

Webinar Report

Rethinking Elections and Democratic Practice in Eastern Africa: Crisis, Adaptation, and the Future of Political Participation

Overview

On 15th May 2026, the HORN International Institute for Strategic Studies (HIISS) convened a virtual webinar to critically examine the state of electoral integrity, the shrinking civic space, and the evolving role of young people in democratic processes across Eastern Africa. The current electoral cycle in the region is unfolding against a backdrop of post-conflict fragility, weakening institutional architecture, deepening citizen mistrust, and mounting restrictions on civic freedoms. Recent elections in Uganda and Tanzania, and anticipated polls in Somalia, South Sudan, and Ethiopia, have raised fundamental questions about whether elections are delivering genuine political change.

The webinar was moderated by Ayan Hassan Nuriye, Associate Fellow at HORN Institute, and

featured three panellists: Anne Judy Kathurima, OGW, a Democratic Governance Specialist with over 28 years of continental experience in elections and governance; Amani Mhinda, Executive Director of the Ikaya Institute for Pan-African Policy and former Programme Manager at the Open Society Foundations; and Nerima Wako, Executive Director of Siasa Place, a youth-led civic technology organisation in Kenya. The session also received substantive contributions from Zenge Simakoloyi, Research Officer at the Institute for Security Studies, and Zineb Elmazouni, a PhD candidate at Mohammed VI Polytechnic University. The discussion was further enriched by questions, comments, and interventions from a broader community of participants, including Christopher Hockey, Senior Research Fellow at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), as well

as university lecturers and other practitioners, researchers, and civic actors who engaged actively in the session.

Key Discussions

The State of Electoral Integrity: Kathurima set the stage by noting that while elections have proliferated across Africa since the end of the Cold War, the critical question has shifted from whether elections are held to whether they uphold credible standards. She identified persistent deficits across the region: underfunded and politically compromised electoral management bodies (EMBs), restricted opposition participation, weak electoral dispute resolution mechanisms, and the pervasive “winner-takes-all” dynamic that excludes substantial opposition mandates from governance. She cited specific examples—Somalia’s continued reliance on clan-based representation in lieu of universal suffrage, the imprisonment of opposition figures such as Kizza Besigye in Uganda and Tunisia Lissu in Tanzania, the absence of post-declaration dispute resolution in Tanzania, and constitutional amendments in Rwanda extending presidential terms from five to seven years. She also flagged the growing threat of digital misinformation and technology-facilitated gender-based violence against women candidates, amplified by the rise of artificial intelligence tools that make manipulated content increasingly difficult to detect.

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Commercialisation of Elections and the Shrinking of Civic Space:

Mhinda deepened the analysis, arguing that elections in the region have become a “PR exercise”—procedurally legal but lacking democratic legitimacy. Drawing on social contract theory, he maintained that elections are one component of a broader political and social contracting process that is rendered meaningless without inclusion, transparency, and accountability. He described the heavy monetisation of electoral campaigns, in which undisclosed business interests fund candidates in exchange for post-election commitments, leaving elected leaders accountable to financiers rather than citizens. He documented the systematic weakening of civil society through restrictive legislation replicated across Kenya, Ethiopia, Uganda, and Tanzania, which effectively prohibits civic engagement between electoral cycles. He also noted the absence of genuine political party structures in the region and the premature validation of flawed electoral outcomes by regional and international bodies, which rush to congratulate declared winners before legal disputes are resolved.

Youth Engagement and Digital Mobilisation:

Wako provided a youth-centred perspective, noting that in Kenya’s 2022 election, the largest bloc was not those who voted for either candidate, but registered voters who stayed away—disproportionately young people. She argued this reflects not apathy, but a deliberate withdrawal from processes perceived as unresponsive. Kenya has witnessed hundreds of protests over the past two years, most notably the 2024 Gen Z movement, which was entirely organic and not convened by any political party. Wako also raised concerns about the growing influence of global technology corporations

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engaging directly with political leaders on policy, warning that surveillance capabilities and data harvesting represent new forms of power that could reshape political participation, particularly as the majority of the global population shifts towards Africa and Asia in the coming decades.

State Violence and the Militarisation of Political Space:

The panel firmly examined the characterisation of youth protesters as violent, noting that demonstrators typically carry only water and handkerchiefs while the state deploys tear gas, live ammunition, and in some cases state-sponsored goon squads operating alongside security forces. Kathurima called for individual accountability for officers who use lethal force, from the officer pulling the trigger to the commanding officer and the Inspector General of Police. Mhinda described the trend as the “militarisation of the political space” and warned that politically empowered goon squads risk evolving into uncontrollable militia forces that ultimately undermine the state institutions that created them.

Institutional Reform: The panel identified three institutional pillars requiring urgent reform. First, EMBs need constitutional protections and independent financing at the level afforded to the judiciary, rather than depending on the same executive officials who benefit from favourable electoral outcomes. Second, the judiciary itself must be

strengthened as a genuine counterweight to executive authority, with ring-fenced financing free from executive interference. Third, media independence is under threat from politically motivated ownership, including cross-border media acquisitions timed to electoral periods, and requires regulatory safeguards and public financing models that allow media to serve the national interest.

Election Observer Missions:

Simakoloyi raised the structural limitations of continental observation, noting that critical observer reports are frequently “watered down” as they cascade through institutional hierarchies. Kathurima drew an important distinction between AU Election Observation Missions, which operate independently and report according to the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, and the AU Commission, whose chairperson is politically accountable to heads of state. She illustrated this with the 2018 DRC elections, where a critical observer report was set aside by the then AU Commission Chairperson in favour of a diplomatic statement.

Indigenous Governance Frameworks:

Elmazouni challenged the assumed universality of liberal democratic models, arguing that the democratic crisis in Eastern Africa stems partly from imposing Western institutional architectures over indigenous realities. She pointed to Somalia, where reformed clan-based mechanisms could offer a more authentic basis for representation and minority inclusion. While the panel did not fully address this contribution, it introduced a significant line of inquiry about the compatibility of imported democratic models with local political cultures and whether the region should pursue more context-responsive governance frameworks.

Key Findings and Recommendations

- **Institutional independence is the central challenge.** EMBs, the judiciary, and media across the region lack genuine independence from the executive branch. Constitutional protections, independent financing, and transparent appointment mechanisms are essential.
- **Electoral financing requires urgent regulation.** The commercialisation of elections excludes citizens without financial resources and entrenches state capture. Campaign expenditure caps, mandatory disclosure of funding sources, and expanded public financing are needed.
- **Young people are reshaping political participation.** Declining voter turnout signals a redirection of political energy towards protests, digital mobilisation, and civic technology. These movements must be protected from co-optation, and state violence against protesters must be met with individual criminal accountability.
- **Civic education must be sustained and inclusive.** Year-round political education extending beyond digital spaces is essential to build informed citizenship and overcome the short-term memory cycles that enable democratic backsliding.
- **Regional solidarity is indispensable.** Electoral integrity is a regional concern. Cross-border civic solidarity, strengthened continental observer mechanisms, and policy dialogue on context-responsive governance frameworks are necessary to counteract authoritarian coordination.
- **Imported democratic models need critical re-examination.** The region should explore governance frameworks that draw on indigenous political traditions where appropriate, rather than assuming the universality of liberal democratic models.



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