from neighbouring countries and had challenged the Idriss Déby regime repeatedly. During a period of eight months, a peace contract was negotiated in Doha, Qatar between representatives of the transitional authorities and some 50 movements. Only FACT and a few small politico-military movements did not sign the Doha Peace Treaty (Krippahl, 2022).

The decisions of the so-called *Dialogue Nationale Souveraine et Inclusive* (Sovereign and Inclusive National Dialogue, DNIS) concluded the smoothing phase, just as the promised 18-month phase of transition ended. Around 1,400 handpicked delegates, including a few token opposition members (in other

words, by no means an 'inclusive' group), decided to extend the transition period by two years. Mahamat Déby would remain as president. He and all members of the transitional authorities were granted the right to stand in the next elections. This decision was not in line with Article 25 of the African Union's Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (AU, 2012)², which Chad has signed. According to the article, persons involved in a coup d'état may not stand for election.

Resistance against the decisions and against the 'dynastisation' of power within the Déby family was immediate. Mostly young people followed the call for protests made by the opposition party Les Transformateurs under the leadership of Succès Masra as well as the newly founded civil society movement Wakit Tama. They protested not only against the dynastic concentration of power in the Déby family, but also because they had lost hope for political change or the establishment of democratic governance structures and a fair redistribution of the country's resources.

The security forces fired sharply on these (unauthorised) mass demonstrations. To this day, it is unknown how many people, mostly youth, were killed or disappeared after being arrested. Human rights organisations speak of more than 1,000 persons. The date of 20 October 2022 will forever be known in Chad as Bloody Thursday (International Crisis Group, 2022). The country was plunged into a state of shock and fear. Nobody seemed to dare to speak out anymore. Consequently, the transitional authorities were able to quietly follow the electoral roadmap that had been agreed upon by the DNIS.

ELECTION PREPARATIONS

A new voter list was needed. Voter registration took place in August and September 2023. The first round was focused on the densely populated southern regions of the country, where the population tends to be relatively opposed to the government. The north tends to be more pro-Déby, and the second round of voter registration took place here. This sequence meant that potential voters in the south who had just reached voting age were unable to participate in the subsequent elections, as they had been too young to register during the first round.

According to the DNIS's decision, the question of whether Chad should remain a unitary state or become a federal one should be decided by a referendum. The population of the south was largely in favour of a decentralised order. The national commission in charge of organising the constitutional referendum combined voting on the future form of state with that referendum. This was

2 <https://au.int/en/treaties/african-charter-democracy-elections-and-governance>

seemingly an economic decision. However, in practice, it meant that Chadians could only approve or reject the entire draft of the proposed constitution, in which centralisation was already determined. They could not opt for a federal state.

According to national observers and eyewitnesses, many Chadians boycotted the referendum on 17 December 2023 (RFI, 2023). The authorities reported a participation rate of 64% among the electorate, with more than 80% of participants voting in favour of the new constitution. The opposition expressed suspicions of fraud, but the Supreme Court confirmed the results. Chad was to remain a unitary state. The final stage to complete the transition was the elections, and 2024 would be the election year.

A SERIES OF ELECTIONS

Idriss Déby had held presidential elections regularly, but he had neglected any legislative elections. His son, Mahamat, has followed in his footsteps by prioritising the presidential elections. Also like his father, Mahamat Déby has ensured that no serious rivals can threaten his victory. His cousin, Yaya Dillo Djérou Betchi, could have been a serious contender. Yaya Dillo was a highly respected leader in their ethnic group of Zaghawa and had shown his willingness to stand in the presidential elections of May 2024. But on 28 February 2024, a day after the announcement of the election date, Yaya Dillo was shot dead by security forces in his party headquarters in N'Djamena. To date, there has been no official investigation into his death. For anyone with a political ambition to become the country's president, it was clear that such ambitions could be dangerous (Dickow, 2024a).

Despite eliminating one of his biggest rivals, Déby continued to play it safe. He allied himself with two groups, the first being the Movement Patriotique du Salut (Patriotic Salvation Movement, MPS), the powerful former ruling party under his father. The second was the newly founded Coalition pour un Tchad Uni (Coalition for a United Chad), a coalition of more than 200 political parties (Ngarndinon, 2025) and more than 1,000 civil society organisations. Chad has a population of approximately 19 million people, according to The World Factbook.³

Ultimately, only 10 of the 20 candidates who had submitted their candidacies were allowed to run for president, based on the Constitutional Council's decision. Among them were the transitional president, Mahamat Déby, and his then prime minister, Masra. During the election campaign from mid-April until 4 May 2024, all candidates promised to improve citizens' living conditions, particularly by

3 <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/chad/> <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/chad/>

providing electricity and water. They also promised to improve education and job prospects for young people and to promote good governance, reconciliation, and co-existence. Transitional President Déby also emphasised ‘stability’, and he had used that word throughout the transition period to justify his assumption of power. Masra promised a break with the past.

The elections were held on 6 May 2024. The results were not scheduled to be announced until three weeks later, due to the size and inaccessibility of some regions. Nevertheless, as early as 9 May, the election authorities published their preliminary results. Déby was declared the winner, having obtained 61% of the votes. Masra received 18.5%, and the former prime minister, Albert Pahimi Padacké Padacké, received 16.9%. The remaining seven candidates received less than 1% each (LAM, 2024).

However, the elections had taken place without any witnesses. No observers, not even the 3,000 civil society members who were financed by the European Union to observe the presidential elections, had been accredited to carry out this task. Therefore, no announcement of the results appears to have been based on credible data. In November 2024, I interviewed members of Chadian civil society and politicians. According to these witnesses, there appeared to have been widespread fraud. Voters were unable to vote, and voter lists and ballot boxes had disappeared. The counting process and rapid publication of the results were also subject to irregularities, leading to further speculation about the elections’ credibility (Dickow, 2024b).

On 22 May 2024, Masra resigned. The next day, Déby nominated Allamaye Halina, a former ambassador to the People’s Republic of China and his father’s long-time head of protocol, as the new prime minister. Déby was inaugurated as Chad’s president on the same day.

The subsequent parliamentary, provincial, local, and senatorial elections were a mere technicality. The first three elections all took place on 29 December 2024. Unlike in the presidential elections, most opposition parties called for a boycott. They included Masra and his party *Les Transformateurs*, as well as the political opposition coalition known as the *Groupe de Concertation des Acteurs Politiques* (Consultation Group of Chad Political Actors, GCAP), which criticised the new electoral law and its application.

The results of the first parliamentary elections since 2011 were released on 21 January 2025. Among the more than 300 political parties in the country (CSAPR, 2019), 38 are now represented in the new parliament. As in the past, the MPS gained a two-third majority of the 188 seats, at 124 seats. The party *Rassemblement National des Démocrates Tchadiens-le Réveil* (National Rally of Chadian Democrats, RNDT) of the former prime minister Albert Pahimi Padacké won 12 seats. In second place was the *Rassemblement pour la Démocratie et le*

Progrès (Rally for Democracy and Progress, RDP), with eight seats. Third place went to the Union Nationale pour le Développement et le Renouveau (National Union for Democracy and Renewal, UNDR) led by the former opposition leader and now mediator of the Republic, Saleh Kebzabo, with seven seats. The other political parties did not win more than a single mandate each. Many of them are so-called allies of the MPS.

The transition officially ended with the general election. The senate elections were merely a formality and took place for the first time in Chadian history on 25 February 2025. According to the new constitution, 46 senators were elected by the newly elected municipal and provincial councillors. Also according to the constitution, the president nominated an additional 23 senators. He chose loyal MPS officials and other individuals who had close ties to the ruling party. According to members of Chadian civil society and politicians whom I interviewed in March 2025, the inevitable result has been a senate that does not provide a check on power. It is, instead, an instrument of the executive.

CONCLUSION

I have described the election process in Chad in detail to demonstrate that the various steps and voting were not conducted in a free and fair manner, as required by international standards. As McDonald (2024) stated, the Chadian 'transition [is] lacking real democratic transformation.' My aim is to illustrate the manoeuvres that were employed to achieve the desired result, which was to maintain power for the ruling elite.

The newly elected president is the son of the former authoritarian leader. He governs with the support of his father's former power base and former ruling party, the MPS. Thanks to its majority in Parliament, the MPS will continue to dominate all parliamentary resolutions. The result is a complete lack of checks and balances. Like his father, Mahamat Déby will be able to rule without parliamentary control and for life. Indeed, in October 2025, Parliament and the Senate passed a constitutional amendment that increases the president's term of office to seven years, with no limit on the number of terms (RFI, 2025).

It has long been known to scholars (e.g., Schmitter & Karl 1991; Schedler 2006) that merely holding elections does not necessarily result in a democratically elected government. Briverty and Mulonda (2019) described elections in Africa as 'administrative formalities which have become standard signs of good conduct adopted by African governments to Western states and international institutions.' The Chadian case illustrates this logic. There were formal elections, but the electoral process was by no means free and fair. Strictly speaking, Mahamat Déby

met the demands of the African Union and the international donor community, which had called for the restoration of constitutional order in Chad after the death of his father. He was rewarded immediately. The number of international visitors to the presidential palace and embassies that recently opened in the capital city of N'Djamena has been impressive. Chadian journal websites regularly report on inaugural ambassadorial visits. Impressive, too, are the international aid commitments made since the end of the transition. In 2025, for instance, Chad received loans from the World Bank totalling around US\$200 million,⁴ and the European Union added another €280 million between 2021 and 2024.⁵

Nonetheless, ordinary Chadians have experienced a further erosion of their rights and the elimination of political opponents. Since the end of the transition, several journalists have been arrested and critical newspapers and journals banned. The main highlight to date has been the arrest of the former prime minister, Masra, in May 2025, on charges of inciting hatred and xenophobia. In August 2025 he was sentenced to 20 years in prison.

The situation in Chad raises the following question: What is the point of international institutions and the Western world insisting on compliance with democratic rules? These institutions and countries should ask themselves why they are willing to impose sanctions on some countries, like Mali, while turning a blind eye to undemocratic practices in others – or even rewarding them. Considerations of *realpolitik* seem to be stronger than democratic standards.

The small, courageous opposition in Chad stands on its own. It urgently needs the support and recognition of the international community. As early as 2019, the Chadian NGO Comité de Suivi de l'Appel à la Paix et à la Réconciliation stated as follows: 'The real challenge is to enable citizens to freely express their expectations of the emerging political forces in order to promote the emergence of a national consensus among all social forces in Chad'⁶ (CSAPR, 2019). Those words must be taken seriously.

4 <https://financesone.worldbank.org/countries/chad>

5 https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/countries/chad_en

6 '*Le véritable enjeu est de permettre aux citoyens d'exprimer librement leurs attentes auprès des forces politiques en construction, afin de favoriser l'émergence d'un consensus national entre toutes les forces sociales tchadiennes.*'

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A LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF PROFESSOR NAANA JANE OPOKU-AGYEMANG'S VICE-PRESIDENTIAL 'OUTDOORING' SPEECH OF 2024

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ABSTRACT

This study presents a linguistic analysis of the 'outdoorings' (ceremonial public introduction) speech delivered by Prof. Naana Jane Opoku-Agyemang, Ghana's first female vice-presidential candidate of a major political party. She was selected as the vice-presidential candidate of the National Democratic Congress for the first time in 2020 and again in 2024. Drawing on political discourse analysis, the study examines her use of personal pronouns, modals, and rhetorical devices, including personification, simile, rhetorical questions, exaggeration, and innuendo. The focus is on the 2024 elections. The findings show that first-person and plural pronouns fostered inclusivity and commitment, and that rhetorical devices were used to enhance persuasion and subtly critique her political opponents. The analysis demonstrates how the speech built a leadership persona, reinforced collective solidarity, and affirmed party ideology. The findings also outline how this political language more broadly shaped public perceptions, mobilised citizens, and contributed to democratic outcomes. The paper advances the understanding of linguistic strategies in Ghanaian political communication and more generally the role of rhetoric in electoral contexts.

Keywords: political discourse analysis, electoral discourse, campaign speech, rhetorical devices, voter engagement

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INTRODUCTION

Language plays a crucial role in political communication. It influences people's decisions in choosing political parties or candidates. As Ayeomoni and Akinkuolere (2012, p. 462) observed,

No matter how good a candidate's manifesto is, no matter how superior the political thoughts and ideologies of a political party may be, these can only be expressed and further translated into social actions for social change and continuity through the facilities provided by language.

The above observation foregrounds language as the principal medium through which political ideas are articulated and enacted. In Ghana, the growth of multi-party democracy has generated scholarly interest in the study of political discourse. Examples include research by Agyekum (2004, 2013, 2015, 2017), Obeng (2002a, 2002b), and Thompson (2019, 2021), whose works have laid the foundation for understanding the relationship between language and politics in Ghana. Building on those earlier studies, the present paper examines the speech delivered by Professor Naana Jane Opoku-Agyemang at her 'outdooing ceremony' as the 2024 vice-presidential candidate of the National Democratic Congress (NDC).

The term 'outdooing' originates from Ghanaian traditional naming ceremonies, where a newborn is formally presented to the community. As Anarfi and Fayorsey (2000, p. 152–153) explained, such ceremonies are 'occasions to show the newborn baby to friends and ... the public[,] with a bit of fun and flair'. In Ghanaian political culture, this practice has been reinterpreted as a formal public event in which a candidate is introduced and endorsed by their party. The outdooing ceremony thus functions as a ritualised occasion that symbolises political and cultural unveiling, legitimises leadership, and projects party unity and public endorsement.

Within this context, the outdooing speech differs from an ordinary campaign address in both function and context. It forms a key component of the ceremony itself and articulates the candidate's legitimacy, values, and connection to the community. The speech delivered at the outdooing ceremony is thus not merely a campaign message but also a performative act of political and cultural introduction.

Political discourse encompasses communicative activities such as campaigns, slogans, manifestos, advertisements, and public speeches, all of which rely on language to persuade and mobilise audiences (Chilton, 2004; Wilson, 2001). In the framework of political discourse analysis (PDA), language is viewed as both a reflection and a constructor of political ideologies (Agyekum, 2015). Political

communication thus shapes voters' beliefs and guides decision-making (Jucker, 1997; Obeng, 2002a). Generally, speeches by politicians exemplify these dynamics through the careful use of language that builds rapport and inspires hope for national progress (Duranti, 2006; Obeng, 1997).

Against this background, the current paper investigates how pronominal choices and rhetorical devices were employed by Prof. Opoku-Agyemang to achieve persuasive and inclusive effects. The analysis reveals how these linguistic strategies positioned the speaker within Ghana's political landscape. The study also contributes to a broader understanding of political communication in emerging democracies. The paper is organised as follows. Section 2 provides background information on the NDC and a brief profile of Prof. Naana Jane Opoku-Agyemang. Section 3 outlines the data collection procedures and the theoretical framework for the study. Section 4 presents the data analysis, and Section 5 presents the conclusion.

THE 2024 RUNNING MATE

The National Democratic Congress

The NDC is one of Ghana's two main political parties. A brief history follows. In 1981, the late Flight Lieutenant Jerry John Rawlings transitioned from the military-led Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) to democratic governance. The NDC was founded in 1992 after the ban on political parties was lifted. Rawlings went on to win the 1992 and 1996 elections, and these victories kept him in office until 2000. Since 2000, the NDC has alternated with the New Patriotic Party (NPP) in holding power.

Milestones for the NDC included the presidency of Prof. John Evans Atta Mills (2009–2012), the succession of John Dramani Mahama (2012–2016), and the contested elections in 2016 and 2020. In the 2024 elections, Mahama was the presidential candidate, and Prof. Naana Jane Opoku-Agyemang was his running mate. The transcript of Prof. Opoku-Agyemang's outdoor speech, which formally introduced her candidacy, provided the data for this study. The event, while rooted in party strategy, also illustrated the broader patterns in Ghanaian political communication.

Professor Naana Jane Opoku-Agyemang

Prof. Opoku-Agyemang is a distinguished academic and a political figure in Ghana. She earned her BEd in English and French at the University of Cape Coast, as well as a diploma from the University of Dakar and an MA and PhD from York University, Canada. She has held numerous academic leadership roles, including

Dean of the Faculty of Arts, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cape Coast (2008–2012), and Chancellor of the Women’s University in Africa (2018–2024).

Prof. Opoku-Agyemang’s political experience includes moderating the 2012 presidential debates and serving as Minister of Education under President John Dramani Mahama. In 2020, she became the first female vice-presidential candidate of a major political party in Ghana; she was later reappointed for the 2024 elections. In that year, she gave her outdoor ceremony, symbolising her official introduction and a key moment in Ghanaian political culture. The analysis of her speech in this paper highlights her rhetorical strategies and political communication style.

METHODOLOGY

Data Source

The data were drawn from the first formal speech by Prof. Opoku-Agyemang as a vice-presidential candidate in the 2024 general election. She delivered her speech on 24 April at the University of Professional Studies, Accra, approximately six weeks after her nomination on 7 March 2024. The event was broadcast live across major television, radio, and social media platforms and was covered extensively in the national press. We selected her speech for analysis because it marked the candidate’s formal public introduction. An outdoor event provides a meaningful context for analysing political communication, as it is strategically significant for articulating ideology, projecting credibility, and mobilising voter support.

The data consisted of the complete transcript of Prof. Opoku-Agyemang’s speech. We examined both audio and textual versions of the speech to ensure accuracy. The final text for analysis was obtained from the electronic edition of a credible Ghanaian news platform, www.ghanaweb.com, which was selected for its reliability and consistency in political reporting (Thompson, 2021; Thompson et al., 2024). The written version enabled a systematic linguistic analysis of discourse markers, including pronominals, modality, and rhetorical devices.

Research Design and Analysis

We employed a descriptive, qualitative research design (Kim et al., 2017) to explore the communicative strategies used by Prof. Opoku-Agyemang. This approach adopts a naturalistic orientation and facilitates in-depth understanding of the language used in a sociopolitical context (Kim et al., 2017). It also provided the necessary flexibility to adjust the theoretical framework and analytical focus throughout the research process.

Each sentence of the speech served as a unit of analysis. Given the study's aim of identifying linguistic strategies, we examined both discourse markers and rhetorical devices. The analysis also considered both internal and external political factors that influenced the speaker's linguistic choices. The methodology allows for the recognition that words and speech acts are often deliberately selected and that such choices may be strategically made to gain a political advantage and reinforce a party's ideology.

Qualitative content analysis is a systematic approach that organises text into meaningful categories, aligned with the study's objectives (Schreier, 2012). Coding was conducted in four stages, adhering to established protocols (Krippendorff, 2004; Schreier, 2012; Drisko & Maschi, 2016). Each of the three authors independently examined the transcript to identify salient linguistic features. We then met to compare our observations and discuss the emerging patterns. Instances of pronoun use, modality, and speech acts (such as promises) were coded and interpreted in relation to the speaker's persuasive and ideological goals.

To complement the qualitative analysis, we used the tools WordTips and Microsoft Word Count to determine the frequency of pronouns, modals, and rhetorical devices. These quantitative insights supported our interpretive discussion. They helped to illustrate how certain linguistic features functioned to project identity, build solidarity, and persuade the audience within the Ghanaian sociopolitical context.

Political Discourse Analysis

The framework underpinning this study PDA. In the realm of political communication, politicians and their supporters use language at various forums to achieve their ideological goals and score political points. Researchers primarily use PDA to analyse political speeches, including campaign messages, slogans, inaugurations, outdoorings speeches, radio and TV panel discussions, and statements by political supporters. PDA facilitates examining any language encounter that has political intentions, goals, and ideologies. Both the text and its context are considered essential for determining whether the communication qualifies as political discourse. According to Agyekum (2015), Desouza (2018), and Fairclough (2003), such speeches can include social, religious, cultural, and philosophical ideologies, as long as the speaker's aim is to persuade voters and influence their political decisions.

Politicians worldwide use language to promise, apologise, and discredit their opponents in ways that favour their own causes (Agyekum, 2013; Agyekum, 2015; Chilton, 2004). Through a PDA lens, this study provides a holistic understanding of how Prof. Opoku-Agyemang's outdoorings speech reflected political ideology, intention, and social goals, which were designed to influence, persuade, and

win over political supporters. In the next section, we examine how pronominals, modals, and rhetorical features were used to advance the NDC's vision and ideology while strategically discrediting political opponents.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Personal Pronouns

Personal pronouns are a central feature in political speeches that index identification, ideological alignment, and relational dynamics with the audience (Beard, 2000). In the speech we analysed, 180 personal pronouns were identified. They were first-person singular (I, me, my); first-person plural (we, our, us); second person (you, your); third-person singular (he, him, his); and third-person plural (they, them, their). First-person plural pronouns were the most frequent, accounting for 47%, followed by first-person singular at 23%, second person at 17%, third-person plural at 8%, and third-person singular at 5%. The subsections below discuss the various forms.

First-person Singular (I, Me, My, Mine)

The speaker's use of first-person singular pronouns totalled 42 instances and served both grammatical and pragmatic functions. Grammatically, the pronouns appeared in the nominative (subject), accusative (object), and genitive (possessive) forms. Examples include 'I' (24 instances) in the nominative, 'me' (6) in the accusative, and 'my' (10) or 'mine' (2) in the genitive case. From a pragmatic perspective, these pronouns positioned the speaker in relation to the presidential candidate, the audience, and broad ideological commitments. For instance:

1. 'As I stated in my brief acceptance note on March 7, 2024, by re-nominating me, you have demonstrated your remarkable consistency and unwavering commitment to inclusivity and innovation.'
2. 'I have heard you share with the public your rationale for choosing me, again. I have found that very touching. Thank you very much; as the Gonjas express it with meaning: *ansan kushun*.'

In examples 1 and 2, the use of first-person singular pronouns acknowledges the presidential candidate directly, while signalling loyalty and gratitude. Even though the decision to renominate the speaker was made in consultation with the NDC's Council of Elders, the responsibility ultimately rested with the presidential candidate, which explains why she directed her appreciation to him personally. Furthermore, by incorporating the Gonja language – the native language of the presidential candidate – to express her gratitude, the speaker deepened her

cultural and emotional bond with him. This act of codeswitching reinforced their shared identity and party cohesion.

Prof. Opoku-Agyemang also employed 'I' to express her personal beliefs and commitments, as illustrated in examples 3 and 4. This use of the first person projected her reliability and personal responsibility.

3. 'I remain inspired by the fact that, as a people...'

4. 'I feel privileged to work with him.'

Furthermore, in example 5, the speaker shifted the focus from personal expressions to matters of political and state accountability.

5. 'John and I have agreed that whoever has participated in the plunder of the state must be held accountable.'

The above utterance aligned with the NDC's campaign message of integrity and responsible governance. It introduced the political dimension of justice and anti-corruption, indirectly contrasting the moral stance of the speaker's team with the perceived misconduct of their political opponents. Thus, the first-person singular pronoun served as a means to express political credibility and moral vision, going beyond mere personal sentiment.

In examples 6 and 7 below, the use of first-person singular pronouns demonstrated inclusiveness and solidarity with the audience. These aspects showed the speaker's awareness of collective identity, despite her role as a vice-presidential candidate.

6. 'My fellow Ghanaians across the political divide, please, please, please, I am not about to burst into a James Brown song! Let's show some respect to our citizens.'

7. 'I address you last because you are very special to me: come, I open my arms to welcome each one of you.'

These inclusions created a sense of unity and personal connection with the audience. The speaker emphasised that, although she was the vice-presidential candidate, she remained aligned with ordinary citizens. The phrase 'my fellow Ghanaians' exemplified the possessive 'my' as a rhetorical strategy of inclusion; it bridged potential social and political divides and reinforced national solidarity despite the competitive electoral climate.

First Person Plural (We, Our, Us)

The most frequently used pronouns in the speech were the first-person plural form, with a total of 85 instances. They included 'we' as the subject (32 instances), 'our' in the possessive form (34), and 'us' as the object (19). Given the context,

these pronouns demonstrated inclusivity, collective responsibility, and solidarity (Pennycook, 1994; Fairclough, 1989).

The referent of 'we' alternated between the NDC party, the presidential and vice-presidential candidates, and the Ghanaian population. In examples 8 and 9 below, 'we' refers to the NDC party, demonstrating the speaker's sense of shared purpose and commitment to the nation's future.

8. 'The victory we seek as a party is to invite everyone to the onerous task of rebuilding a broken Ghana.'
9. 'So, as we mentioned several times during the 2020 campaign, we intend to implement the ONE MILLION CODERS PROGRAMME.'

Here, 'we' functions as both a grammatical marker of collectivity and a political instrument of alignment. By using 'we' to refer to NDC leadership, the speaker emphasised the party's cohesion, continuity, and readiness to govern. Example 9, in particular, connects the party's linguistic choices to concrete policy proposals in digital innovation and youth empowerment, reflecting the NDC's broad developmental agenda. Overall, the use of 'we' bridged ideology and policy and projected a collective image of competence and progressive governance.

In examples 10 to 12 below, the speaker shifted the referent of 'we' to the Ghanaian population as a whole. This usage implied national solidarity and civic engagement. These constructions blurred the boundary between politicians and citizens. The speaker positioned herself alongside the electorate, using the inclusive pronoun 'we' to evoke a shared struggle and collective resilience.

- 10 'We are not in ordinary times.'
11. 'I remain inspired by the fact that, as a people, we have faced terrible situations before.'
12. 'We must move to the level of encouragement, appreciation, and support of those who participate in the private sector, regardless.'

Politically, this shift situated her discourse within Ghana's collective narrative of overcoming adversity, appealing to people's empathy and patriotism. Furthermore, the modal 'must' in example 12 expresses moral urgency, which links the language to calls for economic inclusivity and reform. Similarly, the possessive 'our' and objective 'us' were pronouns that the speaker used to convey ownership and shared responsibility. Examples 13 to 15 are relevant in this regard.

13. 'And the world knows what we do with our resources when women prosper.'

14. 'The purpose is the opportunity to hold our country together.'
15. 'Please come join us in our town hall meetings.'

Collectively, these pronouns constructed a discourse of unity, shared purpose, and national belonging, consistent with strategies of positive identity formation in political communication (Allen, 2007; Jong, 2018). The focus on 'our resources' and 'our country' further tied the linguistic inclusivity to themes of economic management, gender empowerment, and participatory democracy. These were core elements of the NDC's campaign rhetoric. Hence, by merging grammatical inclusiveness with policy-oriented appeals, the speaker employed collective pronouns as persuasive instruments of political mobilisation and ideological framing.

Second Person (You, Your)

Second-person pronouns appeared 30 times in Prof. Opoku-Agyemang's out-dooring speech. Their use was strategically multifaceted: they referred variously to the presidential candidate, the audience, the ruling government, the Electoral Commission (EC), and citizens of Ghana. By using both singular and plural forms, the speaker directed people's attention, asserted her authority, and engaged with multiple political audiences. An example was as follows:

16. 'HE Ayebida President Mahama, please allow me to address you directly.'

In the above example, the expression 'allow me to address you directly' drew attention to the presidential candidate specifically. The phrase invoked respect and acknowledgement for his past leadership because of the use of the Akan honorific, *Ayebida*, which means 'he who has done it before'. This word also reinforced the candidate's legitimacy and evoked a continuity of leadership.

17. 'By renominating me, you have demonstrated your remarkable consistency and unwavering commitment to inclusivity and innovation.'

In example 17 above, the singular 'you' and 'your' again focus on Mahama alone. The singular 'you' functions rhetorically to strengthen the perceived bond between the vice-presidential candidate and the presidential candidate. In contrast, the plural 'you' addresses a broader audience and engages them as active evaluators of political conduct; this usage occurs in Example 18 below.

18. 'I don't know about you[.] but the image I get looking at the trench is that of a hole[.] in utter shock that anyone could believe it was intended as a thanksgiving gift to the Almighty, Invisible, God Only Wise.'

The 'you' in example 18 functions rhetorically to invite shared moral judgement, indirectly criticising the ruling government's perceived mismanagement. The colloquial 'I don't know about you' personalises disapproval and establishes a solidarity with citizens, while maintaining political civility. This subtle positioning enabled a critique that lacked overt attack. It aligned with the norms of respectful political discourse, as grounded in Ghanaian sociocultural values.

Similarly, in example 19 below, 'you' appeals to the electorate's ethical and communal consciousness. Here, the pronouns serve as persuasive devices. They connect moral reasoning to political responsibility and urge citizens to act beyond their partisan emotions and consider the broader social implications.

19. 'If you decide you don't like the owner, think of their worker who may be a member of your community, political party, or church.'

In example 20, 'you' has an institutional referent, namely, the EC. The repeated and direct terms of address here transform the speech act into a civic intervention, holding an autonomous body publicly accountable. Linguistically, the repetition intensified a sense of urgency. Politically, it served as a democratic oversight mechanism and positioned the vice-presidential candidate as both a participant and guardian of fair governance.

20. 'EC, I address you directly: it is in the national interest, and in your own interest, that you make transparent what has been and is going on at your establishment. The truth will not be suppressed. You cannot be so independent as to disregard the people who validate your existence.'

Subsequently, the speaker broadened her address to encompass the entire Ghanaian population, whether they were physically present, virtually connected, or would listen to the speech in the future. This shift is evident in example 21 below, where 'you' encompasses the broad Ghanaian citizenry.

21. 'I open my arms to welcome each one of you to partner with the NDC to envision and craft and roll out a future of limitless prospects; a future where your dreams and those of your children are attainable,

your voices are constructive, where your lives matter. This moment is for you.'

In this example, the pronoun becomes a motivational and inclusive appeal, inviting collective participation in nation-building. By blending the personal and plural references, the speaker frames citizens not as passive observers but rather as active partners in realising democratic ideals. In addition, the use of the word 'future', twice, could instil hope among the electorate.

Across these various uses, 'you' and 'your' operated as rhetorical tools for constructing relationships based on respect, critique, and collaboration. The singular forms expressed loyalty and interpersonal alignment within the party's hierarchy, whereas the plural forms built civic solidarity and moral accountability. Through these shifting terms of address, the speaker navigated Ghana's political terrain, thereby affirming her leadership, challenging institutions, and empowering citizens. Overall, the second-person pronouns enacted a politics of engagement. They linked language, ethics, and governance in the service of democratic participation.

Third-Person Singular (He, Him, His, Her)

Third-person singular pronouns in Prof. Opoku-Agyemang's speech were used in the nominative (he), accusative (him), and possessive/genitive (his) positions. They occurred eight times and referred exclusively to the presidential candidate, John Dramani Mahama. Such words served as a strategic evaluative device to convey admiration and trust in his competence, while also constructing a credible leadership partnership. Examples included the following instances:

22. 'I see it as a sign of strength, and I feel privileged to work with him.'

23. 'He thinks through what he says and considers advice; he is confident enough to amend his views when confronted by working alternatives.'

24. 'He does not rush with decisions that have serious effects on the lives of others. John Mahama does not shoot from the hip.'

Through these references, the speaker performed a deliberate act of political endorsement. The repeated use of 'he' and 'him' positioned Mahama as a reflective and consultative leader, with qualities that are valued in Ghanaian political culture. In Ghana, patience and deliberation are often framed as hallmarks of wisdom and maturity in governance (Asiedu-Appiah et al., 2016). The vice-presidential candidate's admiration was thus not merely personal but also rhetorical. It served to consolidate the voters' confidence in the presidential candidate's judgement and presented the NDC as a disciplined and united team.

Furthermore, by using these third-person forms rather than addressing Mahama directly, the speaker created a narrative distance that enabled an objective commendation. This linguistic strategy transformed her praise into testimonial authority; she expressed her views both as an insider and as an observer. Politically, this dual stance reinforced her credibility as a potential reliable deputy who recognised and supported capable leadership. Moreover, as Ghana's first female vice-presidential nominee, her evaluative positioning engaged with gendered expectations in political rhetoric. Her supportive portrayal of Mahama was aligned with traditional partnership norms, yet her confident and authoritative tone simultaneously redefined the female political voice as both loyal and discerning (Goyal & Sells, 2024).

Overall, the use of third-person singular pronouns not only served a grammatical or interpersonal function; it also had a political purpose. These pronouns helped build a leadership ethos and communicated intra-party harmony. They also aligned the presidential and vice-presidential candidates with public ideals about competence and moral integrity.

Third-Person Plural (They, Them, Their)

Third-person plural pronouns ('they', 'them', and 'their') appeared 15 times in Prof. Opoku-Agyemang's speech and served as key rhetorical resources for political positioning. Although the speaker rarely named her opponents explicitly, these pronouns referred mainly to the then ruling government and members of the NPP. Through indirect references, she critiqued the NPP while displaying rhetorical restraint. The reference to an implied entity enabled her to make accountability claims, without overt confrontation, and reflected a strategy of politeness that softened her criticism, while preserving the ideological contrasts (Obeng, 1997).

This use of pronouns constructed an implicit 'us versus them' dichotomy between the NDC and the NPP. By referring to her opponents indirectly, the speaker framed her political critique as a collective moral judgement rather than a personal attack, which reinforced the NDC's image as a principled and credible party. As Allen (2007, p. 3) observed, 'it is in the politician's interest to present themselves as multifaceted in order to appeal to a diverse audience, and careful pronoun choice is one way of achieving this aim'. Such a rhetorical strategy was evident in the examples below.

25. 'Do not fall victim to those who have realised that having failed in sloganeering and packaging, they have exhausted their strategies and therefore resort to deception and destruction.'
26. 'And at the time of accounting to the people, let no one pretend that

they have more human rights than those they have consciously disenfranchised and those to whom justice has been shamefully denied.'

In the above excerpts, 'they' refers to the then ruling party or its members, who are portrayed as deceptive and morally compromised. The pronouns allowed the critique to appear principled, as they distanced the speaker from making a personal attack and highlighted the contrast between parties.

Interestingly, third-person plural pronouns were also used in reference to Ghana's forefathers and foremothers. Used in this way, the words served a commemorative function. In the examples below, 'they' refers to historical figures, whose resilience and integrity are implicitly contrasted with the contemporary leadership and its shortcomings.

27. 'In those hard times, our forefathers and foremothers did not throw up their arms in despair.'
28. 'They fought back; they resisted, they sacrificed, they persevered; they brought back hope where there was none; they picked up the broken pieces and carefully, strategically, sewed them back, and they left for us a legacy of selflessness, patriotism, and pride.'

This dual usage of the same pronouns to refer to both political opponents and historical exemplars allowed the speaker to navigate between critique and celebration. It further constructed a moral and political continuum that situated the NDC within Ghana's historical narrative of collective struggle and renewal.

Overall, the pronouns 'they', 'them', and 'their' served multiple functions. When referring to the NPP, they implied political failure and moral deficiency; when referring to national heroes, they evoked patriotism, sacrifice, and ethical exemplariness. This dynamism enabled the speaker to criticise the present and valorise the past, reinforcing the NDC's legitimacy and moral positioning.

This section has established how the speaker's pronoun choices constructed political alignment and ideological contrast. The next section examines the use of modal expressions to show how she negotiated authority, commitment, and persuasion.

The Modal 'Will'

The modal verb 'will' evolved from Old English, where it originally functioned as a content verb that meant 'wish' (Larreya, 2009). Over time, it became an auxiliary verb, used to indicate future intention, determination, or commitment.

In this sense, it is often followed by a bare infinitive (e.g. ‘will share’, ‘will repay’, ‘will pursue’).

In political discourse, the use of ‘will’ allows a speaker to demonstrate their intent, reassure their constituents, and project their alignment with a party’s vision (Downing & Locke, 2006). In Prof. Opoku-Agyemang’s speech, ‘will’ appeared along with both singular pronoun constructions (‘I will’) and plural ones (‘we will’). These forms communicated, respectively, personal dedication and collective political commitment and are discussed separately below.

‘I will’ (Personal Commitment)

The first-person singular construction ‘I will’ functioned as a commissive act, in which the speaker pledged to fulfil her duties. This usage emphasises her individual accountability and integrity, aligning with her role as the vice-presidential candidate. Such statements perform commissive speech acts to demonstrate one’s trustworthiness, competence, and loyalty (Searle, 1979). Examples are as follows:

29.

- a. ‘I will share in our collective successes.’
- b. ‘I will repay your abiding confidence with loyalty.’
- c. ‘I will repay your abiding confidence with loyalty, understanding, and a devotion to duty.’
- d. ‘I will share in our collective successes and share responsibility for our setbacks, if any.’
- e. ‘I will not, in the advancement of self-serving ambition, declare to the world that I was only the driver’s mate.’⁴

In examples 29 (a)–(b) above, ‘I will’ reaffirmed the speaker’s commitment to both the presidential candidate and the audience, assuring them of her loyalty and their mutual responsibility. In 29(e), she asserted her readiness to assume full responsibility in governance. This statement countered remarks made earlier by the then sitting vice-president, who had described himself as ‘just the driver’s mate’, a metaphor that depicted his limited authority. The speaker’s expressions thus situated her authority within Ghanaian political culture, in which trust, loyalty, and visible dedication are highly valued.

‘We will’ (Collective Commitment)

The plural first-person form ‘we will’ shifted the focus from individual commitment to collective party and campaign commitments. This usage indicated

4 Driver’s mate: A Ghanaian expression for a bus conductor.

unity, shared vision, inclusivity, and alignment with the presidential candidate. Examples were as follows:

30.

- a. 'We will see how, from the vegetable seller to the miner; from the smallest hamlet to the crowded cities...'
- b. 'We will pay special attention to issues and challenges faced by women in all walks of life.'
- c. 'We will actively pursue the establishment of a Women Development Bank to nurture and grow women-owned, women-led businesses.'
- d. 'We will also undertake the modernisation of our markets, which remain special and dominant places for many women in the economy.'

These utterances constituted promises that articulated the party's social interventions and policy intentions (Searle, 1979, p. 23). These involved the party's focus on future developmental issues, such as women's empowerment, market modernisation, economic growth, and other national priorities. By using 'we', the speaker framed these initiatives as collective commitments, emphasising cohesion and reliability across the NDC leadership team. Politically, 'we will' also indicated her alignment with both the presidential candidate and the broader party agenda. The speaker thus demonstrated inclusive policy goals that resonated with gender, economic, and social development priorities. In Ghana's competitive multi-party context, projecting unity through 'we will' was a persuasive tool for building voter confidence.

Figures of Speech

Political speeches often contain figures of speech that are used for rhetorical and persuasive purposes. According to Gluckberg (2001), figures of speech and figurative language are used to convey ideas and hidden meanings in both daily conversations and public speeches. Prof. Opoku-Agyemang's outdoor speech exemplified this use of rhetorical devices. We identified six figures of speech, namely parallelism, personification, exaggeration (hyperbole), simile, rhetorical questions, and innuendo.

Parallelism

Parallelism involves the use of words, phrases, clauses, or sentences that share a similar structure, sound, or meaning (Agyekum, 2013; Al-Ameedi & Mukhef, 2017). This rhetorical device is particularly effective in public speaking, as it enables speakers to highlight the connections between ideas while maintaining the audience's attention. Indeed, parallelism often features in political speeches as a persuasive tool to enhance both rhythm and clarity (de Albuquerque, 2013).

Prof. Opoku-Agyemang employed parallel structures strategically in her outdoor speech to reinforce her message of resilience, hope, and collective progress. In example 31 below, the phrase 'a Ghana' is used repeatedly, with a balanced structure, to construct a vision for the nation. The repetition emphasises the speaker's envisioned qualities for Ghana, and each clause sequentially builds a sense of national renewal, optimism, and forward momentum.

31.

- a. 'a Ghana that at the very least, can feed itself.'
- b. 'a Ghana that functions, again.'

Similarly, example 32 below shows a related pattern of [subject ('they') + verb phrase (past tense)]. Parallelism is also evident in the use of anaphora, with the pronoun 'they' honouring the collective efforts of Ghana's forebears during times of hardship.

32.

- a. 'they fought back',
- b. 'they resisted',
- c. 'they sacrificed',
- d. 'they persevered',
- e. 'they brought back hope where there was none',
- f. 'they picked up the broken pieces and carefully, strategically, sewed [them back]',
- g. 'they left for us a legacy of selflessness, patriotism, and pride'.

The referent of the pronoun in example 32 above is 'Ghana's forefathers and foremothers', which is inferred from the context. The forward movement to reveal the meaning is particularly evident in clause (g). The parallel structure not only highlights the achievements of the forebears but also cultivates a sense of resilience, national pride, and unity among the audience. Furthermore, clauses (e) and (f) employ contrastive expressions to illustrate the positive outcomes of the forebears' actions. The crescendo of verbs culminates in the legacy statement in (g), reinforcing collective memory and patriotism.

Prof. Opoku-Agyemang further used parallelism to emphasise inclusivity and broad societal coverage. In this context, the '24-hour economy' policy – an initiative aimed at extending economic activities beyond conventional working hours – is presented as benefiting everyone across the country. The 'from ... to' parallel structure in example 33 below highlights this wide-ranging impact, suggesting that the policy extends to citizens across different geographic locations and social groups.

33.

- a. 'from the smallest hamlet to the crowded cities.'
- b. 'from the farmer to the fisherfolk.'
- c. 'from the young couple to the single parent; everyone will come to see and apply the benefits of a nation, group and individual advancement.'

Parallelism was also employed through imperative structures, with the speaker using 'let' to issue a call to action. At the same time, 'let' reminds one of important events that should not be overlooked. These uses are evident in example 34 below. Both statements challenge the audience to confront injustices, while also emphasising urgency, civic responsibility, and unity in the face of adversity.

34.

- a. 'Let no one tell us that the culture of silence has become the norm',
 - b. 'let no one tell us that eight persons were not shot in cold blood ...'
- Finally, parallelism framed Prof. Opoku-Agyemang's aspirational vision for Ghana. She used repeated 'where' clauses to articulate her ideals, prefaced by 'We want a country'. This structure, evident in example 35 (a)–(f) below, constructed a vivid picture of an ideal society. The repetition reinforced hope in a just and equitable nation, inspiring the audience to strive toward these goals.

35.

- a. 'where equality thrives',
- b. 'where equity is paramount',
- c. 'where merit counts',
- d. 'where opportunity is not a privilege',
- e. 'where justice is just',
- f. 'where our sons and daughters can aspire to any height without the fetters of bias or limitation.'

In summary, Prof. Opoku-Agyemang's use of parallelism enhanced both her rhetorical clarity and her persuasive power. She employed repetition, balanced structures, and anaphora to communicate national ideals and commemorate past sacrifices, while also motivating collective engagement. Overall, parallelism was a central feature of her rhetorical strategy.

Personification

Prof. Opoku-Agyeman employed personification as another rhetorical device in her speech. Politicians often employ personification by attributing human

characteristics to inanimate objects, common events, or abstract concepts to persuade their audiences (Boonchuay, 2022). Scholars agree that personification helps convey complex ideas in relatable terms. It can transform abstract concepts to tangible entities in ways that enable an audience to connect with the speaker more deeply (Pamungkas et al., 2024). Prof. Opoku-Agyeman personified both Ghana and specific initiatives in the following examples.

36. 'To heal Ghana.'

Example 36 suggests that Ghana has the capacity to experience being sick and to feel pain, as well as the capacity to recover, much like a human being. The phrase implies the need for care, thereby evoking empathy among the audience and citizens. By framing the nation as an entity that can be healed, the speaker invoked a collective responsibility to contribute to its recovery.

37. 'A free SHS [senior high school] at war.'

In example 37, the SHS initiative was depicted as engaged in a battle to redeem itself from many challenges. Through the technique of personification, Prof. Opoku-Agyeman drew attention to the challenges faced by the educational system. She also evoked in the audience a sense of determination to rally behind the efforts of confronting these challenges and adopt strategies to overcome them, just as warriors strategise to win a war.

38. 'Our country is not sitting pretty.'

In the above expression, the speaker indicated that the nation was actively facing challenges. The use of this personification invited the audience to acknowledge the urgent need for action and change. Essentially, the personification was a persuasive tool to encourage the audience to consider the NDC as a viable alternative to the NPP for governing the country.

39. 'Our beloved country can rise again ...'

Through the above evocative personification, Ghana was portrayed as a resilient entity that is capable of standing and springing back after a fall. This imagery suggests that despite the challenges it faces, the nation possesses an inherent strength and determination that can lead to its recovery and growth. Prof. Opoku-Agyeman tapped into this sentiment, instilling a sense of optimism and resilience within the audience. She persuaded citizens to actively participate in uplifting

the nation from its struggles. Her emphasis signalled that collective effort was needed for a brighter future.

40. 'Ghana will rise again and this time, not to slack.'

She reinforced her vision with the above declaration. This statement affirmed the possibility of transformative change and characterised Ghana as a nation that was not merely capable of recovery but was also determined to emerge stronger than before. The personification of the nation rising, 'not to slack', adds a significant layer of determination and ambition.

Hyperbole

Hyperbole, also known as exaggeration, plays a crucial role in political rhetoric. It can evoke emotions, persuade, and draw people's attention to critical issues (Connor, 2019). As Braim (2014, p. 66) explained, politicians use hyperbole 'to make images and matters bigger and more important on the part of the audience so as to convince and direct them to a particular aim, for example, to vote for their own benefit.' The following examples illustrate how Prof. Opoku-Agyeman employed hyperbole in her outdoor speech.

41. '[I]t is about the chance to pull Ghana from the precipice of destruction.'

This statement employed hyperbole by suggesting that Ghana was on the brink of absolute collapse. The phrase 'precipice of destruction' conveyed an image of imminent disaster and hopelessness, creating a sense of urgency that would compel the audience to recognise the severity of the situation. Such language amplifies the stakes involved and implies that failure to act urgently or now could lead to serious consequences.

42. 'It is to embrace everyone in building a Ghana that functions, again, Ghana from the precipice of destruction.'

The repetition of 'from the precipice of destruction' reinforces the earlier use of hyperbole, emphasising the critical state of the nation. The statement also suggests that the current situation is so dire that collective effort is the only way to prevent disaster.

Overall, the vice-presidential candidate positioned herself as a leader who understood the critical situation facing the nation and presented herself and her party as holding the panacea or solution. Her use of hyperbole in this context made it clear that the stakes were not merely high but potentially catastrophic.

The intention was to motivate citizens to engage in a combined effort to achieve national recovery.

Simile

Simile is a figure of speech that explicitly compares one thing to another using the words 'like' or 'as'. Akram et al. (2022) noted that the vivid imagery created by similes can enhance the audience's understanding and make complex ideas more relatable. Politicians often use similes to describe situations and characterise events (Obeng & Hartford, 2008). In a relatively long statement based on parallel structures, in example 43 below, Prof. Opoku-Agyemang employed simile to illustrate the nature of some political systems in Ghana.

43. 'The promotion of

- a. ethnocentric elitism masquerading as intellectualism;
- b. nepotism cloaked as know-how;
- c. weakness strutting as courage; and
- d. crony capitalism masked as development in freedom;
- e. shameless hypocrisy acting as objectivity'.

Her use of phrases such as 'nepotism cloaked as know-how' and 'weakness strutting as courage' depicted how superficial appearance sometimes obscured deeper truths in the country. The contrast between 'shameless hypocrisy' and 'objectivity' emphasised the betrayal felt by citizens when they realised that what should represent truth was, instead, fraught with deception. The use of simile in this manner can invoke strong emotional reactions by creating striking or sensational images in the minds of the audience. It motivates the audience to demand accountability and integrity from their leaders and can sway public opinion effectively.

Rhetorical questions

In the course of her delivery, Prof. Opoku-Agyeman highlighted specific events in relation to both electricity supply and the EC that she considered disrespectful to citizens. She then posed two rhetorical questions:

44. Hey! What is that?

45. How did disrespect grow such wings?

Rhetorical questions serve as a potent rhetorical strategy to engage one's audience and provoke thought, without expecting an explicit answer (Blankenship & Craig, 2006; Downing & Locke, 2006). The first question, 'What is that?' invited the audience to ponder the significance of the situation being addressed. This

rhetorical question created a moment of pause and encouraged listeners to reflect on their own perceptions and experiences. The speaker sought their engagement as she drew the audience into the discourse, so that they would become active participants rather than passive recipients of information.

The second rhetorical question, 'How did disrespect grow such wings?' suggested that disrespect had taken on a life of its own. Through the metaphor of 'growing wings', the speaker implied that disrespect had become pervasive and insidious, spreading rapidly and perhaps uncontrollably. The figure of speech here emphasises the urgent need for collective action against certain sociopolitical issues in the country.

Innuendo

Innuendo is an indirect act of speech, as it is used to imply a meaning rather than stating something outright. The meaning is often inferable from the context or tone, or from knowledge that is shared between the speaker and the audience (Thompson & Agyekum, 2016). Politicians often use innuendo to subtly criticise or attack their opponents without direct confrontation. In Prof. Opoku-Agyemang's speech, innuendo was strategically employed to critique her opponents. For instance,

46. 'I will not, in the advancement of self-serving ambition, declare to the world that I was only the driver's mate.'

In example 46, she implied that certain political figures may downplay their past roles to present a false image of humility and advance their political interests. This is an indirect critique of the opposition's tactics and motivations. (The phrase was also discussed in example 29 above.) Additionally, in example 47 below, the speaker employed innuendo to accuse the opposition (NPP) of resorting to negative campaigning after they failed to deliver substantial policies during their eight years in office.

47. 'Do not fall victim to those who have realised that having failed in sloganeering and packaging, they have exhausted their strategies and therefore resort to deception and destruction.'

The phrase 'deception and destruction' indirectly refers to the opposition party, without explicitly naming it, to provide a cautionary note to the public. Hence, innuendo allowed the speaker to criticise the opposition indirectly. Through this technique, she maintained a level of plausible deniability while shaping the audience's perception of her rivals (Obeng, 2002b).

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined Prof. Naana Jane Opoku-Agyemang's outdoor speech as the NDC's vice-presidential candidate for Ghana's 2024 general election. The outdoor speech, as a culturally significant genre in the Ghanaian political landscape, provides a public ritual of political introduction. It is where identity, ideology, and legitimacy are first negotiated with the electorate, making it particularly revealing as a political strategy to garner votes.

Our study was based on PDA. The findings have demonstrated that political language served both as a means of communication and as a strategic instrument for persuasion, identity construction, and mobilisation. Furthermore, as a female Ghanaian scholar and politician, Prof. Opoku-Agyemang used rhetoric that acquired symbolic importance within Ghana's patriarchal political landscape. Her speech projected competence, inclusiveness, and moral authority. It challenged gendered assumptions about leadership, while affirming national unity. Through her deliberate use of pronouns, modals, and figurative language, she constructed a leadership persona as well as collective solidarity, reinforcing the NDC's image as a people-centred and forward-looking party.

The potential causal impact of the speech cannot be identified based on the qualitative methodology we employed. However, the NDC's eventual victory in the 2024 elections suggests that the speaker's rhetoric resonated with voters and contributed to broader narratives of change and inclusion. This study illustrates how language can be used deliberately as an instrument in a political campaign, where every word is carefully chosen to influence and engage the electorate. Discourse and rhetoric are central to Ghana's political process. Language is not merely a medium of communication but also a vehicle for persuasion, mobilisation, and change. Our analysis indicates that discourse and rhetoric continue to play these powerful roles in Ghana. Prof. Opoku-Agyemang's speech demonstrates how language can function as a potent tool for shaping voters' perceptions and strengthening their participation to influence democratic outcomes.

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LEGAL OBSTACLES TO WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL DEMOCRACY:

Insights from Tanzania's 2024 Local Elections

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how Tanzania's legal and institutional frameworks shape women's participation in local democracy. Data from the 2019 local elections showed that women occupied only 2.1%, 6.7%, and 12% of elected village, hamlet, and street chairperson positions, respectively. These figures reflect women's persistent structural exclusion at the lower levels of governance. Leveraging data from the 2024 local elections, the analysis adopts a feminist legal methodology. The aim is to show how law constructs gendered pathways that favour descriptive rather than substantive representation. Structural barriers are embedded in the quota design, the first-past-the-post electoral system, compulsory party sponsorship, the prohibition of independent candidacy, and restrictive age thresholds. Such barriers confine women to reserved seats and discourage their participation in competitive positions. Weak enforcement of electoral regulations, a lack of disaggregated data, and executive control over election administration further entrench women's exclusion. The findings affirm the feminist legal theory-based argument that law reproduces patriarchal power through its design and implementation. Several steps are required to advance substantive gender equality in local governance, including transformative reforms, proportional electoral designs, intersectionality considerations, inclusive data architectures, and independent electoral oversight.

Keywords: SDG 5.5.1(b), gender quotas, intersectional exclusion, feminist theory, electoral laws, gatekeeping

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INTRODUCTION

Political representation is not a unitary concept. Classic democratic theory distinguishes among descriptive, symbolic, and substantive forms of representation, each capturing different dimensions of political inclusion and power (Pitkin, 1967). Descriptive representation refers to women's numerical presence within political institutions, typically measured by the proportion of seats they occupy. Symbolic representation concerns the meaning attached to that presence, including whether women's inclusion signals legitimacy, recognition, and equality but without necessarily conferring real decision-making authority. Substantive representation, by contrast, focuses on outcomes, namely, the extent to which women can influence policy agendas, institutional priorities, and governance decisions to advance gender equality and reflect women's lived experiences.

Feminist scholars have long cautioned that increases in descriptive representation do not automatically translate into substantive representation (e.g., Itzkovitch-Malka & Oshri, 2024). Quota-based reforms may succeed in placing women into political institutions, while confining them to marginal or low-influence roles, thereby producing symbolic inclusion without redistributing power (Dahlerup, 2006). From a feminist legal perspective, this disjuncture is not accidental. Legal frameworks that separate 'reserved' from 'open' positions, or fail to impose obligations on political parties to nominate women for competitive posts, can institutionalise symbolic representation by design (Lihiru, 2024). Women's presence becomes visible and countable, yet their capacity to shape decision-making remains structurally constrained.

These dynamics are particularly salient in the context of local governance. Local governance structures are key to the decentralisation of state authority, enabling citizens to influence decision-making, articulate development priorities, and address day-to-day challenges (Chaligha, 2014). Women's participation within these structures builds inclusive governance outcomes by strengthening gender-responsive priorities in areas such as water, education, health, employment, and social protection (Mtasingwa, 2022). Local governance also functions as an incubator for women's political leadership, providing pathways for them to transition into national political arenas (Chiweza, 2016).

Despite these democratic and developmental benefits, global efforts to increase women's representation at the local level have remained uneven (World Economic Forum, 2023). Policy attention and scholarly analysis have historically focused on women's political inclusion at the national level; this bias is reflected in persistent data gaps on women's participation in subnational governance. The 2000 Millennium Development Goals measured progress on gender equality using indicators limited to women's representation in national legislatures

(United Nations [UN], 2000). The adoption of the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals marked an important normative shift. By introducing SDG 5.5.1(b), which measures women's representation in local government, the international framework recognised that women's leadership at both local and national levels is essential for achieving gender equality (UN, 2015).

Globally, women hold an average of 35% of seats in local deliberative bodies (UN Women, 2025). In sub-Saharan Africa, women's representation in local government is estimated to be 29%, while the Africa Women's Political Participation Barometer reported a continental average of 25% in 2024, up from 21% in 2021 (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2024). The same Barometer, however, recorded a concerning decline in East Africa, where women's representation fell from 35% in 2021 to 24% in 2024. These regional and continental figures provide only a partial picture, as they focus primarily on mid-level local government bodies such as district and municipal councils. They rarely extend to the lowest tiers of governance – villages, streets, hamlets, and their respective committees – where community-centred political participation occurs most directly.

In Tanzania, local government authorities constitute the primary interface between the state and citizens. They provide platforms for participatory planning and budgeting, maintain law and order, ensure public safety, protect the environment, and serve as foundational institutions for deepening democratic governance. Women have constituted the majority of Tanzania's population since independence in 1961 (Makulilo & Bakari, 2021). Yet, despite the reintroduction of multiparty democracy in 1992 and the conduct of seven local government elections, women's representation at the village, hamlet, and street levels remains notably limited. Participation has largely been confined to one-third reserved quota seats, with minimal access to mainstream elective positions such as chairpersonships and mixed-member seats.

Official data from earlier election cycles (1994, 1999, 2004, 2009, and 2014), as well as from the 2024 local elections, are generally unavailable. The only readily available data are from the 2019 local election results, which indicated a persistently low representation of women. Women held only 2.1%, 6.7%, and 12% of elected village, hamlet, and street chairperson positions, respectively. Even for that year, official statistics on women's representation in village councils and street committees remain unavailable (UN Women & African Development Bank Group, 2025).

The analysis in this paper demonstrates that Tanzania's local government legal framework enhances numerical and descriptive representation but systematically restricts women's access to substantive political power. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality and a one-third gender quota in local

councils, women remain largely confined to reserved seats. Competitive positions such as those of village and street chairpersons continue to be male-dominated. Structural barriers embedded in the legal framework – including quota design, the first-past-the-post electoral system, compulsory party sponsorship, and age-based candidacy restrictions – limit women's access to mainstream elective offices. Weak enforcement of electoral regulations, a lack of disaggregated data, and the concentration of election administration in the executive branch further entrench these patterns of exclusion.

The above situation prompted the central analytical question of this paper: How does Tanzania's local government legal framework enable women's numerical inclusion while constraining their access to substantive political power? This question addresses the persistent tension between formal legal inclusion and actual access to political authority. The findings presented in this article affirm feminist legal theory's claim that law is not a gender-neutral instrument; it is, instead, a site in which patriarchal power is reproduced through legal design, interpretation, and implementation (Littleton, 2018). The next section outlines the methodological approach employed to examine these dynamics in the context of the 2024 local elections.

METHODOLOGY

Addressing the research question requires moving beyond representation statistics to examine how legal rules are designed, interpreted, and implemented in practice. The article thus adopts a feminist legal approach, which treats law not merely as a formal set of norms but as an institutional and social process through which gendered power relations are structured and reproduced. The 2024 local elections provide a critical empirical entry point for examining how Tanzania's legal frameworks shape women's participation in local democracy. Covering 12,319 villages, 64,886 hamlets, and 4,264 streets, as well as village councils and street committees, the 2024 elections offer a comprehensive setting for analysing the interaction between legal design, institutional practice, and women's political participation.

The article adopts a multi-method approach, integrating doctrinal legal analysis with empirical research to interrogate the extent to which the legal framework facilitates or constrains women's participation in local democracy. The doctrinal analysis examines the architecture of laws governing local government elections. It identifies constitutional, statutory, and regulatory provisions that generate structural barriers regarding women's access to mainstream elected positions. It also evaluates the consistency between Tanzania's domestic legal framework and its obligations under international and regional human rights instruments.

The complementary non-doctrinal component examines how the laws operate in practice, how they are interpreted and enforced by local administrative actors, and how they shape the experiences of women aspirants and candidates. Three national workshops on women's political participation in the 2024 local elections provided participatory spaces for the author to gather stakeholders' perspectives.² The forums provided a platform for the author to present her preliminary analysis on how the legal framework shapes women's participation in local democracy, while gathering further insights on how these rules operate in practice. The forums were conducted in a semi-structured format that combined guided thematic prompts with open discussions. This structure enabled the participants to reflect on how procedural rules affect women's participation in local government structures.

In addition, the author interviewed 24 respondents individually, 12 of whom were political party leaders, including leaders of women's and youth wings; the other 12 were representatives from civil society organisations, including two representing persons with disabilities. Given the study's focus on women's political participation, women were intentionally included from both these categories to capture their lived experiences of legal and institutional exclusion. Male respondents were also included. Men occupy influential positions within party structures and electoral administration and can provide critical insights on how legal rules are interpreted, operationalised, and enforced within political and administrative processes.

Participants were purposively selected on the basis of their direct involvement in nomination processes, election monitoring, and women's political empowerment initiatives. Informed consent procedures were observed throughout. All participant data were anonymised to protect confidentiality.

Secondary sources included official election reports, civil society submissions, and scholarly literature. These sources were reviewed to triangulate the findings. Interview transcripts, workshop notes, and secondary materials were analysed thematically using a coding framework that was developed from relevant categories. Examples of the categories include quota design, electoral system, nomination rules, party sponsorship requirements, electoral enforcement, and administrative posture. The integration of doctrinal and empirical components reflects feminist legal methodology, which understands law not only as a normative framework but also as a social practice through which gendered power relations are structured and reproduced (Littleton, 2018).

2 The source of this information is the author's field notes, written during women's political participation dialogues convened by Women in Law and Development in Africa Tanzania and Tanzania Gender Networking Programme. The setting was International Women's Day commemorations held in Dar es Salaam on 1 and 6 March 2024. Another source was the *Wanawake Sasa* project launch discussion hosted by WILDAF-Tanzania, Her-Initiative and Jamii Forum, Johari Rotana in Dar es Salaam, 19 September 2024.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical and Normative Frameworks

As noted, feminist legal theory and feminist institutionalism examine how law structures political participation and reproduces gendered power relations. Feminist legal scholarship has demonstrated that legal rules, institutional designs, and enforcement practices often reflect and sustain patriarchal hierarchies and are therefore not neutral (Littleton, 2018). Historically, legal systems have legitimised the public–private divide by situating women in domestic roles, while reserving political authority for men. This practice embeds gendered exclusions within governance structures (Scales, 1978).

Feminist legal theory is not monolithic. Liberal feminist approaches focus on dismantling formal legal barriers and securing equal treatment, arguing that equality can be achieved when women have the same legal rights and opportunities as men (Francis & Smith, 2009). By contrast, radical and critical feminist scholars have shown that formal equality alone is insufficient where institutional structures and social norms continue to privilege male dominance (MacKinnon, 1989). The latter scholarship conceptualises law as a contested terrain that both produces subordination and holds transformative potential. These feminists emphasise the relational nature of inequality and the state's role in constructing vulnerability through legal design.

The above perspectives underscore that gender inequality is reproduced not only through exclusionary laws but also through ostensibly neutral rules, which affect people's access, authority, and participation. Feminist institutionalism extends this critique by examining how formal legal rules interact with informal norms within political institutions (Mackay, 2011). From this perspective, electoral systems, quota mechanisms, and party nomination processes are not merely technical arrangements but gendered institutions that mediate who can access power and under what conditions. As feminist institutionalists argue, reforms that introduce women into political institutions, yet without transforming institutional logics, risk entrenching symbolic rather than substantive inclusion. This insight is particularly relevant for electoral systems that rely on majoritarian rules and discretionary party gatekeeping. Such systems tend to privilege incumbency, masculinity, and informal networks of power.

Intersectionality theory further deepens this analysis by recognising that women's political participation is shaped by multiple and intersecting axes of identity, including age, disability, class, marital status, and location (Cho et al., 2013). Within local governance contexts, these intersections are especially salient. Feminist intersectional scholars caution that legal frameworks that treat women as a homogeneous category risk reproducing hierarchies among women themselves.

Women with education, resources, and party connections are privileged, whereas young women, women with disabilities, and rural women are marginalised (Thompson et al., 2023).

These theoretical insights are not merely analytical; they are reflected in binding international and regional legal instruments to which Tanzania is a party. These instruments define the state's obligations to dismantle gendered structures of political power and advance women's equal participation in political life. Instruments such as the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and the 1981 African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) reflect the liberal feminist commitment to formal equality, legal universality, and the principle of non-discrimination. They establish that all persons, regardless of sex, are entitled to participate in governance and enjoy equal access to public service.

Furthermore, the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the 2003 Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol) operationalise radical and critical feminist principles. These instruments acknowledge that formal equality is insufficient and that states must adopt affirmative and transformative measures to achieve substantive gender equality. Similarly, the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action translates these insights into a comprehensive political agenda that resonates with feminist institutionalism. It calls on political parties and states to reform their electoral systems and processes so that equality principles are internalised institutionally rather than merely being upheld in texts. The Platform for Action reflects intersectional feminist thought by addressing the overlapping forms of discrimination that African women face, such as that linked to age, culture, and social status. The instrument acknowledges that women's exclusion from politics is reinforced by multiple and intersecting oppressions, which require structural change across legal, cultural, and economic spheres.

Similarly, the 2008 Protocol on Gender and Development of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) encapsulates a transformative feminist vision that merges radical and institutional perspectives.³ Its call for 50% representation of women in decision-making positions moves beyond equal opportunity toward equal outcomes. The Protocol affirms that gender parity is not merely aspirational but is a normative obligation, tied to the reorganisation of the legal framework and political institutions.

3 See Southern African Development Community, *Protocol on Gender and Development* (2008), revised in the 2016 Consolidated Text, which incorporates the *Agreement Amending the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development* and supersedes the 2008 version. SADC (2016), *Protocol on gender and development* (Consolidated).

Overall, these theories and normative frameworks advance from liberal notions of equality before the law, through radical commitments to substantive equality and affirmative action, to institutional and intersectional understandings of how gender operates across structures of power. They provide both a theoretical scaffolding and normative justification for analysing women's political participation in Tanzania's local democracy. In this setting, legal texts, institutional practices, and social hierarchies converge to define who can access and exercise power.

WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN LOCAL DEMOCRACY IN TANZANIA

Studies on the determinants of women's participation at the village, street, and hamlet levels in Tanzania is limited. A few studies have explored the factors that facilitate or hinder women's electoral participation in local governance, but fewer have systematically interrogated the legal and institutional structures that have shaped these dynamics. The existing literature mostly focuses on socio-cultural, economic, and party-related explanations. The legal architecture of exclusion has not been sufficiently explored.

One cluster of studies situates women's underrepresentation in terms of socio-cultural and economic explanations. Makalanga et al. (2022) argued that entrenched patriarchal attitudes and misconceptions about women's leadership capabilities have contributed to male dominance in local government. They stated that although spousal support has enabled some women to contest, most women continue to face high turnover, marginalisation, and limited prospects for re-election. Similarly, Bukobero et al. (2023) highlighted socio-economic barriers, such as financial dependency, heavy domestic workloads, and the absence of strong political party backing. They noted that many female candidates were widowed or divorced and that married women often struggle to obtain their husbands' permission to run for office.

These differentiated experiences underscore the relevance of intersectional analyses, which highlight how gender intersects with marital status, economic precarity, education, and location to shape women's uneven access to political power (Cho et al., 2013). The findings resonate with demand-side explanations in the wider literature on gender and politics. Such works have attributed women's limited participation to institutional and attitudinal biases within electorates and political parties, rather than to women's lack of aspiration (Makulilo, 2020). At the local level, however, these biases are magnified by intimate social hierarchies, such as kinship, marriage, and community reputation, which in turn determine political legitimacy. This micro-level exclusion reinforces what feminist legal scholars

describe as the state's complicity in maintaining unequal gender roles through unresponsive legal and institutional structures (Fineman, 2010; MacKinnon, 1989).

A second body of scholarship centres on gender quotas as both a corrective and a constraint within Tanzania's political system. Mtasingwa (2022) underscored the transformative potential of quotas in expanding women's participation, enhancing leadership skills, and reorienting local policy agendas towards gender-responsive priorities. Similarly, earlier works by Killian (1996), Yoon (2008), Makulilo (2009), Meena et al. (2017), and Lihiru (2021) showed that quota mechanisms had increased women's numerical representation, particularly in legislative bodies.

The above studies also exposed structural limitations. That is, political parties often allocate quota seats based on loyalty, not competence, treating seats as instruments of control rather than empowerment. This practice mirrors what radical feminist theory describes as the persistence of male dominance within institutions that purport to deliver equality. While quotas symbolically guarantee inclusion, they are often instrumentalised, failing to achieve the very objectives they were established to deliver; instead, they reinforce hierarchical gender relations within political parties. At both the national and local level, nomination decisions for women's reserved seats are often mediated through informal party networks and patronage arrangements, rather than through transparent and competitive democratic procedures (Lihiru, 2021).

Beyond quota-based analyses, a third stream of research – which is smaller but nonetheless important – connects women's exclusion to legal and institutional determinants. Makulilo (2020) attributed women's underrepresentation to structural and legal constraints embedded in constitutional language, electoral systems, and party structures. He commented that the 1977 *Tanzanian Constitution's* use of masculine pronouns symbolically centres political authority on men and fails to explicitly recognise women's collective rights. This is an example of what feminist legal theorists call the 'masculinisation of law'. Makalanga (2023) added a procedural dimension by showing that limited legal literacy among women candidates, particularly in rural areas, created a substantial disadvantage, as many women were unaware of electoral rules and nomination procedures. These insights align with feminist institutionalism, which posits that formal rules and informal norms interact to sustain gendered hierarchies within political institutions.

Recent contributions by the current author (Lihiru, 2023, 2024) extend this debate by examining how national-level laws reproduce women's exclusion from political power. Lihiru (2023) interrogated the *Political Parties Act (1992)* and its 2019 amendment, showing how they constrain women's access to leadership positions, candidacy processes, and financial resources within parties. In her

subsequent study, Lihiru (2024) identified additional legal barriers, including age-based candidacy restrictions, mandatory party affiliation, campaign finance regulations, and inadequate protection against gender-based political violence. Collectively, these barriers curtail women's participation in parliamentary politics.

Generally, the three streams of scholarship illuminate the multi-layered barriers shaping women's political participation in Tanzania. However, they also reveal a persistent analytical gap. Although socio-cultural, economic, and party-based factors are well documented, the legal architecture governing local elections remains insufficiently examined. From a feminist legal perspective, this omission is significant. As Hawkesworth (2014) and MacKinnon (1989) argued, law does not merely regulate politics; it actively constitutes power relations, shaping who can participate and under what conditions.

While Makulilo (2020), Makalanga (2023), and Lihiru (2023, 2024) advanced scholarly understanding of how legal regimes affect gendered political outcomes, they focused on the national and parliamentary level. The legal and institutional set-up governing local elections – such as nomination procedures, quota implementation, and administrative discretion – operates differently. It is therefore necessary to determine whether those rules produce similar or distinct effects regarding women's participation in local democracy. This article addresses that gap. A feminist legal analytical framework is employed to examine how constitutional, statutory, and regulatory provisions, as well as their implementation, influence women's access to power in Tanzania's local elections.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Local elections in Mainland Tanzania occur at the village, hamlet, and street levels, where citizens elect representatives to serve on village councils and street committees.⁴ By ratifying international and regional instruments that require deliberate measures to advance women's political participation, Tanzania has assumed binding obligations. These serve not only to guarantee equality in law but also to reform the institutional and cultural frameworks that reproduce exclusion (Makulilo & Bakari, 2021). Tanzania is a dualist state, however, which means the domestic realisation of these commitments depends on their incorporation through constitutional and statutory reform.⁵

The 1977 Constitution reflects only partial domestication of these norms. Article 3 defines Tanzania as a democratic, secular, socialist state grounded in equality and participation. Consistent with liberal feminist principles and the egalitarian commitments of the UDHR, ICCPR, and ACHPR, the Constitution

4 Regulation 35(2) of Government Notices Nos. 571, 573, and 574 of 2024.

5 Article 63 of the *Constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania*, 1977.

guarantees equality before the law, prohibits discrimination, and affirms every citizen's right to participate in public affairs. These provisions offer a normative basis for women's political inclusion.⁶ Yet radical feminist and intersectional analyses highlight the limitations of this type of constitutional framing. While the text embeds formal equality, it leaves intact the patriarchal institutional logics that mediate access to power and shape political participation (Madsen, 2021).

To address that discrepancy and align the country with transformative equality obligations under CEDAW, the Beijing Platform for Action, and the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development, Tanzania introduced affirmative action measures to boost women's representation at both the national and local levels (Lihiru, 2021). The analysis below examines specific components of the legal framework, quota design, candidacy rules, party sponsorship requirements, enforcement mechanisms, and administrative arrangements. The purpose is to understand how these elements structure women's access, candidacy, and influence within local democracy.

Quota-Driven Inclusion and the Reproduction of Gendered Hierarchies

In terms of access, women are formally allowed to contest in open seats like other candidates. However, the Local Government Elections Regulations also reserves seats for women in village councils and street committees.⁷ Each village council has 25 members and is legally required to reserve one-third for women. The composition includes one chairperson, five hamlet chairpersons, 11 mixed-group members, and eight women's group members to meet the gender quota. At the street level, each committee comprises six members, two of whom must be women.

The legal requirement for women to occupy one-third of seats in these bodies has enhanced numerical and descriptive representation, enabling Tanzania to reach a 30% critical mass (Pitkin, 1967). However, similar to the reserved seats at the parliamentary level, where reserved-seat parliamentarians rarely transition to competitive seats, the reserved-seats framework at the local level entrenches women's concentration in quota positions. Few women aspire to – or contest in – open competitive seats, such as the chairperson or mixed-group seats.

In the 2019 local elections, women constituted only 2.1%, 6.7%, and 12.6% of elected village, hamlet, and street chairpersons, respectively. Data for other election cycles are not available. The concentration of women in reserved seats

6 Article 21 of the *Constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania*, 1977.

7 Government Notices Nos. 571, 572, 573, and 574 of 12 July 2024, made under the *Local Government (District Authorities) Act*, 1982 and the *Local Government (Urban Authorities) Act*, 1982, regulated the conduct of the 2024 local elections in Tanzania.

is a direct consequence of the legal architecture itself. By separating reserved from open positions, without imposing countervailing obligations on parties to nominate women in the latter role, the law has created a structural incentive for women to remain within quota spaces. The 2019 electoral outcomes affirm feminist legal theory's argument that equality requires not only textual guarantees but a transformation of the institutional logics through which law is interpreted and enforced.

The 2019 local elections outcomes also reflect broader national-level patterns identified in the literature. That is, quotas may enhance descriptive representation, but they fail to disrupt institutional and normative barriers that limit women's access to substantive seats (Lihiru, 2021). The logics that confine women to reserved spaces manifest within political parties, which serve as the gatekeepers to both reserved and open seats. Operating within male-dominated hierarchies, parties routinely channel women toward reserved seats, treating these positions as the appropriate and expected locations for female candidates (Makulilo, 2020). This practice limits women's access to chairperson and mixed-member positions, rendering the quota system – rather than open competition – the principal route into local governance (Mwendah & Nyanto, 2024). Overall, legally enabled nomination practices reproduce gendered hierarchies within a framework that formally purports to advance inclusion. The next subsection examines how party dynamics further entrench women's marginalisation.

Party Gatekeeping and Gendered Candidate Selection

The legal design of the electoral system is a first-past-the-post simple majority arrangement.⁸ It amplifies competitiveness and costs and sometimes also violence. These characteristics prompt many women to opt for reserved seats, as a safer and less politically hostile pathway. In addition, political parties are wary of losing to male opponents and are reluctant to nominate women for open seats.⁹ Party leaders perceive women as less viable candidates, not because of legal disqualification, but because informal norms equate political competence with masculinity.¹⁰ Similar to the nomination of candidates at the parliamentary level, these party calculations are reinforced by the electoral system's high-stakes nature.

8 Sections 45(10), 105(1)(a), and 106(1)(a) of the *Presidential, Parliamentary and Councillors Elections Act*, together with Regulation 39 of Government Notices Nos. 571, 573, and 574 of 2024, and Regulation 38 of Government Notice No. 572 of 2024.

9 Interview with a woman leader in an opposition political party, Dar es Salaam, 15 November 2024.

10 Interview with a leader in a non-governmental organisation, Dar es Salaam, 12 November 2024.

Overall, parties are risk-averse about nominating women for open positions, namely, chairperson roles and mixed-group categories.¹¹ Women who attempt to contest in these categories often face direct and indirect pressure to withdraw, with offers to be considered for reserved seats or promises of future positions used to dissuade them (Lihiru, 2021).¹² As several interviewees noted, party officials and incumbents frame women's ambition for open positions as greed. As one woman aspirant explained, "They tell us, "Why do you want a chairperson position when women already have their special reserved seats?"'"¹³ If women persist, they risk intra-party hostility or retaliation from party leaders or incumbents.¹⁴

Husbands and relatives are also generally more supportive of women vying for quota seats, which are viewed as socially acceptable and less conflictual.¹⁵ Campaigns for chairperson or mixed-member positions, by contrast, are associated with personal attacks, rumours, and physical intimidation. These issues show that gendered institutions, even as they ostensibly expand opportunities for women, create new hierarchies that exclude women from the mainstream; women's participation is confined to symbolically inclusive but substantively marginal spaces (Belschner & Paredes, 2020). From a feminist institutionalist perspective, this paradox illustrates how the formal rules of inclusion interact with informal norms to reproduce patriarchal power within the very structures meant to dismantle it (Mackay & Murtagh, 2019).

What may appear to be mere party culture is, in fact, legally enabled behaviour that is shaped by the electoral system and party nomination rules. The majoritarian system increases competition and winner-take-all stakes, while nomination rules grant parties broad discretion over candidate selection. The system concentrates electoral advantage, which leads parties to favour male candidates, who are perceived as more electorally viable than women. In the absence of legal incentives to field women in open seats, parties continue to engage in nomination practices that are structured by patriarchal logics and confine women to reserved positions (Lihiru, 2024). These dynamics become even more restrictive for women located at the intersection of multiple forms of marginalisation. The next subsection examines these intersectional exclusions.

11 Author's field notes from a women's political participation dialogue organised by Tanzania Gender Networking Programme at the TGNP Grounds, Dar es Salaam, 6 March 2024.

12 Interview with a leader in a political party's women's wing, Dar es Salaam, 11 November 2024.

13 Interview with a woman aspirant in the 2024 local elections, Dar es Salaam, 15 November 2024.

14 Interview with a leader of a political party's women's wing, Dar es Salaam, 15 November 2024.

15 Interview with a leader of a political party's women's wing, Dar es Salaam, 17 November 2024.

*Intersectional Exclusion of Young Women, Rural Women, and
Women with Disabilities*

Similar to the legal posture for parliamentary reserved seats,¹⁶ the legal framework governing local democracy views women as a single, uniform category. The framework thus overlooks the differentiated ways in which gender intersects with age, class, disability and location. The Local Government Elections Regulations prescribe the numerical quotas for eight women among the 25 members of the village council and two women among the six street committee members. However, these provisions are silent about who these women should be or how their multiple identities could shape their access to leadership roles.¹⁷

By focusing exclusively on headcounts, the law implies homogeneity and neglects the intersecting inequalities that shape women's political journeys. Workshop data have consistently shown that young, uneducated, rural women, as well as women with disabilities, can rarely access the nomination process, despite the existence of reserved seats.¹⁸ Such exclusion is legally enabled. However, it is also facilitated by limited information flows, financial constraints, accessibility issues, and weak mentorship networks.¹⁹

From an intersectional feminist legal lens, the uniform quota structure ends up producing a hierarchy among women. Women who possess education, party ties, and social capital are structurally privileged, while women at the margins remain excluded (Cho et al., 2013). The result is a quota system that fulfils formal equality but fails to achieve substantive representational diversity, creating a legally compliant but socially narrow conception of inclusion. These patterns are congruent with intersectional analyses in the literature that have demonstrated how, by treating women as a homogeneous category, legal frameworks inevitably reproduce internal hierarchies.

The exclusion generated by this homogenising legal approach is reinforced by the age requirement in the Local Government Elections Regulations. Like the legal framework governing parliamentary elections,²⁰ these regulations permit voting at 18 but restrict candidacy to people aged 21 or older.²¹ Although this

16 The reserved parliamentary seat system established under Article 66(b) of the *Constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania, 1977* applies exclusively to women; there are no reserved seats for young people or persons with disabilities.

17 Regulation 6 of Government Notices Nos. 571 and 573 of 2024.

18 Author's field notes from a women's political participation dialogue organised by Women in Law and Development in Africa Tanzania, held at DoubleTree by Hilton Dar es Salaam Oyster Bay in Dar es Salaam, 1 March 2024.

19 Interview with a leader of a political party's women's wing, Dar es Salaam, 17 November 2024.

20 Articles 39, 47, and 67 of the *Constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania, 1977*.

21 Regulations 13 and 15 of Government Notices Nos. 571, 573, and 574 of 2024, and Regulations 12 and 14 of Government Notice No. 572 of 2024.

three-year gap applies to both young men and women, its practical effects have distinct implications for each gender group. Empirical accounts – and the general Tanzanian electoral context – indicate that young women already encounter social scrutiny, gendered assumptions of immaturity, and restrictive expectations around propriety, marriage, and caregiving if they seek leadership roles. Hence, an ostensibly neutral age threshold becomes a distinctly gendered barrier. In this context, the age threshold for candidacy compounds other disadvantages by delaying women's political entry further. A young female aspirant observed, 'They told me I was old enough to vote at 18 but still too young to run until 21. It felt confusing ... how can we choose leaders but not be trusted to stand as leaders ourselves?'²²

The seemingly neutral rule therefore entrenches a gendered disadvantage, as the age bar interacts with broader socio-cultural expectations about femininity and adult status. This point aligns with feminist critiques (MacKinnon, 1989; Fineman, 2010) that demonstrate how ostensibly neutral legal standards can conceal deeper structural biases. By legally constructing 18- to 20-year-olds as sufficiently responsible to vote, but insufficiently mature to lead, the law reinforces ageist and gendered stereotypes. It forecloses early political entry points that could nurture a more genuinely inclusive leadership pipeline.²³ The legal exclusion of younger candidates also limits their ability to influence policies that affect young people's lives, education, employment, health, and gender equality. This deprives local communities of leadership perspectives that are uniquely shaped by youth experiences (Stockemer & Sundström, 2022).

Overall, despite the lack of official statistics disaggregated by age, disability, and location at the village, hamlet, and street levels, workshop evidence and interview accounts indicate that young women, rural women, and women with disabilities are almost entirely absent from competitive positions. They also remain underrepresented even within reserved seats. Notably, the absence of desegregated statistics is itself legally enabled – a point that is expounded below.

Legally Structured Demographic Invisibility in Local Elections

Reliable demographic data are essential for understanding who participates in local elections. This is particularly salient regarding the participation of women, whose political engagement is shaped by intersecting barriers. The President's Office, Regional Administration and Local Government (PO-RALG) is the statutory authority responsible for organising and administering local elections in Mainland Tanzania. The completeness of voter registration data directly affects

²² Interview with a young woman aspirant, Dar es Salaam, 20 November 2024.

²³ Interview with a leader in a youth-led organisation, Dar es Salaam, 7 December 2024.

the Office's ability to deliver inclusive electoral arrangements. For example, the 2024 Local Elections Regulations required the voter roll to capture people's ages and genders. However, the regulations did not mention disability status, which left the PO-RALG without the demographic information necessary to plan appropriate accommodations for voters with disabilities.²⁴ This omission disproportionately affects women, who constitute the majority of persons with disabilities and are more likely than men to require gender-sensitive assistance. In addition, regulations that permit assisted voting for persons with visual or other impairments may compromise ballot secrecy if accessible voting technologies and procedural safeguards are absent.

Under such conditions, women with disabilities may face heightened vulnerability. Disability intersects with gendered inequalities in mobility, dependence, and access to electoral information, which can limit people's autonomous participation.²⁵ Accessibility barriers were widespread during the 2024 local elections. Most polling stations, typically public schools or government offices, lacked ramps, accessible pathways, or adjustable voting booths.²⁶ No braille ballots or assistive technologies such as audio devices were provided. No sign-language interpreters were available. These shortcomings meant that voters with visual or hearing impairments were excluded from meaningful participation.²⁷

Such omissions compound pre-existing gendered disadvantages in mobility, safety, information access, and caregiving responsibilities, making inaccessible polling environments especially exclusionary for women.

PO-RALG's preliminary report disaggregated the 31 million registrants only by sex (15 million men; 16 million women).²⁸ Although candidate nomination forms captured age, sex, location, and disability status, none of this information was incorporated into the preliminary 2024 results.²⁹ Furthermore, the final report presented only party outcomes. The Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) party reportedly won 99% of villages, 98% of streets, 98% of hamlet chairperson positions, and 99% of village councils and street committees. The report did

24 First Schedule and Form No. 1 of Government Notices Nos. 571 and 573 of 2024.

25 Regulation 36 of Government Notices Nos. 571, 573, and 574 of 2024, and Regulation 35 of Government Notice No. 572 of 2024.

26 Interview with a woman leader at the Federation of Persons with Disabilities in Tanzania, Dar es Salaam, 20 November 2024.

27 Interview with a male leader at the Federation of Persons with Disabilities in Tanzania, Dar es Salaam, 20 November 2024.

28 Statement on the 2024 local election results delivered by Mohamed Mchengerwa, Minister of State, President's Office – Regional Administration and Local Government, 28 November 2024.

29 Forms Nos. 2 and 3, and Schedules 2 and 3 of Government Notices Nos. 571 and 573 of 2024; see also Forms V–VIII and Schedule 5, Form No. 9 of Government Notices Nos. 571 and 573 of 12 July 2024.

not indicate how many women, young women, or women with disabilities had contested or won positions. Such omissions erase critical gendered dynamics in candidate emergence, party gatekeeping, and electoral success.

Furthermore, the Local Election Regulations required ballot papers and forms declaring results to record only the candidates' genders, not their ages or disability status. This prevented consistent tracking of the demographic profiles of women candidates across different stages of the electoral process. Reliance on manual forms and limited technological capacity further constrained any systematic analysis. The inconsistencies in data capturing and reporting obscure the scale and nature of women's participation (Machado & Prado, 2022), particularly that of young women, rural women, and women with disabilities. The end result undermines the effort to build a gender-inclusive local democracy.

The omissions are not merely administrative accidents. They stem from a legal framework that mandates counting people according to their sex, while remaining silent on age, disability, location, and other intersecting identities. Electoral data systems reproduce this homogenising logic, rendering the most marginalised women nearly invisible. These patterns of legally structured demographic invisibility illuminate only part of the exclusionary landscape. Women's access to candidacy is further constrained by legal gatekeeping mechanisms, most notably the compulsory party-sponsorship requirement.

Legal Gatekeeping Through Compulsory Party Sponsorship

The above layered exclusions converge with the most structurally consequential requirement of all, namely, compulsory affiliation to a political party.³⁰ A replica of the national-level candidacy requirements, the party-affiliation rule is facially gender-neutral but in reality produces gender-differentiated effects. The legal mandate that all candidates must obtain party sponsorship privileges people who are already embedded in political hierarchies. It disadvantages those – particularly women, youth, and persons with disabilities – who lack connections within these male-dominated party structures (Makulilo, 2020). Women especially are affected, because they face social scrutiny and hold relatively few internal leadership positions, from which nominations and endorsements are typically negotiated (Lihiru, 2024).

Tanzania continues to refuse to recognise independent candidacy, despite the judgment by the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights in *Tanganyika Law Society and Legal and Human Rights Centre & Reverend Christopher R. Mtikila v. United Republic of Tanzania* (2013).³¹ The Court held that prohibiting independent

30 Regulation 15 of Government Notices Nos. 571, 573, and 574 of 2024, and Regulation 14 of Government Notice No. 572 of 2024.

31 Applications Nos. 009/2011 and 011/2011.

candidates violates Articles 2, 10, and 13(1) of the African Charter; Articles 22, 25, and 26 of the ICCPR; and Articles 1, 7, 20, and 21(1) of the UDHR.

Such refusal indicates a deliberate narrowing of political opportunities. The state's persistent non-compliance illustrates its reluctance to dismantle frameworks that consolidate party – and by extension, patriarchal – control over political participation. From a radical feminist legal perspective, party gatekeeping is not merely a procedural hurdle but a legally entrenched mechanism. It produces gendered exclusion by conditioning access to candidacy on allegiance to institutions in which women's representation, influence, and bargaining power remain structurally limited (Kunovich & Paxton, 2005; Makulilo, 2017).

Weak Enforcement of Electoral Justice

This section discusses electoral violence and gender-blind enforcement. Overall, the enforcement mechanisms intended to protect candidates, particularly women, are weak. The 2024 Local Elections Regulations and the Code of Conduct impose obligations on political parties and government authorities to uphold peace, order, inclusion, security, and non-discrimination.³² These provisions are intended to ensure a safe electoral environment, particularly for vulnerable groups. Although violence in local elections is formally recognised as an electoral offence, enforcement remains weak.³³ The penalties for violations, including incidents of violence against women in elections, are typically limited to warnings, apologies, or short campaign suspensions; these sanctions fall far below deterrent thresholds.³⁴

Interviews revealed that most violations occurred during the compressed seven-day campaign period. Women seldom reported these incidents as they were afraid of retaliation, social backlash, or the loss of already limited campaign time.³⁵ One participant stated, 'Reporting violence only makes you a target. You just keep quiet and continue campaigning.'³⁶ Enforcement is further undermined by the Ethics Committees being dominated by male officials drawn from electoral management bodies. Members are appointed by virtue of their institutional positions. Given that senior roles within election administration remain primarily

32 Regulations 2.2 and 3.0 of the Electoral Code of Ethics under Government Notices Nos. 571, 572, 573, and 574 of 2024.

33 Regulation 49(3) of Government Notices Nos. 571 and 573 of 2024, Regulation 48(3) of Government Notice No. 574 of 2024, and Regulation 46(3) of Government Notice No. 572 of 2024.

34 Regulation 5.9 of the Electoral Code of Ethics under Government Notices Nos. 571, 572, 573, and 574 of 2024.

35 Regulation 27(1) of Government Notices Nos. 571, 573, and 574 of 2024, and Regulation 26(1) of Government Notice No. 572 of 2024.

36 Interview with a woman candidate, Dar es Salaam, 17 November 2024.

male, women's representation in these bodies is limited.³⁷ The committees also operate without mandatory gender-related training, which leads to gender-specific harms often being trivialised or dismissed as interpersonal disputes.

The weak enforcement around electoral offences reflects deeper institutional patriarchy in the administration of electoral justice. Laws prohibiting electoral violence formally exist, but in the absence of strong penalties, gender-responsive implementation, or adequate training, they remain largely symbolic.³⁸ This dynamic is congruent with the insight of feminist legal theory that the meaning and effect of laws are shaped by their textual provisions and the perspectives and biases of people who interpret and enforce them (Machado & Prado, 2022). Under-enforcement is not merely administrative failure; it is a legal design problem, embedded in sanction types, decision-making timelines, committee composition, and the absence of explicit training obligations. The next section examines administrative capture, showing how legal and bureaucratic arrangements further narrow the political space available to women candidates.

Administrative Capture and the Impact on Women's Political Participation

Administrative irregularities ostensibly affect all candidates, yet once again, their effects are gender-differentiated. Women have fewer protective networks, less access to legal redress, less financial resilience, and greater exposure to reputational and physical risks than men. Overall, the credibility of local elections in Tanzania remains a significant issue for candidates and voters, including women. Whereas the national elections are managed by the Independent Electoral Commission (INEC),³⁹ the local elections are managed by the PO-RALG. The staff managing these elections are public servants,⁴⁰ most of whom are appointed by the president and are affiliated with the ruling party, CCM. The CCM itself is one of the political parties participating in the elections.

This alignment between the executive branch and election administration creates a conflict of interest that undermines the impartiality of the electoral process. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that staff members, in the course of conducting the elections, are immune from any civil or criminal liability regarding

37 Interview with a leader at a women-led non-governmental organisation in Tanzania, Dar es Salaam, 19 November 2024.

38 Regulation 5.2 of the Electoral Code of Ethics under Government Notices Nos. 571, 572, 573, and 574 of 2024.

39 Article 74 of the *Constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania*, 1977.

40 Regulation 3 of Government Notices Nos. 571, 572, 573, and 574 of 2024.

their actions.⁴¹ Furthermore, election data and information are legally required to be discarded after 30 days, unless there is a court injunction. This point raises concerns about the transparency of the electoral process; the practice limits the ability to conduct thorough post-election audits or investigations beyond the legal realm.⁴²

The new *Independent National Electoral Commission Act, 2024* includes supervision of local elections as one of the Commission's responsibilities. However, this provision can only be implemented through additional legislation, which Parliament must pass.⁴³ The 2024 local elections became immanent, and the new law had not yet been passed. The PO-RALG continued with its preparations for the elections. The situation led to litigation challenging PO-RALG's role in overseeing the local elections in *Bob Chacha Wangwe and 2 Others v Minister, President's Office Regional Administration and Local Government and Attorney General* (2024). The court ruled that a new law was needed that should define how the INEC should supervise local elections. In the absence of such a law, the court allowed PO-RALG to continue managing the local elections (Karashani, 2025).

In the end, similar to the 2019 local elections – which were considered a watershed moment in Tanzania's electoral history – opposition political parties reported significant challenges in 2024. These included the registration of underage and non-resident voters, widespread disqualification of candidates for minor or rectifiable errors, allegations of form manipulation, ballot stuffing, voting by non-residents, and intimidation and violence. The PO-RALG vehemently disputed these allegations (Nebe & Ngutjinazo, 2024).⁴⁴ The Alliance for Change and Transparency (ACT Wazalendo) party filed 51 election petitions across the country,⁴⁵ challenging the irregularities in the conduct of the 2024 local elections (*The Citizen*, 2025).

Under such circumstances, women often feel they must choose between running for candidacy under the ruling party, for the sake of safety, or abandoning their political ambitions altogether. Contesting under the opposition exposes them, their families, and supporters to manipulation, violence, and intimidation.⁴⁶ As one woman candidate from the opposition party stated, 'If you run with the opposition, you risk your life; if you run with the ruling party, you lose your

41 Regulation 50 of Government Notices Nos. 571 and 573 of 2024, Regulation 47 of Government Notice No. 572 of 2024, and Regulation 49 of Government Notice No. 574 of 2024.

42 Regulation 45 of Government Notices Nos. 571 and 573 of 2024, Regulation 44 of Government Notice No. 574 of 2024, and Regulation 42 of Government Notice No. 572 of 2024.

43 Section 10(1)(c) of the *Independent National Electoral Commission Act, 2024* (Act No. 2 of 2024).

44 Interview with a leader in an opposition political party, Dar es Salaam, 1 December 2025.

45 Regulation 44 of Government Notices Nos. 571, 572, and 573 of 2024, and Regulation 43 of Government Notice No. 574 of 2024.

46 Interview with a woman leader in an opposition political party, Dar es Salaam, 5 December 2025.

voice.⁴⁷ This dilemma illustrates how legal and institutional bias discourage independent female participation. Administrative capture and its negative effects on women's candidacy are not merely political perceptions. They stem from statutory allocations of power, along with immunity and a legislative vacuum regarding local election supervision. In short, administrative capture reinforces a continuum of exclusion that begins before elections and extends into the exercise of political power. The next section considers how this continuum shapes women's substantive representation within local governance.

Substantive Representation and Gendered Division of Political Labour

It is clear by now that although the one-third quota at the local level enhances women's numerical inclusion, it does not guarantee their substantive representation. Women serving in reserved positions often occupy peripheral roles where they have minimal influence in setting the agenda. Their participation is largely confined to sectors socially coded as feminine, such as health, education, water, and sanitation.⁴⁸ Strategic and high-prestige domains, such as infrastructure, finance, and security, remain dominated by men (Dahlerup, 2006).⁴⁹ In addition, women in reserved seats at the village and street levels cannot make meaningful advances in gender transformation, even within 'feminised' sectors,⁵⁰ just as women in parliamentary reserved seats often struggle to advance women's issues. Party loyalty in villages and streets often supersedes women's collective solidarity, weakening their capacity to advocate for gender-responsive policies.⁵¹

These dynamics affirm radical feminist critiques that legal reforms enacted within patriarchal institutions risk devolving into tokenism if structural hierarchies remain unchallenged. The law guarantees seats, but it does not guarantee the decision-making authority that would redistribute power – and dismantle the entrenched social perceptions that women's political roles belong purely in certain sectors. As a result, formal inclusion without institutional transformation reproduces symbolic rather than substantive equality (Htun & Weldon, 2018).

The above scenario aligns with global evidence that merely increasing the number of women does not automatically enhance their agenda-setting power

47 Interview with a woman candidate from an opposition party, Dar es Salaam, 18 November 2024.

48 Interview with a woman who was a former street chairperson in Kinondoni, Dar es Salaam, 10 November 2024.

49 Interview with a leader in the ruling party's women's wing, Dar es Salaam, 25 October 2024.

50 Interview with a woman who was a former street chairperson in Kinondoni, 10 November 2024.

51 Interview with a leader of a women-led non-governmental organisation in Tanzania, Dar es Salaam, 18 November 2024.

or lead to gender-responsive governance. Overall, the evidence illustrates a continuum of exclusion across access, candidacy, and influence. Patriarchal party structures, intersectional barriers, weak enforcement, and administrative capture all undermine women's ability not only to contest local elections safely and independently, but also to exercise meaningful authority if they are elected. Quotas are thus prevented from translating into substantive gender equality.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This article has shown that women's exclusion from local democracy in Tanzania is not merely the product of culture, party bias, or weak implementation. It is structurally produced through law. Tanzania's local electoral framework formally admits women into politics, but does so on terms that largely confine them to descriptive rather than substantive participation. In this sense, the legal regime does not simply fail to dismantle patriarchal power; it actively organises its reproduction.

The analysis demonstrates that this exclusion is generated through a combination of mutually reinforcing legal and institutional features. The quota system expands women's numerical presence, but by design, it channels them into reserved spaces, leaving the competitive positions subject to male-dominated party discretion. The first-past-the-post electoral system intensifies risk, competition, and party conservatism, making women less likely than men to be nominated for open seats.

Compulsory party sponsorship, together with the continued non-recognition of independent candidacy – despite the African Court's ruling in *Mtikila v United Republic of Tanzania* (2013) – narrows the entry points for women and entrenches party gatekeeping. Weak enforcement regarding electoral offences, the absence of robust data disaggregated by sex, age, or disability, and executive control over the local election administration all deepen women's exclusion. Furthermore, the full scale of that exclusion remains obscured. The result is a system in which women may be present but are not equally positioned to contest, win, or exercise influence.

The article therefore concludes that the central problem is not the absence of formal inclusion, but the persistence of a legal architecture that separates inclusion from power. This confirms the feminist legal insight that law is not a neutral arena within which political competition occurs; it is itself a site through which gendered hierarchies are structured, normalised, and maintained. While women's political participation is mediated through rules that privilege party control, majoritarian competition, executive oversight, and homogenised quota design, the descriptive gains will continue to eclipse substantive equality.

Meaningful reform must therefore move beyond adding women into an unchanged system. Instead, the rules through which access to local political power is organised need to be transformed. This requires replacing the current reserved-seat approach with a parity-oriented design capable of integrating women across all elective positions, rather than isolating them in designated quota spaces. Reform also requires re-evaluating the suitability of the first-past-the-post system for local elections. Furthermore, stronger measures for including young women and women with disabilities are needed. Candidacy and voting ages need to be reconciled, and independent candidacy should be recognised as an alternative route for individuals who are excluded by party hierarchies.

Equally important are institutional reforms. Local elections should be placed under genuinely independent electoral supervision. Electoral offences, especially violence against women in elections, should attract stronger and reviewable sanctions. Electoral data systems should be legally required to capture sex, age, disability, and other relevant indicators, so that exclusion is no longer hidden within aggregate figures.

Ultimately, advancing women's participation in Tanzania's local democracy requires more than a formal recognition of gender equality. It requires restructuring the current legal and institutional order that distributes political opportunity unevenly. Without such reform, women will continue to be included as headcounts while being excluded from power. With such reform, local democracy could begin to move from symbolic inclusion toward substantive gender equality.

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VOTING BEHAVIOUR AND IDENTITY POLITICS: *Reflections on the 2024 National and Provincial Elections in South Africa*

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ABSTRACT

The 2024 National and Provincial Elections marked a pivotal moment in South Africa's post-apartheid democracy, resulting in the African National Congress (ANC) losing its parliamentary majority for the first time. The shift in power dynamics necessitated coalition discussions and the possibility of a government of national unity, highlighting the intricate dynamics of voter behaviour. This article employs voter behaviour theory and document analysis to explore these complexities. The results reveal an intricate interplay of factors shaping electoral outcomes, with identity politics emerging as particularly salient. The emergence of new parties, such as uMkhonto weSizwe (MK Party), together with ethnically charged campaign rhetoric, highlighted the potential for ethno-populist appeals. Hence the elections underscore the importance of comprehending voter behaviour within the context of the loss of power by a dominant liberation movement to a breakaway faction, whose support ostensibly exhibited ethnic undertones. Rational choice considerations around socioeconomic issues and growing

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discontent with the ruling ANC also factored into voting decisions, indicating critical engagement by the electorate with political choices in 2024. Future elections will likely continue to reflect the complex interplay of identity, economic concerns, and evolving political loyalties in South Africa's maturing democracy.

Keywords: Voter behaviour, identity theory, African National Congress, uMkhonto weSizwe, political fluidity

INTRODUCTION

Analysing South Africa's 2024 elections requires a close understanding of voter behaviour and its implications. The 2024 South African National and Provincial Elections (NPEs) featured an unprecedented number of competing parties, with ethnically oriented parties such as uMkhonto weSizwe (MK Party) and the Patriotic Alliance (PA) achieving significant electoral gains among Zulu and coloured constituencies respectively. Additionally, there was a significant increase in the number of parties vying for seats in these elections, with many of them leaning towards identity politics and populist sentiment. These developments underscore the need to examine how voter identity – particularly race and ethnicity – shapes electoral behaviour in contemporary South Africa.

International literature indicates that identity politics play a significant role in determining voting behaviour. For instance, researchers have shown elections to be strongly influenced by racial ethnic identities and political attitudes in both the United States (Pérez 2015; Sides et al., 2018) and Western Europe (Kranendonk et al., 2018). Further research shows that partisan identities (Huddy et al., 2015) and religious group loyalties (Achen & Bartel, 2017) can significantly influence political behaviour, political decision-making, and emotional responses to campaigns. These studies collectively demonstrate that identity politics markedly influence voting behaviour across various contexts and demographic groups, highlighting how factors such as race, ethnicity, religion, and partisan affiliation shape political preferences and electoral choices.

Similarly, South African electoral behaviour is distinctly characterised by the strong influence of identity-driven political allegiances. Research by Seekings (2008), Ferree (2011), Schulz-Herzenberg (2019b), and Gordon et al. (2024) documented how racial and ethnic identities have shaped post-apartheid political attitudes and voting patterns in South Africa's national and municipal elections. Previous literature explored how class identity intersected with racial identity to influence political behaviour among black South Africans (Mattes, 2015) and how race and class identities shaped voting patterns in the first decade of South African democracy (Habib & Naidu, 2006). Southall (2013) explored polarisation

in South Africa, revealing how identity-based polarisation affected South African politics. While not exclusively about voting behaviour, Adhikari's (2005) book on racial identity in the South African coloured community provides insight on how complex racial identities can influence political allegiances.

South Africa's 2024 NPEs were widely regarded as the most competitive and unpredictable since the country's democratic transition in 1994 (Ofusori, 2024). In a historic shift in the country's political landscape, the ruling African National Congress (ANC) secured only 40.2% of the national vote, a dramatic decline from 57.5% in the 2019 elections. The ANC lost its parliamentary majority for the first time in the post-apartheid era. The electoral outcome signalled not merely a weakening of the ANC's longstanding hegemony but also a broader realignment of voters' allegiances. Notably, the MK Party, a new breakaway party led by the former president Jacob Zuma – and emerging from within ANC ranks – captured a surprising 14% of the national vote. The MK Party drew significant support particularly in KwaZulu-Natal. The fragmentation of the vote forced the ANC into complex coalition negotiations, introducing an unprecedented era of coalition governance at the national level.

While arguing that identity politics played a crucial role in the success of the MK Party and of the outcomes in the 2024 NPEs, we note that identity politics is not the sole determinant of voting behaviour in South Africa. Other factors such as economic conditions, policy preferences, populism, and perceptions of government performance also play important roles. The latter, for instance, is widely reported on in studies by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), which have shown a deterioration in government trust over the past few years. The HSRC's 2025 South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS), using data from 1998 to 2024/25, indicates a broad decline in public confidence across various levels of government and specific institutions. Confidence in the national government, provincial government, and parliament all remained below the 50% threshold (Human Sciences Research Council [HSRC], 2025).

The interplay of these factors creates a complex landscape of South African electoral politics. This study builds on existing literature, using voter behaviour theory and document analysis, to analyse the outcome of the 2024 South African elections and point towards key lessons for future elections in the country.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study employed a qualitative methodology aimed at obtaining insights on voting behaviour from the 2024 parliamentary and provincial elections in South Africa. The analysis predominantly focused on past studies conducted on voting behaviour in South Africa, to determine if the trends persisted in the 2024 elections.

Other sources, including international scholarly journal articles, newspaper reports, and press releases, and South Africa's Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) reports were instrumental in scrutinising voting behaviour intricacies and identifying potential lessons that South Africa and the IEC could draw upon to enhance future electoral processes. Relevant voting behaviour theory is used to substantiate the generality of findings from these sources.

LITERATURE REVIEW

An Overview of Identity Politics: International Experience

Voting behaviour is multifaceted, shaped by socioeconomic, institutional, and identity-based factors. A substantial body of research shows that social identity – including ethnicity and race – remains a salient determinant of electoral choices across diverse political contexts, albeit with varying expressions regionally (Eifert et al., 2010; Harris, 2022).

In the Global North, identity-based voting manifests distinctively despite assumptions of post-materialist politics. Scandinavian democracies, traditionally characterised by class-based behaviours, have experienced growing ethnic polarisation following immigration. Gordon (2018) reported on literature that showed that among whites in America, racial attitudes and xenophobia were associated with support for certain policy positions and political candidates. The Sweden Democrats' electoral breakthrough in 2010 similarly reflected nativist identity mobilisation rather than economic grievances (Rydgren, 2008). Bjørklund and Andersen (2002) documented similar patterns in Norway's 2001 elections, where immigration attitudes significantly predicted support for the Progress Party. These findings corroborate broader European trends wherein cultural identity threats (such as those posed by minorities and immigrants) increasingly structure electoral competition along ethnic lines (Inglehart & Norris, 2016).

In the Global South, identity politics operate with even greater intensity and institutional embeddedness. Chandra's (2004) seminal work on India's patronage democracy reveals how ethnic entrepreneurs mobilise caste identities to construct winning coalitions, with the 1996 and 1998 elections exemplifying caste-based bloc voting. Similarly, Wilkinson (2004) argued that India's federal structure enabled ethnic parties to leverage group identities to gain an electoral advantage, perpetuating what Horowitz (1985) termed 'ethnic census' voting patterns.

Identity Politics in Africa

In Africa, ethnicity constitutes the predominant axis of electoral mobilisation, although its political salience varies considerably across institutional contexts

(Posner, 2005). In Kenya, Bratton and Kimenyi (2008) analysed the disputed 2007 presidential election, revealing a near-perfect correlation between ethnic identity and candidate support. Kikuyu voters overwhelmingly backed Kibaki (96%), whereas Luo constituents supported Odinga (99%). This ethnic-bloc-based voting precipitated post-election violence, underscoring the destabilising potential of identity-based electoral competition (Bratton & Kimenyi, 2008).

Within the SADC region, Zimbabwe exemplifies how ethnic identity structures electoral behaviour. Raftopoulos and Savage (2004) documented how Mugabe's ZANU-PF mobilised Shona ethnic nationalism against Ndebele-associated opposition during successive elections from 1980 to 2005. The Gukurahundi massacre in the early 1980s against the minority Ndebele group still features prominently in Zimbabwean election rhetoric, 40 years after the country gained its independence. This example clearly illustrates the importance of ethnicity in determining voter behaviour (Raftopoulos & Savage, 2004).

Voter Participation in South Africa's Elections

Despite a consistent increase in voter registration in South Africa, from 18.2 million in 1999 to 27.7 million in 2024, voter turnout has declined successively over the same period. The 2024 elections saw only 58.6% of registered voters cast their ballots, a dramatic drop from 89.3% in 1999. This decline occurred even as the number of political parties contesting the elections increased, suggesting that IEC mobilisation and greater electoral choice has not translated into higher participation.

The 2024 elections also revealed significant provincial variations: KwaZulu-Natal recorded the highest turnout (62.3%), while North West had the lowest (51.4%). Gauteng experienced the steepest decline between 2019 and 2024, dropping 9.9 percentage points (from 71.8% to 61.9%). Analysts have interpreted voter abstention as a form of protest (Runciman & Paret, 2024). This pattern of declining turnout despite rising registration numbers reflects broader trends in democratic participation. Research on voter apathy suggests that low turnout often signals disillusionment with political systems, perceptions of ineffective governance, or a belief that electoral participation cannot produce meaningful change (Norris, 2002). In South Africa's case, the phenomenon may reflect growing frustration with service delivery failures, corruption, and a sense that expanded party competition has not yielded better governance outcomes.

That so few voters turned out to vote in the 2024 elections has been subject to academic introspection in terms of understanding the voting behaviour of the electorate. Ironically, the drop in voter turnout occurred within the context of an increased number of political parties, some of them growing from populist

and ethnic sentiment, as well as independent candidates, all vying for seats. The elections saw 14,889 candidates contesting for 887 seats, representing 70 political parties and 11 independent candidates (Independent Electoral Commission [IEC], 2024).

A 2022 Afrobarometer survey found widespread discontent with elected leaders. Many citizens called for stronger parliamentary oversight of the presidency and greater responsiveness to voter priorities. Weak trust in members of parliament, who were perceived as unresponsive and corrupt, further reinforced the public's disengagement.⁵ Recent HSRC surveys have confirmed that declining trust in government institutions contributes to voter disengagement. The SASAS has consistently documented a steep decline in public confidence, with trust in national government dropping from 62% in 2004 to just 29% in 2021 (Roberts et al., 2023).

This erosion of trust extends across key democratic institutions, including parliament, the presidency, and political parties. It reflects widespread public dissatisfaction over service delivery failures, corruption scandals, and perceived governmental unresponsiveness (Davids et al., 2021). The HSRC's research indicates that citizens who express little trust in government institutions are significantly less likely to participate in elections, viewing voting as futile because they perceive the political system as unresponsive to their needs (Mattes, 2015; Roberts, 2022). This pattern of institutional distrust has been particularly pronounced among young voters and urban residents, contributing to the marked decline in voter turnout observed in recent electoral cycles (Schulz-Herzenberg, 2019a; HSRC, 2022).

Race as a Determinant of Voting Behaviour

Notwithstanding the above, South Africa has witnessed a growing trend of racial rhetoric in political campaigns since the democratic dispensation in 1994, particularly as the ruling ANC has been criticised for using race-based appeals to consolidate support among black African voters (Gordon, 2018). There has been a pattern in which party allegiance and voting choices are ostensibly racially based. Indeed, the 'race census thesis' posits that voting patterns in South Africa resemble a prism of racialised politics, because racial and ethnic political identities predominate among the citizenry, with black people voting for 'black parties' and white people voting for 'white parties' (Habib & Naidu, 2006).

The National Party (NP), for instance, the predominantly white governing party of South Africa from 1948 until 1994, was disbanded in 2005 to be replaced

5 <https://www.afrobarometer.org>

by the DA, which was formed out of the white-only and anti-apartheid Progressive Party. The NP's policies, in particular, included apartheid, the establishment of a South African Republic, and the promotion of Afrikaner culture. The NP was therefore formed to advance white Afrikaner domination. The ANC, on the other hand, was black-dominated and sought to advance the interests of the black population. Paret and Runciman (2023) found that black voters were significantly more likely to vote for the ANC, whereas coloured, Indian, and especially white voters were more likely to vote for the DA.

A study on voter behaviour linked to the University of Johannesburg found that black African respondents were 12 times more likely than Indian / Asian respondents, six times more likely than coloured respondents, and eight times more likely than white respondents to support the ANC over an opposition party (Patel et al., 2024, p. 3). In the main, the study concluded that racial identity remained correlated with voting decisions (Paret & Runciman, 2023).

However, other researchers have long challenged the race census theory. Habid and Naudi (2006), for instance, studied voter behaviour in the 1994 and 1999 elections and concluded that voter choices were largely rational; voters based their votes according to prevailing socioeconomic conditions that represented their material well-being and interest. They further pointed out that political parties tend to hold onto the racialised view of voter behaviour, thereby losing the opportunity to attract a wider cross-section of the electorate, resulting in poor performance during elections (Habib & Naidu, 2006).

Other researchers argue that identity politics, and voting along racial lines, are features that will continue to play a prominent role in South African voting behaviour because of structural inequalities that persist in the country, decades after the abolition of apartheid (Paret, 2018). The sociological model of voting behaviour is widely used to explain voting behaviour based on age, race, gender, income, employment / unemployment, geographic location, and education. For instance, black people remain generally poorer than white people; the World Bank estimates that 47% of black households live in poverty, compared with 1% of white residents (Patel et al., 2024). This economic disparity influences voting behaviour, with the electorate voting for parties that represent their aspirations, such as the ANC – whose promise since 1994 has been to lift black people from poverty (Patel et al., 2024). Tshishonga (2022) argued that the ANC frames the opposition as 'white', simultaneously reinforcing both its own dominance and the centrality of race. Tshishonga (2022) further argued that white elites promote the DA within affluent suburbs, while black elites promote the ANC within lower-income townships, as part of the localised power struggles.

In a study using public opinion data in South Africa, Gordon (2018), however, argued that interracial animosities are not strong predictors of support for the

ruling party in South Africa. He further stated that partisan identity in democracies develops through childhood socialisation and political experience, guiding both voting decisions and information processing. Strong partisans tend to resist attitude change despite new information. In multiracial contexts, the politicisation of racial identities creates opportunities for parties to play the 'race card' (Gordon, 2018). Political parties find expression in playing the race card due to persistent inequalities rooted in apartheid's legacy, as white South Africans continue to occupy the upper echelons of the post-colonial socioeconomic order, despite the end of minority rule in the early 1990s. Nevertheless, while the study showed that many black Africans viewed other racial groups as threats to their political power, economic prosperity, and cultural identity, it offered no data demonstrating that racial rhetoric effectively generated ANC support within this demographic.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON VOTING BEHAVIOUR

This study attempts to explain the elections in South Africa, particularly in 2024, using voting behaviour theory. Since the advent of the first democratic election, voting behaviour continues to be obscured by various dimensions that reflect the country's history and its shifting identity on the continent and in the world. Racial and ethnic identity politics are not a relic of the past but an enduring feature of the political landscape, which is also shaped by ever-deepening socioeconomic inequity (Sadie et al., 2016; Patel & Sadie, 2021; Paret & Runciman, 2023).

The results of the 2024 general elections in South Africa constituted a seismic shift in South African post-1994 politics for two reasons. First, the incumbent ANC lost its outright majority, and second, a newcomer, the MK Party, became a significant feature at the national and provincial levels. These changes relate to three major intersecting trends identified from past elections worldwide. The first is a change in traditional voting behaviour, which mirrors a similar shift across the continent (Khambule, 2021). The second is the erosion of long-term psychological attachments to liberation movements (Tshishonga, 2022). The third is the growth of ethno-populist politics (Morieson, 2024).

Given the complexity, one cannot use a single methodological or theoretical approach to understand these shifts. Using the sociopolitical, rational choice, and party identification theories, we contend that dominant voter behaviour and perceptions of elections – both pre- and post-voting – result from a complex interplay of factors. These include race, ethnicity, party loyalty, and populism, particularly within the South African context.

The development of theories explaining how voters make decisions has itself been shaped by multiple influences. Notably, André Siegfried's ground-breaking

electoral geography work in 1913 revealed spatial patterns in election results associated with economic, social, demographic, religious, and historical factors (Sanguin, 1985). Scholars and practitioners face the challenge of explaining and identifying determinants of social and political decisions made by the electorate. Given the complexity involved, multiple approaches and frameworks can be used to understand post-1994 voting behaviour in South Africa, especially during 2024.

Sociopolitical Theory

Paret and Runciman (2023) explained the sociopolitical model effectively; they argued that sociopolitical factors such as race, class, education level, and gender identity all influence electoral behaviour in South Africa. The model is intrinsically linked with issues of group identity, as all these factors can be linked to identity politics. Paret and Runciman (2023) offer empirical evidence illustrating the continued link between race and partisan alignment. In the South African context, the data reveal a strong correlation between black racial identity and support for the ANC, whereas coloured, Indian, and white demographics tend to align more with the DA. According to Ferree (2011), race remains the strongest predictor of party support in South Africa, with the ANC receiving approximately 60–65% of the black African vote in elections from 1994 to 2009, whereas the DA's support base has been predominantly drawn from white, coloured, and Indian communities. Schulz-Herzenberg's (2014) analysis of the 2014 elections found that the ANC secured 73% of black African votes, compared to only 4% of white votes, while the DA received 55% of white votes, 52% of Indian votes, and 53% of coloured votes.

More recent data from the 2019 elections confirms this pattern. Afrobarometer surveys showed that 57% of black South Africans identified the ANC as their preferred party, while the DA drew 61% of its support from coloured voters, followed by white and Indian voters (Afrobarometer, 2018, p. 5). The HSRC's post-election analysis of the 2024 results indicates that while the ANC's support among black voters declined to between 45% and 50%, it remained significantly higher than among other racial groups, where ANC support ranged from 5% to 15% (Roberts et al., 2024).

Similar patterns are evident in many African countries and extend to societies divided by religion or language. Voters in such societies tend to vote along identity lines for several reasons: to reinforce collective identity, ensure group safety, and maintain political relevance to negotiate their identities with other communities (Anyangwe, 2012). The persistent racial divide in voting patterns underscores the enduring impact of historical and social dynamics on contemporary electoral outcomes in the South African context.

Rational Choice Theory

The rational choice model formed the basis for Anthony Downs's (2018) seminal work titled *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. The theory explains individual voting behaviour economically, essentially proposing that voters use cost-benefit analyses when evaluating political parties and policies. In the South African context, previous research indicates that concerns about socioeconomic well-being significantly influence voter decisions. However, the importance of this factor decreased after a leadership change within the ANC (Sadie et al., 2016; Patel & Sadie, 2021) and the emergence and success of parties ostensibly formed along ethnic lines, such as MK Party and the PA. The presence of breakaway members from the ANC, such as the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), had a similar diluting effect (Morieson, 2024). The EFF, in particular, evidently benefits from its charismatic leader, who appeals to the youth; similarly, the MK Party benefits from its populist leader, Jacob Zuma (Morieson, 2024).

Party Identification Theory

The party identification framework posits that enduring party loyalty and identification are the primary determinants of voter preferences. Evidence from South Africa supports this notion, revealing that long-term party allegiance and perceived party performance were dominant factors shaping voters' decisions in economically disadvantaged communities, irrespective of geographical contexts (Sadie et al., 2016). The model emphasises several vital elements, including party identification, issue concerns, personal candidate attachment, group conformity, a sense of political efficacy, and the civic duty to vote.

Central to this paradigm is the concept of partisanship, which is theorised to stem from pre-adult socialisation, particularly parental influences (Hutchings & Jefferson, 2017). This perspective argues that voters maintain longstanding associations with political parties, often transcending specific candidates or issues in any election. This argument has been cited to explain the survival of liberation parties like Zanu-PF in Zimbabwe, Chama Cha Mapinduzi in Tanzania, and the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) in Angola, among others (Southall, 2013).

RECENT EMPIRICAL STUDIES

In their paper titled 'Factors determining voter choice in South Africa's 2024 national general elections' published just before the 2024 general elections, Patel et al. (2024) reported that voter behaviour in South Africa was still very nuanced. They used the findings of a 2023 voter survey conducted by the Centre for

Social Development in Africa and compared these with previous surveys from 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2020. They highlighted three key findings regarding voter behaviour and party choice.

First, contrary to expectations, socioeconomic well-being did not significantly predict party preference. This factor included attitudes toward social grants, promises about improved living conditions, and service delivery. Voters supporting all parties seemed to universally anticipate these factors, implying that other considerations played a more decisive role in determining party allegiance.

Second, the fear of losing social grants was no longer correlated with voting patterns in the 2023 data. This change can be attributed to several factors. The grant system had been expanded to include more adults, youth, and unemployed individuals, and there was a growing awareness of the role of grants in poverty reduction. In addition, more opposition parties had endorsed the social assistance programmes.

Third, the determinants of party choice were related to several factors, including respondents who had strong trust in institutions such as parliament, the presidency, and the ANC government. Voters with high levels of trust were 2.5 times more likely to support the ANC. On the other hand, opposition parties benefitted from voters who valued anti-corruption efforts. Continued trust in party leaders thus influenced ANC support, and the ANC's historical role in creating democracy and freedom still served the party well. Finally, Patel et al. (2024) found that trust in President Ramaphosa led respondents to be 77% more likely to support the ANC; in addition, older voters supported the ANC more than younger voters did.

DISCUSSION

The emergence of race and identity politics in South Africa reflects transformed post-apartheid conditions. While the late 1990s featured reconciliation optimism and non-racialism anchored in constitutionalism (Anciano, 2016), the contemporary period exhibits democratic fatigue and deepening inequality. Racially stratified economic power and spatial segregation persist, transforming race into a language of grievance rather than reconciliation (Houston et al., 2023). Anciano (2016) demonstrated the decline of non-racialism that resulted from its failure to address distributive conflict, and Msimang (2018) argued that it now signifies elite denialism, incompatible with demands for redress.

Unlike in 1999, when transitional imperatives constrained race politics in South Africa, contemporary identity politics have emerged through economic stagnation, generational change, and declining faith in post-apartheid settlements. Race has therefore re-emerged as a central organising principle, reflecting

structural inequalities and stale hegemonic narratives (Anciano, 2016; Houston et al., 2023; Msimang, 2018). An understanding of voting patterns since the maiden 1994 elections in South Africa helps build this picture.

Voting Patterns in South Africa (1994–2024)

Multi-racial elections were introduced in South Africa for the first time in 1994, when the apartheid state made way for a democratic dispensation.⁶ Naturally, the ANC, a predominantly black liberation party that had been at the forefront in dismantling the apartheid state through armed struggle and popular insurrection, emerged victorious. White people, fearful of living under black rule, voted for predominantly white parties like the NP and Freedom Front (FF). Coloured and Indian people largely aligned with the white parties and therefore mostly voted for them (Anyangwe, 2012).

The period soon after 1990 was marked by devastating ‘black-on-black’ political violence, particularly concentrated in KwaZulu-Natal and the Witwatersrand; it resulted in approximately 14,000 deaths between 1990 and 1994 (Marks, 2001). The ethnically oriented Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), led by Mangosuthu Buthelezi and drawing predominantly on Zulu identity and traditional authority structures, emerged as a central actor in this violence through its rivalry with the ANC for political dominance in KwaZulu-Natal and control over migrant worker hostels in urban areas (Bekker & Prinsloo, 1999). Scholarly analyses reveal that this conflict transcended simple ethnic antagonism, encompassing struggles over territorial control, competing visions of post-apartheid governance, and strategic manipulation by apartheid security forces through covert support for the IFP as part of counterinsurgency operations (Truth and Reconciliation Commission [TRC], 1998).

The violence involved systematic political assassinations, massacres of civilians, and orchestrated attacks on communities perceived as rival strongholds. The IFP’s paramilitary structures and the ANC’s self-defence units engaged in cyclical retaliatory killings that destabilised the transition process (Jeffery, 1997). The TRC documented extensive evidence of third-force involvement. For example, the state security apparatus had armed and directed IFP attacks to undermine the liberation movements. It was clear that ethnicity functioned less as a primordial

6 In South Africa, *apartheid* (1948–1994), meaning ‘separate development’, was a system of racial segregation under an all-white government, which dictated that non-white South Africans – who made up the majority of the country’s population – had to live in separate areas from whites. Blacks also had to use separate public facilities, and contact between the two groups was legally limited. This system was legalised under the *Population Registration Act of 1950*, which classified all South Africans as either Bantu (black Africans), coloured (people of mixed race), Asians (including Indians), or white (Caucasians).

cause and more as a mobilising framework, which was instrumentalised by political elites and security operatives for strategic purposes (TRC, 1998).

The succeeding election, held in 1999, was also underpinned by a racialised view of electoral behaviour. The opposition parties, particularly the Democratic Party (DP) and the New National Party (NNP) 'prioritized... issues in relation to how particular issues correlated to the interests of their specific racial and ethnic group support as revealed in opinion poll data' (Taylor & Hoeane, 1999). Ostensibly, opinion surveys painted a picture of white people being under threat from crime and possible targeting by black people and the ANC, as well as coloured and Indian people being marginalised by the ruling party for 'not being black enough' and acting together with white people in suppressing the black majority (Anyangwe, 2012). With its campaign of 'fighting back' against black rule and *swart gevaar* rhetoric,⁷ the DP unseated the NNP as the official opposition in parliament and thereafter tactically positioned itself as the party of choice amongst conservative Afrikaner, English, Indian, and coloured voters (Ebrahim-Vally, 2009).

The 2004 elections further painted a picture of the complexity of voting behaviour among the South African electorate. Despite expectations that the Zulu-dominated electorate of KwaZulu-Natal would support the ethnically based IFP to advance Zulu interests, the ANC secured more than 47% of the black vote in the province. The trend continued in the 2009 and 2014 elections. Despite discontent with Zuma's rule,⁸ the ANC remained firmly in power, receiving 62.15% of the national vote. However, parties such as the DA and Congress of the People⁹ gained ground, in what appeared to be the start of a shift in the popular black vote away from the ANC. Discontent with the ANC government also expressed itself through voter apathy, particularly among the youth. The number of non-voters was the largest group among the South African electorate, surpassing even the number who voted for the ANC (Paret & Runciman, 2023).

The 2019 general elections that followed were viewed with much interest by the electorate. Most people expected the ANC to lose its majority, given the gain in popularity of the EFF and the growing public discontent with the ANC. In the final election results, the ANC emerged as the winner, with 57.5% of the vote, while the DA secured 20.77%; the EFF won 10.79%, the IFP 3.38%, and the

7 *Swart gevaar*, Afrikaans for 'black danger', was a term used during apartheid in South Africa to refer to the perceived security threat posed by the majority black African population to the white South African government.

8 Jacob Zuma was the fourth president of South Africa, from 2009 to 2018. His presidential term ended prematurely when he was recalled by his own party amid allegations of massive corruption and mismanagement of state funds.

9 COPE was a breakaway party from the ANC, formed by the erstwhile ANC members Mosiuoa Lekota, Mbhazima Shilowa, and Mluleki George, to contest the 2009 general elections.

FF 2.38%. The replacement of Zuma, whose rule was later labelled ‘the nine wasted years’ because of his involvement in state capture,¹⁰ saw the ANC lose 5% of its majority in parliament. Even more voters did not turn out to vote this time, with only 66% of registered voters turning up at the polls (a drop from the 73.4% of 2014).

The DA’s election strategy was that of criticising Cyril Ramaphosa for his complicity in state capture, since he was Jacob Zuma’s deputy during the state capture years. The DA, however, failed to attract more black voters. It also alienated conservative white voters, who opted for the FF+ instead (Bank & Hart, 2020).

The 2024 National and Provincial Elections and the ‘MKP Factor’

The 2024 NPEs deserve close attention because of their intense competitiveness and the influence of the MK Party, which Southall and Mchunu (2024) have dubbed ‘the MKP factor’. The newcomer MK Party under Zuma’s leadership achieved the largest single-election gain in post-1994 democratic history. It secured 58 of the 400 National Assembly seats, surpassing the DA’s previous record of 31 seats in 1999 (IEC, 2024). The MK Party also emerged as the dominant party in KwaZulu-Natal’s provincial legislature, with 46.25% of seats. In addition, it became the second largest party in Mpumalanga, with 17.65% of seats.

Scholarly interpretations of the MK Party’s electoral breakthrough offer two primary explanations. The first attributes the party’s success mainly to Zuma’s personal popularity and charismatic appeal (Peyton & Hlophe, 2024), while the alternative explanation suggests the party capitalised on widespread disillusionment among ANC voters by positioning itself as their new political home (Booyesen, 2024). Notably, other parties like the PA emerged, ostensibly to serve the coloured population. The emergence and performance of new parties, particularly MK Party, aligns with populist and ethnic frameworks of voter behaviour, underscoring identity politics as a critical determinant of electoral choices.

Formal analysis of the MK Party’s electoral performance indicates identity politics alongside other contributing factors. The Social Research Foundation conducted a survey of 7,196 registered voters between April and May 2024, and the results were reported with a 2% margin of error (Buccus, 2024). The results revealed a highly homogeneous supporter base: nearly all MK Party supporters were black (99%), with over three-quarters speaking Zulu as their home language

10 State capture occurs when individuals or groups operating in the public and private sectors influence government policies for their personal advantage. The term was first associated with former president Jacob Zuma’s rule, when the Gupta family influenced him in directing funds to the family for personal gain.

(78%) and the vast majority (87%) residing in rural areas. Economically, 68% of MK Party supporters earned below South Africa's median monthly income of R5,200 (Statistics South Africa, 2024), indicating significant representation among lower-income groups. The MK Party's age distribution demonstrated relatively balanced support across the generations. Voters aged 30–39 years constituted the largest demographic subgroup at approximately one-third of total supporters. Therefore, the average MK Party supporter was younger than 11 years old when apartheid ended and would have less nostalgia for the ANC's liberation days and therefore less partisan sentiment than their parents' generation. Yet they had inherited the economic and social burdens inflicted by apartheid and left unresolved under the ANC.

The ANC's poor performance in government – high unemployment, deep inequality, continuously rising poverty, crime, increasingly poor services, and the collapse of public infrastructure – provided fertile ground for the populist, ethnic, and opportunistic former president. He reclaimed the ANC's former armed wing, scavenged on ANC weaknesses, and wrought havoc in the ruling party (Southall & Mchunu, 2024). The MK Party's campaign platform of taking back the people's fight against economic and social injustice from a captured ANC perfectly positioned the MK Party as a home for disillusioned ANC voters. This could explain the level of support the MK Party received in KwaZulu-Natal and why it successfully penetrated Mpumalanga too. The demographics of MK Party supporters fit with this explanation and indicate why its campaign platform resonated with these voters (Social Research Foundation, 2024).

These demographic patterns collectively illustrate the significance of ethnic identity, linguistic affiliation, geographic location, and socioeconomic status in shaping the MK Party's electoral constituency. Gordon et al. (2024) demonstrated through multivariate regression analysis that ethno-racial identity, particularly Zulu identification, constituted the strongest predictor of MK Party support, eclipsing democratic discontent and institutional distrust once identity and provincial variables were controlled. Initially significant effects of democratic satisfaction and governmental trust lost statistical significance when identity factors were introduced. The MK Party's geographic concentration in Zulu-speaking areas – achieving 17.2% in Mpumalanga and 10.7% in Gauteng – substantiates the ethnic character of its coalition, consistent with earlier findings by Harris (2022) and De Kadt and Larreguy (2018) regarding the persistent influence of race and ethnicity in South African voting behaviour (Gordon et al., 2024). Contemporary scholarship emphasises political ethnicity's constructed nature (Posner, 2005) and the role of elite manipulation in activating ethnic identities (Wilkinson, 2004). Eifert et al. (2010) demonstrated experimentally that the political salience of ethnic identification intensified contextually near elections.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined voting behaviour in South Africa's 2024 elections through the lens of key theoretical frameworks, using a qualitative document analysis approach. The results reveal a complex interplay of factors shaping electoral outcomes, with identity politics emerging as a particularly salient influence, with the hitherto dominant political party losing its majority in the National Assembly.

Voter decisions in the 2024 elections have proven complex and nuanced, highlighting the challenge of interpreting electoral outcomes without enough empirical evidence to support any proposed explanations. The identity theory perspective proves valuable in explaining many aspects of voter behaviour. Results show that racial and ethnic identities continue to play a significant role in shaping political affiliations and voting patterns. It appears that black voters remain more likely to support the ANC, even though many of them shifted their loyalty to the breakaway faction, the MK Party; other racial groups tended to favour opposition parties such as the DA and the newly formed PA. However, there could also have been instances where voters switched between parties or between voting and abstaining, across elections, regardless of their race. This was evident in the low voter turnout and the retention of the dominant opposition status of the predominantly white DA. This point suggests that identity is an important but not entirely deterministic factor in determining voter behaviour.

On the other hand, voting behaviour could have been influenced by disillusionment among voters over failure by the ruling party to fulfil some of its promises. The electorate may have been incensed by constant power cuts, a high unemployment rate, and perceived corruption by the ruling elite, and therefore chose to either abstain from voting or to vote for other parties rather than the ANC. This is in line with the rational model, wherein voting behaviour is simply influenced by peoples' needs.

Even with the ANC losing its majority in the 2024 elections, some voters still show strong endurance and loyalty to the traditional liberation struggle party. However, the loss of the majority status indicates that such attachments may be weakening. In essence, the 2024 election voting behaviour presents several key lessons and findings. The election results indicate a shift in the political landscape of the country, with a party that had maintained its majority for almost 30 years losing it to a breakaway party. This is interesting regarding voter behaviour, as it shows the electorate is not only fluid but can be swayed by populist or ethnic politics. The emergence of new parties and independents indicates a more diverse political environment in the country, although there is a continued salience of racial identity in voting patterns, albeit with growing complexity and nuance.

Empirical studies after the 2024 elections are required to fully understand voting behaviour under such a complex political environment. The current study's

main limitation is its non-empirical nature, relying on perceptions, election commentator reports, and past electoral reviews rather than concrete data. Despite this constraint, the research underscores the ongoing importance of economic policies targeting inequality and unemployment, as these factors continue to exert significant influence on voting patterns in the country. Additionally, while identity politics remains influential, voters are demonstrating greater fluidity and critical engagement with political choices. As the political landscape becomes more competitive and diverse, there are both challenges and opportunities for strengthening democratic institutions and fostering more inclusive governance. Future elections will probably continue to reflect the complex interplay of identity, economic concerns, and evolving political loyalties that characterise South Africa's vibrant democracy.

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Election Notes

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Uganda's 2026 General Elections

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ABSTRACT

Uganda's January 2026 general elections were the seventh in a five-cycle that started in 1996 after the promulgation of a new constitution in 1995. Predictably, incumbent President Yoweri Museveni scored a landslide victory, and his ruling National Resistance Movement party cemented its supermajority in the national legislature and claimed an overwhelming majority of local government positions. With widespread state repression and an uneven campaign environment, the opposition lost ground at all levels to the ruling president and party, who commanded vast incumbency advantages. This election cycle reflected a continuation of a deepening autocratic landscape. Opposition leaders and supporters were arrested, detained, and tortured. The internet, social media, and mobile money services were shut down two days before the polls, and on polling day, technical failures of biometric voter verification kits caused long delays in the start of voting. These issues, along with possible voter fatigue, combined to produce a historically low turnout, according to official results from the Electoral Commission. Museveni was re-elected for a new term, which will amount to 45 years of uninterrupted rule when it ends in 2031. Furthermore, at 81 years old, Museveni once again delayed the question of presidential succession, which is Uganda's most important unresolved political question.

Keywords: autocratisation, Bobi Wine, Museveni, NRM, Keinerugaba

INTRODUCTION

Uganda held general elections for parliament and president on 15 January 2026, followed by local government elections for cities, districts, municipalities, and sub-counties from 22 to 27 January. This was the seventh round of routine elections

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under a five-year cycle that began in 1996, following the promulgation of the 1995 Constitution. According to the official 2026 results, the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) won at all levels. The incumbent President Yoweri Museveni has been in power since 1986, when his guerrilla rebel National Resistance Army (NRA) scored a decisive military victory. In January 2026, Museveni was again declared the winner, with a landslide 71.65% of the votes – the highest since the first general election in 1996.

Between 1986, when the NRA came to power, and 1996, when the first general elections were held, there were no presidential elections. But grassroots Resistance Councils elections took place in 1989, and through an electoral college system, members of parliament (MPs) were elected to expand the interim national legislature, called the National Resistance Council, to 270. This was a marked increase from the original 38 selected after the NRA captured power in 1986 (Kasfir, 1991). In 1994, elections were held to choose delegates to the National Constituent Assembly, which debated and passed the 1995 Constitution (Makara et al., 1996).

Before 1996, Uganda had only two national elections, one in April 1962, just months before independence in October of that year, and the other almost two decades later, in December 1980, after the nearly decade-long fascist regime of Idi Amin (1971–1979). These were not general elections, as voters did not directly elect the president; rather, he was the leader of the political party with the majority of seats in parliament (Khisa, 2026, p. 174). At independence, Uganda adopted a Westminster system with an executive prime minister and a ceremonial president. In 1966, Prime Minister Milton Obote militarily forced out the then-president Edward Mutesa, abrogated the independence constitution, and introduced a Republican constitution, with himself as president and no executive prime minister.

During the first three decades of independence, from 1962 to 1995, elections in Uganda were irregular and held far apart. By contrast, since 1996, a five-year election cycle has become regularised, routinised, and institutionalised at both the national and subnational levels. It is underpinned by a constitutional and legal framework. Hence, over the past 30 years, Uganda has maintained a fixed, uninterrupted, and predictable electoral calendar. Parliamentary elections are held under a single-member constituency, first-past-the-post system for 499 seats, one-third of which (currently 146) are reserved for women. There are 30 additional seats for special interest groups, bringing the total to 529 MPs. This figure makes Uganda's legislature one of the largest in the world relative to its population size (about 50 million people). At the top, the president is popularly elected and must garner an absolute majority of 50% plus one vote; otherwise, a runoff is held.

Despite their routinisation and institutionalisation, elections in Uganda have not produced 'democratisation by elections', as scholars previously suggested

when highlighting the value of electioneering even under authoritarian settings (Lindberg, 2009). Rather, the country has experienced ‘autocratisation by elections’ (Sjögren, 2024). As I state elsewhere, ‘The five-year cycle has served to deepen autocracy rather than to propel the country onto a firm path of democratic governance’ (Khisa, 2026, p. 174). This paper analyses the contours of the January 2026 elections, underscoring the stakes for presidential succession and the implications for the country’s political stability.

This year’s elections took place in an environment of heightened political uncertainty, punctuated by deepening repression and over-militarisation (Namwase et al., 2023; Khisa & Rwengabo, 2024; Melchiorre, 2025). For an incumbent who had ruled uninterrupted for 40 years, Museveni’s landslide victory as officially announced flattered to deceive. Instead of rapturous street celebrations, there was muted post-election public reaction and a tense political climate (Daily Monitor, 20 January 2026). While countries like Tanzania and Mozambique experienced violent street protests, Uganda saw tenuous calm accompanied by a targeted clampdown on opposition leaders through kidnappings and detentions, both before and after the elections. Quite instructively, fearing imminent arrest and possible physical harm, the leading opposition candidate, Robert Ssentamu Kyagulanyi (aka Bobi Wine), escaped into hiding after enduring a security siege on his home. He eventually fled into exile.

CONTEXTUALISING THE 2026 ELECTIONS

Uganda held the first multiparty elections of Museveni’s era in 2006, after 20 years (1986–2006) of a ‘no-party’ or ‘movement’ system. In 1986, political parties were effectively barred from engaging in nationwide activities, including sponsoring election candidates, and were instead confined to their national headquarters. They were not allowed to convene large gatherings, including party conferences for leadership renewal. This ban was arguably the most important anti-democratic measure instituted by the NRA in 1986. It was subsequently integrated into the 1995 Constitution but was subject to a national referendum every five years, during which voters would decide whether to continue with the no-party system or choose multiparty politics. The first referendum took place in 2000, officially returning an overwhelming endorsement of no-party rule, only for the second referendum five years later (in 2005) to swing the pendulum back to multiparty rule. The main opposition parties at the time, along with civil society activists, advocated a boycott of both referenda, arguing that freedom of association is a fundamental and inalienable human right, neither granted by the state nor subject to public approval through a plebiscite.

In placing an indefinite freeze on political parties, Museveni and his NRA/M faulted parties for engendering divisiveness and fuelling sectarian fissures in

a context supposedly bereft of clear social classes and defined group interests that informed the emergence of parties in the West. Thus, parties were seen as unsuitable for an African social setting. This reasoning was not new. It was an old self-serving rationale widely used by immediate post-independence incumbent African rulers to consolidate their power by proscribing organised competition (Khisa, 2026).

To properly contextualise the 2026 elections, it is important to emphasise that Museveni and the NRA/M came to power through the use of armed force, placing the military at the centre of political processes. Worse, they proscribed organised political competition for two decades, running the country as a *de facto* one-party state, packaged as a 'non-party' movement system (Magaju & Oloka-Onyango, 2000). The no-party / movement system was predicated on the principle of individual merit, supposedly unencumbered by rigid partisan considerations and deleterious divides tethered to religious, regional, and ethnic markers. In theory, individual merit is a strong argument. In practice and with hindsight, however, it was little more than a ruse for engineering regime hegemony, laying the foundation for the longevity of rule and creating a durable electoral autocracy (Rubongoya, 2007; Carbone, 2008).

With no general elections in the first 10 years (1986–1996) and an effective ban on political parties until 2006, Museveni bought enough time to cement a firm grip on state power and solidify incumbency advantages, which shaped subsequent elections. When the five-year electoral cycle started in 1996 under the no-party system, and especially by 2006 when the first multiparty elections took place, Museveni's practices of power and tight control of the system had been embedded into the electoral processes. The first 20 years (1986–2006) were thus critical to establishing far-reaching hegemonic control and fusing the ruling organisation with the state, particularly the military, intelligence, and security apparatuses (Khisa, 2024; Tapscott, 2021; Tripp, 2010).

Since 1996, the seven successive general elections have had the same incumbent, who wields unmatched power against a repressed opposition, making the elections fall short of a competitive struggle for the people's vote. This despite fleeting appearances of stiff challenge from the main opposition candidates – Kizza Besigye from 2001 through 2016, and Robert Kyagulanyi for the last two cycles in 2021 and 2026. At best, the elections have been a tool of 'controlling consent', an apt title for a book on the 2016 elections (Oloka-Onyango & Ahikire, 2017).

THE PREDICTABLE OUTCOME OF AUTOCRATIC ELECTIONS

The 2026 election cycle reflected a continuous trajectory in Uganda's electoral politics over the past 30 years. Unsurprisingly, incumbent Museveni was

declared the winner. His ruling NRM, also unsurprisingly, took more than two-thirds of the parliamentary seats, although there are pending petitions yet to be fully adjudicated by the courts. The NRM secured an even larger share of local government positions.

While as predictable as can be expected from an electoral autocracy, some election results were both underwhelming and shocking. For one, Museveni is past his prime and arguably unappealing to a largely young Ugandan electorate, estimated to be more than 70% under 35 years of age. Yet the octogenarian incumbent officially scored a landslide victory with 71.65%, his highest count since 1996. This flattering figure had a notable and dispiriting corollary: official voter turnout was at its lowest ever, at just 52% nationally.

Table 1: Presidential Election Results

Candidate	Political Party	Percentage Score
Elton Joseph Mbirizi	Conservative Party	0.21
Mubarak Munyagwa	Common Man's Party	0.29
Robert Kasibante	National Peasants Party	0.30
Frank Bulira Kabinga	Revolutionary People's Party	0.41
Gregory Mugisha Muntu	Alliance for National Transformation	0.53
Nathan Nandala Mafabi	Forum for Democratic Change	1.88
Robert Ssentamu Kyagulanyi	National Unity Platform	24.72
Yoweri K. Museveni	National Resistance Movement	71.65

Source: Provisional Results from the Electoral Commission (Daily Monitor, 20 January 2026)

Details of the officially reported voter turnout reveal a suspicious, and perhaps unsurprising, pattern pointing to possible electoral fraud. Voter turnout was notably high in districts and regions that voted overwhelmingly for Museveni and far lower in opposition strongholds (Daily Monitor, 20 January 2026; The Africa Report, 20 January 2026). For example, in the populous Buganda / Central region, where the main opposition candidate (Robert Kyagulanyi) obtained more votes than the incumbent, voter turnout was reportedly only 45%. It was below 30% in Kampala, the capital and heart of the opposition. By contrast, in the Ankole and Karamoja subregions, where the incumbent's tally was more than 90%, turnout was officially 70%. Such patterns were widespread. In the relatively urban areas of Kampala Metropolitan and in upcountry urban centres, which largely supported the opposition, turnout was much lower than the national average.

By contrast, turnout tended to be far higher in rural districts, which constituted the incumbent's support base.

The failure of some biometric voter verification kits (BVVKs) on polling day may have contributed to turning away voters, which could have played a role in the poor turnout (The Africa Report, 20 January 2026). Sheer election fatigue after repeated cycles of opposition defeat also contributed to the low turnout. In addition, the incarceration of the veteran opposition leader, Kizza Besigye, may have had a demoralising impact on opposition supporters.²

On election day, voters cast three separate ballots, one for the president and two for MPs. The MPs included a constituency representative and a woman (district) representative under a quota system where, constitutionally, women have reserved seats, ensuring they hold at least one-third of all seats in the national legislature. Typically, therefore, citizens vote for two MPs, one of whom must be a woman. Alternatively, both MPs can be women, because in the unreserved constituency women may also compete (and win), but in the seats reserved for women, men are obviously not candidates. These two categories of MPs, namely, the constituency – essentially a county or part of one – and the district woman's seat account for 499 seats. There are another 30 seats for special interest groups, with five each for people with disabilities, the elderly, youth, and workers. The final 10 seats are for the army, who are non-partisan but vote with the NRM.

Table 2: Parliamentary Election Results

Political Party	Number of Seats
National Resistance Movement (NRM)	372
Independents	68
National Unity Platform (NUP)	49
Uganda People's Congress (UPC)	12
Forum for Democratic Change (FDC)	9
Democratic Party (DP)	6
People's Front for Freedom (PFF)	2
Alliance for National Transformation (ANT)	1
Total	519 + 10 Army Seats = 529

Source: Summarised from the official *Government Gazette* (Republic of Uganda)³

² This was according to interviews I had with different sections of the public in the weeks leading to the elections.

³ These figures are subject to change, as there are dozens of court petitions challenging the results. But any change will be marginal, probably only a few seats switching parties, with no substantial impact on the numbers.

The 2026 parliamentary election cycle experienced an unprecedented phenomenon in which the election management body, the Electoral Commission (EC), 'de-nominated' candidates. This entailed removing them from races on various grounds, including allegedly forged signatures on nomination forms, inadequate or fraudulent academic credentials, and procedural issues such as failing to resign from public office on time. Curiously, nearly all of the dozen cases of de-nomination – some decided very late in the process and just weeks before polling day – were against opposition candidates and in favour of the ruling party. In a few cases, de-nomination resulted in candidates being declared unopposed because nominations had already closed and campaigns were underway or about to end.

A second feature, not at all unprecedented, was the very high turnover. As with past elections, the fight for a seat in Uganda's parliament was fierce and high-stakes, starting with 'do-or-die' battles in the ruling party's primaries (Kjær & Katusiimeh, 2021). At least nine ministers lost in the general election; roughly the same number were defeated in NRM primaries. Fifty-nine percent of incumbents either lost or bowed out of re-election, meaning only about 41% of the new parliament would be returning MPs.

For the presidential race, media hype painted an unmistakably sensationalised portrait of a courageous pop star intent on unseating a long-surviving ruler, especially going into the 2021 elections and their aftermath, and again in the 2026 cycle. Nonetheless, Kyagulanyi was up against the same entrenched electoral autocracy that Besigye had unsuccessfully contested four times between 2001 and 2016. Uganda's electoral system, and indeed regime politics writ large, is anchored in imposing control using the two major instruments of state power, namely force and finance (Khisa, 2024, pp. 9–17). As with previous cycles, the 2026 elections were characterised by the incumbent's unlimited use of the state's coercive arsenal against the opposition, without any institutional checks or oversight constraints, as well as the deployment of the soft power of money in a sprawling patronage apparatus that ensnared a wide array of constituencies and actors among both the elites and the masses.

At all levels, force and finance permeated the electioneering processes, leaving the opposition unable to meaningfully challenge Museveni. The use of state repression and coercion shaped the election outcome not only during the short campaigning season but also through a long and continuous process involving a partisan security apparatus explicitly weaponised by the incumbent (Tapscott, 2021; Bareebe, 2024; Melchiorre, 2025). Through state coercion and the distribution of patronage spoils, Museveni has consistently stayed ahead of the game, maintaining unfettered access to the electorate by utilising the vast official budgets for the State House/Presidency and for defence and security – both classified and directly under his control. For example, long before the 2026 election

campaign season officially began in the last quarter of 2025, Museveni was on the trail through a range of activities, including 'fighting poverty' by promoting Operation Wealth Creation (run by the military) and the Parish Development Model, a government poverty alleviation programme. Even while he campaigned between elections, opposition parties and leaders were prohibited from convening rallies and other forms of public gatherings until the official election campaigns had started.

The EC is constitutionally mandated to manage elections and adjudicate political competition impartially and independently, in accordance with constitutional and legal provisions.⁴ But the EC is neither constituted through a meritorious process nor run independently of executive influence. Members of the top governing body – a seven-person commission – are appointed exclusively by the incumbent and rubber-stamped by Parliament, which is fully controlled by the ruling party (Khisa, 2026, p. 176). In Parliament, the Speaker and Deputy are not just NRM leaders; they are overtly pliant to the president, making the legislature largely an appendage of the executive. The incompetence of the EC was on full display in the January elections, with widespread failures of the BVVK equipment on polling day, leading to long delays even in starting to vote.

Uganda's electoral landscape reflects remarkable continuity, but also important changes. The NRM and President Museveni maintain an impregnable hold on the country's electoral terrain, especially in rural areas, where the 'uncaptured peasantry' – to borrow Göran Hydén's (1980) famous phrase – serves as a voter reservoir for the ruling party. Since assuming power 40 years ago, the NRM has taken pride in the poor masses as its social base, however undefined and hard to verify in an unfree political environment. This year's elections underscored the extent to which the NRM maintains an unmatched hold on the country's political landscape, including electioneering processes, through a cadre of operatives in the state's security, intelligence, and presidential political appointees at the subnational level. The fusion of the state with the ruling party runs deep and diverse from the centre to the lowest level; in fact, it is most elaborate and electorally consequential at the grassroots level (Tapscott, 2021, p. 57).

Activities in the days leading up to the elections and on polling day reflected remarkable continuity in the praxis of NRM's and Museveni's power play, with a heavily militarised landscape and the pervasive, blatant use of money to sway voters. But in starker terms than during past election cycles, the January elections showed the incumbent's unbridled and practically unlimited use of the full apparatus of the coercive state and the fiscal power of government in demobilising

4 These are the *Electoral Commission Act*, the *Presidential Elections Act*, the *Parliamentary Elections Act*, the *Local Government Act*, and Chapter Five of the 1995 Constitution.

the opposition. This has invariably resulted in a decidedly skewed electoral landscape.⁵ Consequently, all opposition parties emerged from the elections with fewer parliamentary seats than they held in the outgoing parliament. Seats for the main opposition party, Kyagulanyi's NUP, dropped from 57 to 49, while the NRM increased its supermajority.

Ahead of the elections, there were overt and explicit verbal threats to the opposition and its supporters from the president himself, but more importantly and, quite unprecedentedly, from General Muhoozi Kainerugaba, the Chief of Defence Forces (CDF), who is the president's son (Daily Monitor, 19 December 2025; Reuters, 6 January 2026). Worse, opposition supporters and leaders were arrested and reportedly tortured, allegedly on the orders of the CDF, prompting a statement from the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (Reuters, 25 November 2025; Daily Monitor, 4 December 2025). On polling day, at least 10 people were shot dead by security forces in one incident at the home of prominent opposition leader Muhammed Muwanga Kivumbi, the NUP Deputy President for the Buganda region. He was subsequently arrested, charged with terrorism, and remanded (BBC, 22 January 2026).

As in previous cycles, the national army, the Uganda People Defence Forces (UPDF), played an oversized role in the 2026 elections (BBC, 16 October 2025). The deployments were deep and extensive, making this easily the most militarised and securitised election to date. The military's campaign-period and polling-day involvements were part of a broader militarisation strategy that included implementing the anti-poverty programmes mentioned earlier and deploying military personnel across the public sector (Namwase et al., 2023; Tapscott, 2021; Khisa, 2020). Leveraging military muscle and the state's fiscal wherewithal, the NRM and Museveni captured political support by embedding perceived benefits into the electioneering processes.

Previously, heads of the military had played active roles in supporting Museveni's re-election, but nowhere near the level and magnitude seen in this year's cycle. In 2026, Museveni's son showed flagrant disregard for the law that bars serving army officers from expressing partisan speech or engaging in any form of politicking. The army's role this time was much more direct. Indeed, it was unapologetically broadcast on Twitter by the CDF, who, following the 2024 launch of the 'UPDF Establishment', assumed total command and control of the military. Until then, it had been the preserve of the Commander-in-Chief.

Wielding full power over the military, the CDF is the head of security under a regime already built around security as the central plank. Thus, Kainerugaba oversaw critical decision-making related to the elections, including deploying

5 This comment is based on my observations and informal interviews before and on election day.

troops, drawing from a classified security slush fund, demobilising the opposition, and shutting down the internet or mobile money services (Reuters, 23 January 2026). He declared that voters would not be allowed to stay near the polling area, even though the law permits observing polling from a 20-metre distance (Daily Monitor, 19 December 2025). Worse, the government ordered a total shutdown of the internet, social media, and mobile money services two days before election day. The blackout lasted five days (*New York Times*, 13 January 2026; Daily Monitor, 23 January 2026). Overall, the heavy deployment of the military and the increased police presence created an atmosphere that was un conducive to a free and fair outcome.

FATHER-TO-SON SUCCESSION

Museveni is essentially a 'president-for-life', a project necessarily entailing the construction of a personalist system of rule where critical decision-making stops with him. Only two other individuals wield power that compares to Museveni's. They are his son (the CDF) and his brother, General Salim Saleh, who is arguably the de facto deputy president, despite holding no official government position. This family rule tramples entire institutions.

The son's role in the 2026 elections highlighted his place in the power hierarchy and succession queue. His untamed Twitter/X comments were a key part of the campaign season and electioneering activities, which included overt threats to harm opposition leaders and unhinged claims of his father's exclusive legitimacy, leaving no place for opposition. His wild behaviour points to his top position in the power hierarchy, arguably second only to his father; however, it has also triggered scepticism about his temperament and presidential suitability.

Beyond Kainerugaba's personal conduct and public standing, whether prudent or flawed, there is the critical role of key individuals from the 'bush-war' old guard. These are the guerrilla fighters of the 1980s, who may not acquiesce to a father-to-son transfer of power, thus complicating the succession dynamic. Although retired from the army, this small but not insignificant group of generals remains active and influential. One of them, Internal Affairs Minister Kahinda Otafiire, has openly expressed critical sentiments against Kainerugaba.

Since Kainerugaba's elevation to the all-powerful position of CDF in 2024, there has been marked intensification of state repression and the arrests of opposition leaders and activists, particularly in the period leading up to the 2026 elections as well as during and after them. Over the past two to three years, sparrings between Kainerugaba and Kyagulanyi on Twitter/X appear to have added fuel to the tenor of opposition repression, with the former openly gloating over the arrest, torture, and incarceration of the latter's aides and personal

bodyguards. Kyagulanyi often chides and mocks Kainerugaba, portraying him as a 'stupor' who abuses the powers and privileges granted to him by his father. Kainerugaba, in turn, constantly denigrates Kyagulanyi as an unworthy political challenger, a lightweight to be physically crushed.

The very personal focus Kainerugaba has placed on Kyagulanyi partly underscores Uganda's succession conundrum. Even if roadblocks to succeeding the father have been largely cleared for the son within the NRM and UPDF, Kainerugaba evidently remains irritated by a menacing external foe, Kyagulanyi, who commands popular appeal – especially among young Ugandans. His celebrity status, complete with a compelling personal profile of rising to stardom, appears to trigger personal indignation and ruthless reactions from Uganda's most powerful military man, the CDF. This dynamic may account for the rampant arrests and brutality unleashed on NUP supporters and leaders.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS: THE ROAD AHEAD

At the time of writing, Museveni was due to be sworn in for a new five-year term on 12 May 2026. This puts him on course to rule for nearly half a century, cementing his number three position among Africa's longest-surviving presidents, behind only Cameroon's Paul Biya and Equatorial Guinea's Teodoro Obiang. Yet Museveni's new term will start under intense political uncertainty, mounting tensions, and heightened fissures within the ruling regime. These issues all revolve around the vexed question of presidential succession in a country that has yet to experience a peaceful power transition in its more than 60 years of independence.

The succession conundrum has enormous implications for Uganda and the broader East African region. A sudden breakdown of political order in Uganda, or worse, state implosion, would have catastrophic ramifications for the Great Lakes region and the Horn of Africa. Uganda officially hosts more than two million refugees, but unofficially, the number is probably higher due to its porous borders, making it Africa's top refugee-hosting nation. The country has also been deeply involved in several foreign military interventions and still maintains troops in the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, and Somalia. Depending on how one positions the analytical lens and empirical aperture, Uganda has played both stabilising and destabilising roles in the region's geopolitics and security complexes. An unexpected regime collapse and state disintegration would probably have reverberations well beyond the country's borders.

The January elections also did not resolve Uganda's most pressing political question, which is the conundrum of power succession. While Museveni demonstrated that he retains control of both the ruling party and the state apparatus, the election cycle exposed deepening fissures. In particular, loyalists

of Museveni's son, under the Patriotic League of Uganda (PLU), were pitted against the old guard in the NRM. Fierce fights and sharp divisions in the NRM primaries and elections for the party politburo were contained in large part because of Museveni's commanding power. In his absence, it is possible that matters may spiral out of hand.

Museveni is 81 years old and therefore might not finish the current term or seek another in 2031, although he seems determined to press on (Khisa, 2026, p. 179). The Constitution provides for the vice president to take over in the event of the president's death or incapacitation. Throughout his rule, Museveni has never had a real vice president – someone who wields power, has gravitas, and can be taken seriously as the president-in-waiting. If, in the next cabinet, he were to name his son as vice president, that move would be the clearest signal of a succession path and a formal transfer of power from father to son.

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UNDERSTANDING 2025 ELECTIONS IN TANZANIA:

A Solid Mark in the Shift from Competitive to Hegemonic Authoritarianism

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the 2025 elections in Tanzania were both qualitatively and quantitatively distinct from all previous elections held since the reintroduction of the multiparty system in 1992. While the six preceding elections –1995, 2000, 2005, 2010, 2015, and 2020 – were regarded as unfree and unfair, none were characterised by the scale of overt violence observed in 2025. The 2025 elections thus represent a significant escalation in state repression, signalling a clear shift to a new and more entrenched phase of authoritarianism. Tanzania’s electoral regime appears to have transitioned from a competitive authoritarian system to a hegemonic authoritarian one. In this context, the paper argues that the intensified repression of 2025 marks the consolidation of that transformation. To understand the dynamics of the 2025 elections, it is necessary to trace developments back to previous elections, particularly those of 2015, which revealed important underlying trends that have culminated in the unprecedented levels of repression and violence. The analysis divides Tanzania’s multiparty electoral history into two periods, 1995–2015 and 2020–2025. Drawing on theories of elections under authoritarian contexts, the paper analyses these periods to explain the evolution and conduct of the 2025 general elections.

Keywords: Tanzania, election violence, authoritarianism, semi-presidential system

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INTRODUCTION

The 2025 general elections in Tanzania were qualitatively and quantitatively different from all previous elections held since the reintroduction of the multiparty system in 1992. The previous six general elections – in 1995, 2000, 2005, 2010, 2015, and 2020 – were neither free nor fair; however, none had been accompanied by widespread and overt violence such as that which occurred in the 2025 elections. The 2025 elections represented a significant escalation of repression, indicating a new level of authoritarianism in the country.

Between 1995 and 2020, general elections in Tanzania exhibited characteristics of competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky & Way, 2010), with the electoral playing field skewed in favour of the ruling party, while still allowing some space for opposition parties to participate and secure parliamentary representation. Levels of violence were relatively low, and the competitive nature of elections resulted in a gradual improvement in the share of opposition votes. Between 1995 and 2015, the vote share of opposition presidential candidates fluctuated; in 2015, it was 41.54%, with CHADEMA, the main opposition party, securing 39.97% of the presidential vote (Stears Open Data, 2025). In 2020, CHADEMA's vote share declined sharply to 13.04%, whereas Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) party secured 84.4% of the vote (Stears Open Data, 2025). In 2025, the CCM presidential candidate won 97.66% of the vote, and all opposition parties collectively received only 2.34% (Stears Open Data, 2025).

This dramatic shift suggests that Tanzania was moving from a competitive authoritarian regime (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Morse, 2014) to a fully hegemonic authoritarian one. This paper argues that the 2025 elections and the subsequent repression represent a turning point, ushering in a new era of intensified authoritarianism in Tanzania.

To understand the 2025 elections, it is necessary to examine developments since 1995, as the historical dynamics help explain the unprecedented levels of repression and violence in 2025. In light of this, the article assesses Tanzania's general elections since 1995, with particular analytical emphasis on the period from 2015 onwards. This approach facilitates a deeper understanding of what occurred and seeks to answer the central question of why these developments took place. The sequence of events leading to 2025 is thus examined closely. To ensure a systematic approach, the paper explores two analytical periods, namely 1995–2015 and 2020–2025. These periods capture the transition from competitive authoritarianism to hegemonic authoritarianism in Tanzania.

ELECTORAL SYSTEMS AND LAWS IN TANZANIA

In theory, Tanzania operates under a semi-presidential system, which is characterised by an elected president, with a prime minister selected from

the members of parliament. However, given the extensive constitutional and institutional powers vested in the president – often described as ‘imperial’ (Liambilah, 2025; Ndamungu, 2020) – in practice, the system functions largely as a presidential one.

Presidential dominance is reinforced by an electoral system that follows the first-past-the-post model, whereby the winner takes all. Partly as a result of this system, the ruling party, CCM, has remained the dominant electoral actor, often maintaining its position through the manipulation and misuse of state resources enabled by unilateral decision-making power. Moreover, there is an entrenched norm that the president should simultaneously serve as the chairperson of CCM. This practice further blurs the boundary between party and state, increasing the potential for the misuse of public resources during electoral processes.

Elections in Tanzania are governed by legal frameworks and administered by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). The designation ‘Independent’ was introduced in 2024 in response to sustained pressure for electoral reform and a presidential commitment to reform. However, the changes have often been described as cosmetic (Paget & Kwayu, 2025). The president retains the authority to appoint electoral commissioners, a power that has been widely criticised as undermining the objectivity and neutrality of the electoral body (Mwanga, 2022; Marwa, 2022; Makulilo, 2009).

The United Republic of Tanzania comprises two political entities, namely Mainland Tanzania (formerly Tanganyika) and Zanzibar. Zanzibar enjoys a semi-autonomous status, with its own electoral system, through which it elects a president and the House of Representatives. However, Zanzibari voters also participate in Union elections to elect the president of the United Republic and members of parliament. This dual electoral arrangement operates within the same political party structures, and CCM has remained the ruling party in both Mainland Tanzania and Zanzibar. Political party registration is a Union matter, requiring all parties to maintain their representation in both jurisdictions.

Notably, several electoral laws were enacted in 2024, including the *National Electoral Commission Act (2024)*, which renamed the National Electoral Commission (NEC) as INEC; the *Presidential, Parliamentary and Local Government Elections Act (2024)*; and the *Political Parties Affairs Laws (Amendment) Act (2024)*. These legislative changes generally preserved the status quo rather than introducing substantive reforms (Kwayu, 2024). Indeed, they can be understood as part of broad authoritarian strategies that utilise electoral processes to secure legitimacy and consolidate power.

A growing body of scholarship highlights how authoritarian regimes employ elections to legitimise their rule (Gandhi & Przeworski, 2006; Gandhi, 2008; Wright, 2008; Donno, 2013). In light of the 2025 elections, it is evident that these

so-called reforms served mainly as a façade to mask the move toward greater electoral control. To illustrate how these institutional arrangements and electoral rules constrain democratisation, the following sections analyse Tanzania's general elections across the two periods of interest.

GENERAL ELECTIONS FROM 1995 TO 2025

1995 to 2015

General elections in Tanzania between 1995 and 2015 produced fluctuating outcomes across electoral cycles, but the overall trend indicated gradual improvements in the electoral space for opposition parties. In 1995, the combined opposition presidential vote share stood at approximately 38.18% (African Elections Database, n.d.), but the share declined to 28.26% in 2000 and dropped further in 2005 to 19.72%. The trend then reversed, with the opposition vote share rising to 37.17% in 2010 and reaching 41.54% in 2015 (African Elections Database, n.d.).

A key question regarding this period is why opposition support declined between 1995 and 2005. The decline can be interpreted as an early indication of the ruling party's reluctance to relinquish power. The 1995 election – the first after the reintroduction of multiparty politics – occurred in the context of constitutional reforms that were, to a large extent, externally driven and top-down (Hydén, 1999). Referendum results suggested that approximately 80% of Tanzanians preferred to retain the one-party system, while only 20% supported a transition to multiparty politics. However, the first multiparty election saw considerable support for opposition candidates, presenting a paradox.

Clearly the CCM faced a potential loss of power, which prompted the party to increasingly rely on state apparatus to suppress opposition forces. In his autobiography, the past president Benjamin Mkapa (Mkapa, 2019) recounted how CCM utilised state resources, including funds from the Central Bank that were originally earmarked for servicing external debt, to finance its election campaigns. Such practices contributed to a significantly uneven playing field in favour of the ruling party. Mkapa also acknowledged and expressed regret over the killings of opposition supporters in Zanzibar in 2001 during his presidency (*The Citizen*, 2020).

The systematic suppression of opposition actors across both Mainland Tanzania and Zanzibar contributed to the declining opposition vote share during this period. By 2005, under a new CCM candidate, the combined opposition share had fallen to 19.72%. Analysing this period, Hoffman and Robinson (2009, p. 123) argued that the weakness of the opposition in Tanzania was largely attributable to CCM's deliberate efforts to maintain its near-monopoly of power,

including a willingness to employ coercion when necessary. The authors identified three strategies used by CCM to constrain competitors: (i) regulating political competition through control of media and civil society; (ii) blurring the boundaries between party and state; and (iii) the targeted use of overt coercive measures.

Despite these constraints, opposition parties remained relatively viable between 1995 and 2015. This was evidenced by a recovery in the opposition vote share, which increased from 19.72% in 2005 to 37.17% in 2010 and further to 41.54% in 2015 (African Elections Database, n.d.). These gains suggest that, despite structural disadvantages and repression, a degree of electoral competitiveness persisted in Tanzania during this period.

2020 to 2025

The 2015 general elections delivered a huge shock to CCM, as voters demonstrated substantial support for the opposition. Given the strengthening of opposition parties, particularly in terms of their mobilisation and organisation between 2010 and 2015 (Kwayu, 2022), the ruling party became increasingly aware of its vulnerability. In response, CCM undertook rebranding efforts between 2012 and 2015, with its secretariat conducting nationwide campaigns to highlight the party's socialist and developmental agenda. This context explains the nomination of John Pombe Magufuli as the party's presidential candidate in 2015. His selection was influenced by his reputation, developed during various ministerial roles, as a modest and hardworking leader, as well as his perceived neutrality across intraparty factions (Collord, 2022).

This strategic repositioning was particularly important given that CCM's image between 2005 and 2015 had been tarnished by allegations of corruption, embezzlement of public funds, and administrative inefficiency (Kisiangani & Lewela, 2012). Despite these efforts, CCM's presidential vote share declined to below 60% in the 2015 elections. In a further effort to curb opposition growth, the CCM under President Magufuli adopted increasingly repressive measures, particularly targeting CHADEMA, which had emerged as the main opposition party. Since fielding its first presidential candidate in 2005, CHADEMA had engaged in extensive grassroots organising and nationwide mobilisation efforts (Paget, 2019a, 2022; Kwayu, 2022, 2023). These strategies contributed to a significant rise in its presidential vote share, from 5.88% in 2005 to 27.05% in 2010 and further to 39.97% in 2015.

One of President Magufuli's earliest actions was to ban public political rallies, a move that deeply constrained opposition mobilisation. As Paget (2019b) noted, public rallies had constituted the primary mechanism for political organisation in Tanzania, with the country hosting more rallies than most others globally. Beyond

the ban, the government imposed broader restrictions on CHADEMA's political activities, and opposition leaders were subjected to repeated arrests. The ban itself illustrated the expansive – and arguably extraconstitutional – powers of the presidency, as it contravened constitutional provisions. Nonetheless, it remained in force until it was reversed by a later presidential directive.

The 2019 local government elections showed a further escalation in electoral control. CHADEMA candidates were widely disqualified, resulting in CCM securing approximately 99% of positions (Paget, 2025; Babeiya, 2024; Oxford Analytica, 2020). This pattern foreshadowed what would later become a recurring feature of both local and general elections. During the 2020 general elections, opposition candidates – particularly CHADEMA's presidential candidate – faced systematic harassment. The elections were widely documented as involving significant human rights violations, including allegations of violence (Minde et al., 2021). After the elections, the CHADEMA presidential candidate went into exile and several other opposition leaders fled the country due to security concerns. This period, especially the 2020 elections, provided an example of Donno's (2013) observation that 'as the scope of misconduct increases, the prospect that an election will usher in democracy declines.'

After the death of President Magufuli in 2021, Vice-President Samia Suluhu Hassan assumed the presidency. Her administration initially projected a reformist agenda focused on the '4Rs', namely reconciliation, reforms, resilience, and rebuilding. However, as subsequent elections approached, the CCM under President Hassan increasingly reverted to coercive and repressive tactics targeting CHADEMA and its leadership. Many of the proposed reforms proved to be symbolic and performative (Paget & Kwayu, 2025). The 2024 local elections mirrored those of 2019, with CCM again securing approximately 99% of seats amid widespread disqualification of opposition candidates. Notably, the 2024 elections were administered by the President's Office – Regional Administration and Local Government (PO-RALG) rather than the INEC. This point raised public concern regarding their legality and impartiality.

During President Hassan's tenure, key CHADEMA leaders were repeatedly targeted. The former chairman, Freeman Mbowe, was arrested and charged with non-bailable terrorism offences. He spent eight months in detention from July 2021 through March 2022. His successor, Tundu Lissu, was similarly arrested on non-bailable treason charges as of April 2025. Given these developments, CHADEMA threatened to boycott the 2025 general elections, and INEC then disqualified the party from participation. Although smaller opposition parties contested, their limited organisational capacity rendered the election effectively a single-party contest. President Hassan officially secured 97.66% of the vote.

The disqualification of CHADEMA can be interpreted as a strategic move to facilitate and legitimise the 2025 general election outcome. In addition, the unprecedented levels of violence and killings during these elections, as well as the overall conduct of the electoral process, call for close scrutiny of what transpired. The section below provides a more detailed account of these elections.

The 2025 Elections

As noted above, the 2025 general elections differed significantly from all previous elections in Tanzania in terms of the level of coercion and killings as well as election outcomes. Although Parliament had enacted new electoral laws in 2024 and presented them as reforms, critical analysis suggests that the measures were merely designed to entrench the status quo (Centre for Strategic Litigation, 2024) and facilitate a shift to full electoral authoritarianism.

The 2024 electoral laws included the *Political Parties Affairs Law (Amendment) Act*, the *National Electoral Commission Act*, and the *Presidential, Members of Parliament and Councillors Election Act*. Prior to their enactment, Parliament had invited public submissions and received over 1,700 responses (Centre for Strategic Litigation, 2024) from individual citizens, civil society groups, political parties, and other groups. The most common submission was the need for a constitutional amendment to reform the management of elections, including provisions for handling post-election disputes, particularly the ability to challenge presidential election results in courts of law. Another widely expressed concern was the need to ensure the independence of electoral commissioners through an autonomous selection process rather than presidential appointment.

The enacted reforms failed to address these demands and remained largely superficial. No constitutional amendments were introduced regarding the management of elections, and there is still no legal avenue to contest presidential election results after they are announced. With regard to the independence of the electoral commission, the changes are mainly symbolic; the body was merely renamed from the NEC to the INEC. Although a nomination committee was established to improve the selection process for commissioners, its role is limited to recommending candidates. The final appointment authority is retained by the president. Furthermore, members of the nomination committee are themselves presidential appointees.

A closer examination of the political trends from the beginning of the election year to election day provides evidence of a planned authoritarian strategy. Starting with the nomination process within CCM, there were clear warning signs. President Hassan secured an early nomination without undergoing any primaries (Minde, 2025). During a party meeting that was not scheduled to

address candidate selection, a party member introduced an unplanned motion to endorse President Hassan as the party's presidential candidate, ostensibly to avoid what were described as unnecessary nomination procedures. In an apparently coordinated move, former president Jakaya Kikwete endorsed the proposal. Only one party member, Rev. Godfrey Malisa, objected publicly. Subsequently, Malisa was expelled from the party and charged with an unbailable treason offence (*The Citizen*, 2026). As a result, no presidential primaries were held within CCM. The entire process suggests a reluctance by President Hassan to face internal competition.

On the opposition side, there was no credible challenger to President Hassan. Tundu Lissu, chairman of CHADEMA – who had previously expressed interest in contesting the presidency before his party's boycott and disqualification from the 2025 elections – was arrested and charged with an unbailable treason offence from April 2025 onward. Similarly, Luhaga Mpina, the presidential candidate for ACT-Wazalendo, the third largest political party in Tanzania, was barred from contesting (Radio France Internationale, 2025) through a politically motivated court ruling that declared his nomination unprocedural. These incidents demonstrate the selective application of procedural rules. Opposition parties were subjected to strict enforcement, while the CCM acted contrary to its own internal procedures in nominating its candidate. In analysing the pre-election environment, Minde (2025, p. 9) cautioned that

Tanzania's 2025 elections pose a significant risk of strengthening authoritarian practices rather than advancing democratic governance. The ruling party's control, exclusion of the opposition, and institutional bias undermine electoral credibility. Limited civic space and low voter engagement further weaken inclusiveness.

Voter registration in the 2025 elections was also unprecedented, with more voters registered than in any previous election. According to INEC data, 37,647,235 voters were registered, representing a 26.66% increase over the 2020 elections (*The Chanzo*, 2025). This presents a paradox given that CHADEMA had actively discouraged participation through its 'No Reform, No Election' campaign. Under such conditions, higher levels of voter apathy would have been expected. Even more strikingly, INEC reported the highest voter turnout in the country's history. Of the 37,647,235 registered voters, 32,803,310 cast their ballots, representing an 87% turnout – significantly higher than the 50.7% turnout of 2020 (*The Chanzo*, 2025). This outcome was particularly paradoxical given the reported violence and burning of polling stations on election day.

President Hassan contested against 16 other presidential candidates from smaller parties with limited national presence and minimal campaign capacity. After the election, all 16 candidates endorsed the official results, which indicated a 97.6% victory for President Hassan. The president justified this outcome by arguing that the opposing candidates lacked national recognition, unlike candidates from CHADEMA or ACT-Wazalendo. However, this justification further reinforces the argument that there was a premeditated electoral strategy.

The parliamentary results closely mirrored the presidential outcome. In mainland Tanzania, CCM secured 383 out of 387 seats, including 270 of the 272 directly elected constituencies and 113 of the 115 special women's seats (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2025). These results highlight the risk of the normalisation of authoritarian practices in Tanzania. Parliament has effectively become a de facto one-party institution, functioning as an extension of the CCM caucus. This composition reinforces the close relationship between the ruling party and the state.

As noted earlier, beyond the unprecedented electoral results, the 2025 elections were marked by violence. Reports included visual and video evidence. They indicated that in major urban centres, such as Dar es Salaam, Mwanza, and Arusha, polling processes were either severely compromised or absent. Public protests occurred, to which the state responded with disproportionate force, including the use of lethal violence against both protesters and bystanders. International media outlets such as CNN, Al Jazeera, BBC, and Reuters, alongside eyewitness accounts on social media, documented indiscriminate killings. Reports also indicated the presence of mass casualties and alleged mass graves, some of which were corroborated by satellite imagery.

The levels of overt violence represented a new development in Tanzania's electoral history. Although the president publicly defended the state's actions and established an investigative commission, public trust in the process remains low due to perceived affiliations between the commission members and the ruling establishment. Ultimately, the 2025 elections demonstrated the consolidation of hegemonic authoritarianism in Tanzania.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

The trajectory of electoral politics in Tanzania between 1995 and 2025 illustrates a clear shift from competitive authoritarianism to hegemonic authoritarianism. A turning point occurred after the 2015 elections, when CCM appeared to recognise that continued tolerance of even limited political space could enable the opposition to mount a credible challenge. The ruling party thus adopted increasingly restrictive measures to curtail opposition influence.

Several key inferences have emerged from the analysis. First, the relationship between the ruling party and the state has consistently functioned to shield CCM from meaningful electoral competition. After the relatively strong performance of opposition parties in the 1995 elections, the state deployed coercive and repressive measures against opposition actors. This strategy was replicated with even greater intensity after the 2015 elections in response to the growing electoral strength of the opposition.

Second, the transition from competitive to hegemonic authoritarianism became more pronounced after 2015. As Paget (2021, p. 63) argued, the 2020 elections marked Tanzania's shift 'from a partly-authoritarian regime in which electoral competition is permitted, to a fully authoritarian regime... [where] multipartyism has been pulverized and CCM domination has been forcibly restored'. Furthermore, as Donno (2013) suggested, a defining feature of hegemonic authoritarian regimes is the overwhelming electoral dominance of the ruling party. This pattern has been evident in Tanzania. The CCM secured 84.4% of the presidential vote in 2020 and an unprecedented 97.66% in 2025, the highest vote share recorded by any presidential candidate since independence.

Third, the Tanzanian case aligns with broader findings in the literature that competitive authoritarian regimes do not necessarily transition towards democracy (Donno, 2013). The conduct of elections in Tanzania since 1995 reveals little evidence of a genuine commitment to democratisation. Instead, electoral processes have been systematically structured to preserve the status quo. Existing scholarship identifies several conditions that may facilitate democratic transitions from competitive authoritarianism, including regime vulnerability, sustained international pressure, and cohesive opposition coalitions (Donno, 2013). In Tanzania, however, these conditions have largely been absent. The opposition has remained fragmented, with small parties often co-opted or mobilised against the main opposition party, CHADEMA. In the lead-up to the 2025 elections, CHADEMA called for electoral reforms and questioned the legitimacy of the process, yet other opposition parties chose to participate, reinforcing divisions among the opposition forces. This dynamic reflects what Lust-Okar (2005) described as 'divided structures of contestation', whereby regimes strategically fragment opposition forces to weaken the collective resistance.

Finally, elections in Tanzania have also served as mechanisms for elite co-optation, encompassing actors from both ruling and opposition parties as well as broader societal groups. This strategy is widely documented in the literature as a common tool of authoritarian consolidation (Boix & Svoblik, 2008; Magaloni, 2006; Gandhi & Przeworski, 2006; Gandhi, 2008; Wright, 2008). Even after the contested 2020 elections, the ruling party continued to invoke the language of reform as a means of legitimising its rule. However, the 2025 elections represented

a marked deterioration, characterised by unprecedented coercion and the almost total marginalisation of the opposition. Overall, the conduct of the 2025 elections constituted a clear consolidation of hegemonic authoritarianism in Tanzania.

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