

REFLECTIONS ON THE 2024 ELECTIONS IN SOUTHERN AFRICA OUTCOMES, TRENDS AND PROSPECTS

REPORT

INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

The year 2024 was pivotal for electoral democracy across Africa with a record number of countries holding elections. Against this background, the African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD), convened a two-day workshop in Johannesburg on the 11 and 12 December 2024 to reflect on the outcomes, trends, and prospects of a number of elections in 2024 within the Southern African region.

The event brought together a diverse group of stakeholders, which included representatives from Election Management Bodies (EMBs) such as the Independent National Election Commission of Comoros, the Independent Electoral Commission of South Africa, and the Zanzibar Electoral Commission. Regional and continental organisations included the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM). Academic institutions were represented by the University of Namibia, the University of Botswana, the University of the Western Cape, and the Thabo Mbeki School of Public and International Affairs at the University of South Africa. Civil society organisations such as the Namibia Institute for Democracy, the Eswatini Council of Churches, the African Centre for Governance, the Institute for Multiparty Democracy-Mozambique, African Youth Ambassador for Peace-Southern Africa, the Election Management Consulting Agency (EMCA), and Tales for Turning were also present. In addition, there were diplomatic representatives from various embassies in South Africa.

The workshop provided a platform for in-depth discussions on the region's evolving electoral landscape, highlighting both progress and ongoing challenges in terms of consolidating democratic governance. In Southern Africa, the elections were epochal in a sense that the region saw former liberation movements losing their longstanding dominance, new political forces emerged, and historic milestones were achieved, such as the election of Namibia's first female president. Botswana's ruling party, the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP), lost power for the first time since the

country's independence in 1966, marking the end of 56-years of political dominance. This was followed by a smooth transition of power from the former regime to the new government.

Similarly, Africa's oldest liberation movement, the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa, lost its parliamentary majority in the 2024 elections and subsequently formed a Government of National Unity (GNU). These developments signify a significant shift in the region's electoral landscape and political discourse.

However, the region also faced electoral challenges. In Namibia, the opposition party Independent Patriots for Change (IPC) legally challenged the presidential election results, contesting the legitimacy of the extended voting period and alleging irregularities in the electoral process. The IPC argued that the extension of voting days violated constitutional provisions and undermined the fairness of the election. Despite these challenges, Namibia's highest court upheld the validity of the elections, affirming the ruling party's victory.

Similarly, in Mozambique, the main opposition parties legally challenged the results of the October 2024 general elections, contesting the legitimacy and fairness of the electoral process amid widely reported irregularities. The opposition argued that the discrepancies in vote tabulation, as acknowledged by the Mozambique National Election Commission, and the refusal by the Constitutional Council to conduct a full recount undermined the credibility of the outcome. Despite these challenges, Mozambique's Constitutional Council, as the highest judicial authority on electoral matters, upheld the official results announced by the CNE, affirming the victory of the ruling Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO) party.

OBJECTIVES & RATIONALE

Rationale

Given the high number of elections in Southern Africa in 2024 and the critical link between political stability, governance, and elections, the workshop aimed to take stock of the state of electoral politics in the region. The workshop sought to foster

dialogue among experts and practitioners from countries that held elections, with a view to identifying positive developments and areas for improvement to enhance democratic governance and political stability.

Objectives

- Identify electoral trends, challenges, and opportunities from the 2024 elections to strengthen democracy in Africa.
- Examine the intersections between peace, security, and governance in the context of recent elections in Southern Africa.
- Develop recommendations for improving electoral cycles and the roles of National Election Management Bodies (EMBs) and regional mechanisms in supporting electoral processes.

KEY INSIGHTS FROM THE WORKSHOP

The workshop provided a comprehensive analysis of the evolving political and electoral landscape in Southern Africa, highlighting both progress and persistent challenges. One of the most significant insights was the recognition of a historic shift in the region's political dynamics. The 2024 elections marked the end of long-standing dominance by former liberation movements, as two of them, the BDP of Botswana and the ANC of South Africa lost electoral dominance, signalling a move towards greater political pluralism and competition.

This shift was exemplified by landmark events such as the election of Namibia's first female president, Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah, in 2024, and the peaceful transfer of power in Botswana following the BDP's loss after 56 years of rule. Additionally, South Africa witnessed a significant political moment with the ANC losing its outright majority in the 2024 elections and subsequently forming a Government of National Unity. These developments, alongside the emergence of new political parties and coalitions, reflect a more diverse, competitive, and dynamic political environment across the region. However, these positive developments were tempered by ongoing issues, including electoral disputes, allegations of

malpractice, and episodes of post-election violence, which underscored the fragility of democratic consolidation in the region.

Another major theme was the complex interplay between governance, peace, and security. The discussions traced the historical roots of current challenges, noting that colonial-era borders and subsequent governance arrangements continue to influence political stability and conflict in the region. While the African Union Commission (AUC) and its predecessor, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), have made significant strides in promoting democratic norms and human rights, the continent still grapples with military coups, Unconstitutional Changes of Government (UCGs), and political interference in the judiciary. These issues are compounded by economic challenges such as declining growth, food insecurity, rising unemployment particularly among the youth, and rising debt, all of which threaten to reverse democratic gains.

The role of EMBs in Southern Africa's 2024 elections was a central focus of discussion. Participants acknowledged that EMBs are under intense scrutiny from both politicians and the electorate at large to ensure that elections are free, fair, and credible. While progress has been made in strengthening electoral processes, challenges remain, notably political interference within EMBs. Despite these pressures, EMBs have been commended for their resilience in resisting political manipulation and election malpractices, as well as for upholding the AU's electoral frameworks. Their efforts are crucial in maintaining electoral integrity amid complex political environments.

Civic education plays a crucial role in elections by empowering citizens with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for active and informed participation in democratic processes. It fosters inclusivity and transparency by helping voters understand their rights and responsibilities, the importance of voting, and how electoral systems function. Despite progress, it was noted that much remains to be done to strengthen civic education across the region to address voter apathy,

enhance trust in political institutions, and improve voter turnout during elections. Effective civic education initiatives are essential to nurture a vigorous democracy and ensuring representative and credible elections.

Despite these efforts, EMBs face significant challenges, including financial and logistical constraints, the need to maintain impartiality, and the growing complexity of managing elections in the digital age. The proliferation of misinformation and the increasing influence of social media were identified as factors that can erode public trust and complicate the electoral process.

Election observation emerged as a critical tool for enhancing electoral integrity, but the workshop highlighted a worrying trend. There is noticeable shift in electoral observation, marked by the diminishing presence of independent civil society observers and the growing dominance of observers affiliated with state institutions or government aligned bodies. This trend raises concerns about the impartiality and credibility of electoral monitoring, as observation is increasingly carried out by actors who may lack independence from state and its interest. There is a need for more inclusive and balanced observation efforts, with greater involvement from local civil society. This was strongly emphasised as a means to bolster public confidence in the electoral process.

The workshop also explored trends in citizen participation, particularly regarding women and youth. While women constitute a majority of voters in several countries, their representation in elected office remains limited. This is partly due to persistent barriers rooted in social norms, economic constraints, and inadequate media coverage, where female candidates often receive significant less attention and exposure compared to their male counterparts.¹ For example, a 2024

media monitoring exercise by the African Centre for Media Excellence during the Kenyan elections found that male candidates comprised 93% of news coverage. Female voices made up only 13.7% of news sources in print media, 12.9% on radio, and 12.4% on TV during the same period, despite a record turnout of women candidates. Similarly, while youth engagement in politics is increasing, many young people remain disillusioned with the effectiveness of democratic processes and the value of voting. Addressing these barriers through targeted reforms and inclusive policies was identified as essential for deepening democratic participation.

Finally, the influence of media and digital platforms on elections was a recurring topic. While social media has the potential to enhance information dissemination and civic engagement, it also facilitates the rapid spread of misinformation and incitement to violence. The conference underscored the importance of developing proactive strategies, such as social listening and fact-checking mechanisms, to safeguard electoral integrity and foster informed public discourse. Social listening in elections involves monitoring online conversations to detect misinformation, hate speech, and emerging issues that could undermine the fairness and peace of the electoral process, providing timely insights to election stakeholders for effective response.

In summary, the insights from the workshop painted a picture of a region in transition one where significant democratic progress is being made, but where old and new challenges continue to test the resilience of institutions and the inclusiveness of political processes. The need for ongoing reforms, strengthened institutions, and active engagement from all sectors of society was repeatedly stressed as vital for building sustainable democracies in Southern Africa.

¹ Media and social media: Gender Links https://genderlinks.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Barometer-FINAL-1_7_2024-media.pdf

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Enhance civic education to improve voter engagement and understanding of democratic processes.
- Protect the independence of EMBs and build their capacities to ensure impartial and well-resourced election management.
- Promote gender equity, youth inclusion and persons with disabilities in political participation and representation.
- Foster inclusive, transparent, and balanced election observation missions, with greater involvement of civil society, including domestic observers.
- Adopt proactive digital strategies to monitor and counter misinformation, and to support credible information dissemination during elections.
- Enhance on-going regional cooperation to share best practices and address cross-border electoral challenges.
- EMBs should collaborate with social media platforms to combat online misinformation and explore innovative ways to use digital spaces to enhance the integrity and equality of electoral processes, in line with the African Union Commission's principle and guidelines for the use digital and social media in elections.

CONCLUSION

The 2024 elections in Southern Africa marked both progress and persistent challenges in the region's democratic journey. Notable achievements included increased political diversity and historic milestones in gender representation, but issues of trust, effective governance, and deeper democratic consolidation remain. The workshop emphasised the importance of inclusive electoral processes, robust institutions, and proactive engagement with citizens and civil society to foster resilient and sustainable democracies in Southern Africa.