State of democracy in sub-Saharan Africa
Democratic progress at risk

SUMMARY
Although countries in sub-Saharan Africa started opening up to democracy three decades ago, the region is still characterised by a high heterogeneity of political regimes. Fragile democracies often endure numerous challenges and shortcomings, and share their borders with some of the world’s least democratic regimes. Virtually non-existent in 1990, multi-party elections are the norm today, yet they still only rarely lead to power changes. The recent trends of democratic recession have not left sub-Saharan Africa untouched, but they have affected individual countries differently. Some unexpected democratic transitions have taken place at the same time as overall democratic decline has set in.

Two sets of reasons account for the fragility of democracies in sub-Saharan Africa – those that are extrinsic and those that are intrinsic to political and institutional settings. The first include low socio-economic development, conflict and insecurity; the second include weak institutions, lack of judicial independence, manipulation of electoral laws and constitutional norms, as well as serious limitations of civil and political rights. In practice, authoritarian regimes have become skilled at using a façade of legality to legitimise their grip on power. The coronavirus pandemic has affected the region less severely than compared to other parts of the world, but its impact on democratic and human rights norms has been significant.

For the EU – which is an important partner and development aid provider to the region, while also launching frequent election observation missions there – issues of concern include the shrinking space for civil society, the need to broaden political participation for various groups such as women and youth, as well as the impact of digital developments on democracy and human rights in societies that are still suffering from limited internet access and insufficient digital literacy.

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- Elections
- Political and civil participation
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Current situation and background

Between 1975 and 2018, sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) made significant progress on democracy, being part of what some experts in the field called the 'third wave of democratisation'. This wave started progressively in the mid-1970s in southern Europe and Latin America, and then expanded to a global outreach after the end of the Cold War. While in the 1990 sub-Saharan democracies were still almost non-existent (only Botswana and Mauritius held regular multi-party elections), the number of regimes exhibiting at least some democratic features has constantly expanded since then. Today, only three countries (Eritrea, Somalia and South Sudan) do not hold regular elections, the latter two because of generalised conflict and instability. Somalia holds indirect elections; consensus has not yet been reached on proposed plans for holding direct elections. The democratic expansion that has occurred in Africa during the third wave is considered second ‘in terms of its range and scope’ to the one in Latin America and the Caribbean region. Based on VDEM’s Liberal Democracy Index, around the year 2000, the number of democratising countries sharply declined across the world, while the number of autocratising countries gradually increased, outnumbering the former category for the first time in 2019. SSA has also been impacted by this authoritarian wave. Overall, however, it is rather difficult to establish a clear general trend (see Figures 1 and 2). The region has experienced negative developments in some countries and positive ones in others. Freedom House found that in 2019, SSA led the world in both positive and negative movement: 'of the 12 largest declines globally, seven were in SSA, and of the seven largest improvements, six were in the region'. The negative trend was strongest in West Africa: five of the 12 largest global declines (and of the seven in the entire SSA) were in this sub-region.

Democratic trends

Big democratic disparities

A key feature of the democratisation of SSA is that democratic progress has been unevenly distributed across it, with clusters of regimes emerging in certain sub-regions: West Africa and Southern Africa have been the most democratic sub-regions; progress in East Africa has known ups and downs, while Central Africa continues to be dominated by autocratic regimes. Local conditions differ greatly among the sub-regions: according to the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI), ‘nowhere in the world is governing as difficult as in West and Central Africa. Several societies in the region harbor the potential for ethnically driven conflicts’. West Africa also includes a large number of ‘poor democracies' that are facing enormous social and economic challenges. In contrast, Southern Africa has stable democracies and enjoys continued socioeconomic progress.

The competences of the regional economic communities (see Table 1 below) on matters of governance are also a likely factor explaining these sub-regional tendencies. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has systematically addressed political crises in the sub-region, as it is empowered by a strong legal framework. The opposite is true for Central Africa, which is dominated by authoritarian regimes. The Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) has no power to intervene in political crises. For example, ECOWAS responded to the military coup in Mali in 2020 with severe sanctions, which it withdrew after the appointment of a transitional civilian government. Following a second coup in May 2021, it suspended the country’s membership, but adopted no further sanctions as at the end of May 2021. Political pressure and military action by ECOWAS in the Gambia also made possible the transition to a democratic regime in this country in

EU current priorities for democracy support

The issues discussed in this paper reflect the general priorities established by the EU for its democracy support, such as the 2019 Council Conclusions on democracy and the EU Action plan on human rights and democracy 2021. The Council conclusions highlight new challenges, such as the 'growing trend towards authoritarianism' (including the undermining of democratic processes and institutions through various strategies promoted by autocratic regimes), low public trust in institutions and politicians, a shrinking space for civil society, increased violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms, and manipulation of online technologies for political purposes.
2017. According to the BTI, regional cooperation will become even more important for consolidating democracy.

Table 1 – The competence of the African Union and its Regional Economic Communities (RECs) on democracy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>REC</th>
<th>Member States</th>
<th>Provisions on democracy in their governance framework</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African Union</td>
<td>All African states</td>
<td>Article 4 of the <a href="#">Constitutional Act of the African Union</a>: respect for democratic principles, human rights, the rule of law and good governance; condemnation and rejection of unconstitutional changes of governments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The <a href="#">African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance</a>: commitment by Parties to democracy, rule of law, human rights; as well as to constitutional transfer of power; sanctions in cases of unconstitutional changes of government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECOWAS</td>
<td>Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Côte d’Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo</td>
<td>Article 4 of the <a href="#">Treaty of ECOWAS</a>: adherence to human rights and democratic governance</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>Declaration of Political Principles of the ECOWAS: reaffirms the decision to achieve the respective aims</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance: envisages sanctions for breaches of democracy and human rights</td>
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<tr>
<td>SADC</td>
<td>Angola, Botswana, Comoros, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eswatini, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe</td>
<td>Article 4 of the <a href="#">Treaty of the SADC</a>: affirms the principles of human rights, democracy and rule of law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><a href="#">SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECCAS</td>
<td>Angola, Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Republic of the Congo, São Tomé and Príncipe</td>
<td>Bata Declaration for the Promotion of Lasting Democracy, Peace and Development in Central Africa: reaffirms the sovereign right of each nation to determine the nature and rate of its democratisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EAC</td>
<td>Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda</td>
<td>Articles 3.3.b and 6.b of the <a href="#">EAC Treaty</a>: adherence to good governance, democracy, rule of law, human rights is a precondition for membership and an obligation of the Member States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>EAC Principles for Election Observation and Evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IGAD</td>
<td>Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan and Uganda</td>
<td>Draft Protocol on Democracy, Governance and Elections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Guidelines for Election Observers and Code of Conduct for Election Observers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Compiled by the author.
While the international perception of Africa often ignores regional and country differences, the variation in democratisation levels among individual countries is stunning. According to Cheeseman (2018), ‘there are few other parts of the world in which states are so polarized between countries firmly rooted in authoritarianism, such as Cameroon … and Rwanda, and those that are defective democracies but nonetheless have the potential to consolidate over time’. Over the years, some countries have emerged as best performers across various indices, despite differences in their methodology (see box on the right), while others are among the worst performers not only in the region, but also in the whole world.

High level of democratic fragility

Another characteristic of democracy in the region is the fragility of democratic regimes and the high share of hybrid regimes that combine democratic features (e.g. holding of elections) and autocratic ones (e.g. control over the judiciary and the mass media, or executive control over the legislative branch). According to IDEA’s 2019 State of Democracy Report, ‘Africa is home to more than three-quarters of the world’s fragile democracies, which are countries that transitioned to democracy after 1975, but then experienced a partial (to hybrid) or full democratic breakdown (to non-democracy) but have since returned to democracy. More than half of Africa’s democracies can be considered weak democracies, with a low performance on at least one of their democratic attributes’.

Local public perceptions align with international rankings in indicating a democratic recession in some parts of the region. The 2020 Ibrahim Index on African Governance found, based on Afrobarometer surveys, that in 2019 the African average score for Public Perception of Overall Governance was the lowest registered for 2010-2019. Citizens across the continent also consider elections less free and fair and themselves less free to say what they think compared to 10 years ago.

Where it occurs, democratic decline takes place behind a façade of legality, with a slow erosion of democratic norms. Among the main drivers of democratic decline are restrictions on the freedom of expression both online (see sub-section on ‘Digital Developments’) and offline, the undermining
of term limits, government control over the media and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), as well as the growing number of authoritarian external partners.

Simultaneous democratic progress and regress
In recent years, sub-Saharan Africa has witnessed both positive and negative democracy scenarios. The fall of the autocratic ruler in The Gambia in 2017, the opening process initiated in Ethiopia in 2018 and the democratic transition in Sudan constituted unexpected positive developments in entrenched long-term autocratic regimes. The change of power in Malawi, after a rerun of the presidential elections of 2019, was also hailed as a big democratic success. The democratic recessions in Benin, Zambia and Tanzania, as well as the 2020 coup in Mali represent, on the other hand, negative developments in countries that seemed to have promising democratic potential. Until recently, Benin was one of the most stable democratic countries in West Africa, with promising prospects particularly after a peaceful change of power in 2016. President Patrice Talon, a multi-millionaire cotton magnate, was re-elected in April 2021 in elections marred by tensions and the exclusion of the opposition. In power since 2016, he is accused of undermining the country’s democratic institutions, after breaking his promise to run for only one term, and of preventing opposition leaders from running for office or forcing them into exile. Benin was included in the V-DEM list of the 10 countries with the biggest decline in democracy in the world in 2020.

The manipulation of constitutional norms by rulers as would allow them to stay in power beyond the maximum term limit continues to undermine democracy. In 2015, ECOWAS seemed close to adopting a regional norm limiting the maximum presidential terms to two. One of the two countries that opposed the move at the time, The Gambia (the other being Togo), transitioned to democracy two years later. However, in two other countries that seemed to uphold the rule, constitutional limits were subsequently skewed. In Guinea, a constitutional change reset the counter and allowed the incumbent president to run for a third term. The move stirred massive opposition and civil society protests, which were marred by violence. In Côte d’Ivoire, the incumbent president ran for a third mandate, in breach of previous promises not to do so, after the governing party candidate suddenly died. He invoked a constitutional change that reset the term limit. Similarly, the move caused violent protests and the opposition boycotted the elections. The Gambian President, Adama Barrow, who surprisingly defeated long-time authoritarian ruler Yahya Jammeh in 2016, reneged on his initial commitment to step down after a single term – a promise that enabled him in 2016 to be nominated as the single candidate of the opposition. However, other countries have adhered to term limits. In recent years, Liberia’s President, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, left in 2018 after two mandates, Mauritania’s Abdel Aziz in 2019, and Niger’s Mahamadou Issoufou in 2012, opening the way to changes of power, including a victory of the opposition candidate in Liberia. It remains to be seen whether the death in office of presidents known for their authoritarian tendencies in Burundi (2020, shortly before handing over power), Tanzania (March 2021) and Chad (April 2021) will have any longer-term effect on the democratic situation in the respective country. Data from the region show that change of leadership needs time to translate into general political improvements.

Coupst used to be among the biggest obstacles to democracy in SSA. However, after the adoption by the African Union as well as by some regional economic organisations such as ECOWAS of strong frameworks to deter and respond to coups, they have become much rarer. For instance, both the African Union and ECOWAS reacted to the Mali coup of August 2020, suspending the country’s membership. While their action seemed effective for a while, as it enabled the appointment of a transitional civilian government, a second military coup in May 2021 against this government has made the prospect for a return to democracy uncertain. In Niger, an attempted coup failed in March 2021, before the inauguration of President-elect Bazoum. Thus, the first peaceful power transition through elections (albeit inside the same party) in Niger’s history since independence from France in 1960 went smoothly. The establishment of a military council in Chad in April 2021 and the dissolution of the parliament and government after the death on the battlefield of the country’s president were branded by the opposition a coup. In some cases, doubts linger about the veracity
of authoritarian governments claiming they prevented alleged coup attempts; an example of this are the 2018 events in Equatorial Guinea.

Democracy in conflict-affected countries

In countries affected by conflict, such as the Central African Republic, Mali, or Somalia, the political situation remains complex. In the Central African Republic, the re-election in December 2020 of President Faustin Touadera widened divisions, after his victory was rejected by the main opposition leaders, stirring further violence. In Mali, the coup d'état of August 2020 removed an unpopular president whose re-election in 2018 had been contested by the opposition. It followed massive street protests over the result of parliamentary elections earlier that year, but also over the corruption and incapacity of political elites to end the civil conflict. In Côte d'Ivoire, Ouattara’s candidature for a third presidential term in late 2020, in breach of previous promises and possibly of constitutional norms, combined with various actions by the government to stifle the political opposition, also widened divisions in the country. The participation of all political forces in the March 2021 parliamentary elections— for the first time after 2010 – bodes well for political reconciliation, but it is uncertain how the acquittal of former President Gbagbo by the International Criminal Court and his return to the country will play into this. In Somalia, an attempt to organise direct general elections for the parliament for the first time since the start of the civil conflict in the 1990s caused political turmoil; the parliament finally rejected this move by annulling an earlier endorsement by the lower house. An agreement between political leaders signed on 27 May provides for holding indirect parliamentary elections within 60 days. South Sudan was expected to organise the first general elections since independence in 2021 in line with the 2018 peace agreement, but they will likely be postponed until 2023.

Elections

Many authoritarian governments in SSA try to remain in power indefinitely: suppressing term limits, manipulating elections and preventing the opposition from participating in political life. SSA has some of the longest-serving heads of state in the world, presented here in descending order based on the years they stayed in power: Equatorial Guinea’s Teodoro Obiang (41), Cameroon’s Paul Biya (38), Republic of the Congo’s Denis Sassou Nguesso (37), Uganda’s Yoweri Museveni (35), Eritrea’s Isaias Afwerki (28), Djibouti’s Ismail Omar Guelleh (22), and Rwanda’s Paul Kagame (21). According to Freedom House, ‘violent, fraudulent elections that extended incumbent presidents’ already lengthy tenures’ are one of the main factors explaining the decline in freedom scores in SSA.

Elections are the cornerstone of democracy, but many issues undermine their integrity in SSA. The Electoral Integrity Index established by the Electoral Integrity Project shows that local experts have unfavourable perceptions of electoral integrity in the majority of the countries in the regions, with Ghana, South Africa and Namibia being among the few to make an exception in this regard.

Questionable independence of institutions overseeing elections

There is significant mistrust, particularly on the side of the opposition, in the independence of institutions charged with overseeing elections, as well as of judicial bodies competent to deal with electoral complaints. By law, the vast majority of election management bodies in the region are independent, but in practice serious doubts linger about their impartiality, including in the region’s most advanced and stable democracies such as Ghana. Marking a turning point, the Malawi Constitutional Court annulled the 2019 presidential election, which saw President Peter Mutharika narrowly re-elected, on grounds of irregularities such as the use of correction fluid on tallying forms sent by polling stations. The precedent in this regard was set by the Kenyan Supreme Court in 2017, when it invalidated the re-election of President Uhuru Kenyatta. In both cases, the decision required a re-run of the elections, but the outcome was different. In Malawi, the incumbent was ousted from power, while in Kenya the re-run did not alter the result and was boycotted by the opposition. Unlike in Malawi, voters and political parties in other countries often lodge complaints about the conduct
of elections, but with limited success. In Uganda, the opposition candidate to the presidential elections withdrew his petition citing mistrust in the way the court handled the case. International electoral observers, including the EU, have encouraged the opposition to use formal channels to challenge the outcome of elections instead of fomenting violent protests (e.g. in Kenya). Elections in SSA remain among those at the highest risk of violence in the world, according to the One Earth Foundation, which compiles data on the issue.

Important obstacles to the opposition's participation in elections

Another important factor that undermines free and fair elections is the widespread prevention of opposition candidates from participating in elections, through intimidation and violence, judicial harassment or legal restrictions. Sometimes, criminal charges are filed against opposition candidates on flimsy grounds, while in other cases it is difficult to dissociate fact from politically motivated manipulation of justice. During the 2021 presidential elections campaign in Uganda, the opposition candidate, Bobi Wine, was arrested on several counts, as were many of his supporters, prompting him to ask the International Criminal Court to investigate the situation in the country. In Senegal, opposition leader and former presidential candidate in the 2019 elections, Ousmane Sonko, has been accused of rape, which he asserts is a politically motivated manoeuvre. His arrest in March 2021 sparked massive and violent protests among his young supporters. In Niger, the opposition leader, Hama Amadou, was arrested for his role in violent protests that followed the 2020 presidential elections, on charges that some civil society organisations claimed were politically motivated. In Tanzania, various reports revealed that political opposition and civil society had been exposed to judicial harassment and intimidation ahead of the October 2020 elections. In Benin, the electoral law reform of 2019 led to the almost complete exclusion of the opposition from a third consecutive round of elections. In the 2021 presidential elections, candidates were required to have the signatures of no less than 16 elected officials. As all members of parliament and 71 out of 77 mayors belong to the president's camp, this practically obliges the opposition to secure the governing party's backing.

In authoritarian regimes, where incumbent leaders have a firm grip on power, the opposition frequently responds to the lack of fair electoral competition by boycotting elections. As reported by the media, recent examples of a boycott by most of the opposition or a part of it include Chad’s April 2020 presidential elections, the Republic of the Congo’s March 2021 presidential elections; Cameroon’s 2020 parliamentary elections; and the 2020 legislative and presidential elections in Guinea.

Political and civil participation

Numerous sub-Saharan African countries have seen the emergence of a vibrant civil society that now plays an increasingly important role in political life. Civil society, particularly professional associations, played a crucial role in starting the democratic transition in Sudan in 2018. The 2019 Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index for sub-Saharan Africa, published with the support of the US Agency for International Development, found that in elections, civil society provided ‘crucial support, including educating citizens about the voting process, arranging for opportunities for voters to meet candidates, supporting women candidates, and observing the polling process’. Civil society was also involved in combating corruption. That said, African civil society organisations face the serious challenges of inadequate funding and government restrictions. The lack of funding limits their independence and sustainability. According to the Sustainability Index, ‘financial viability remained the weakest dimension of CSO sustainability in sub-Saharan Africa’, with many organisations dependent on international donors.

The shrinking space for civil society all over the world is recognised as a major issue of concern by the EU, including in numerous European Parliament resolutions. According to the classification by Civicus – a platform monitoring civic space around the world – of the 49 SSA countries, six are considered closed regimes, 21 repressed regimes and 14 obstructed regimes, indicating varying degrees of severe restrictions against civil society. Civic space is only open in the island states of
Cabo Verde and São Tomé and Principe. In the words of Civicus, it is 'narrowed' in six other countries: Ghana, Namibia, Botswana, South Africa, Mauritius and Seychelles. Over 2020, civic space continued to decline in West Africa, namely in Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Niger and Togo. The most common civic space violations according to the Civicus monitor were detention of journalists, protest disruption, censorship, intimidation and the detention of protestors. Restrictive legislation against civil society is applied much less frequently than in other regions of the world.

Spontaneous forms of civic protests are also important drivers of change. Youth protested police brutality in the autumn of 2020 in Nigeria, provoking a massive public outcry and obliging state authorities to address citizens’ concerns. In the summer of 2020, widespread protests broke out in Kenya against the brutality with which police enforced coronavirus-related restrictions. Other grass root-level movements have a clearer political objective. In the earlier years of the previous decade, such movements were hailed as engines of democratisation in countries such as Senegal (2012) and Burkina Faso (2014). In March 2021, protests in Senegal by disenfranchised youth took on a more violent anti-system turn, reflecting a possible facet of African populism.

Broadening political participation to women and youth also remains a challenge, even though some notable progress has taken place. Some sub-Saharan African countries are among those with the highest proportion of women in parliament in the world. These include Rwanda (61 %), South Africa (49 %), Namibia (44 %), Senegal (43 %), Mozambique (42 %), and Ethiopia (39 %). In comparison, the European Parliament has 41 % female members in the current term, a share surpassed by only four Member States. Young people remain strongly underrepresented in political positions. SSA’s numerous old age presidents are in stark contrast to its very young population.

Several states have revoked the possibility for their individual citizens to appeal to the African Court on Human and People’s Rights in case of violations of their rights: Tanzania in December 2019, Benin and Côte d’Ivoire in May 2020. Benin revoked the right of private citizens to appeal in response to a court decision ordering the country to postpone the local elections scheduled for May 2020, until the court could decide on a complaint by an exiled opponent about his allegedly politically motivated prison sentence for drug trafficking. Côte d’Ivoire’s move in the same direction followed a court judgment that requested the suspension of the arrest warrant against Guillaume Soro, an exiled presidential candidate and former prime minister and National Assembly president. Soro is wanted under an international arrest warrant for subversion of the state authority and faces other politically motivated charges.

Digital developments

The uptake of digital technologies in SSA has had a profound effect on political participation. The smartphone and social media have allowed people to share ideas, organise themselves and participate in politics like never before. The new communication technologies implemented during the pandemic could also have a positive impact on political participation. Both activists and governments have sought to exploit the mobilisation power of digital platforms. Social media have served as a liberating tool, but they have also been used by existing power structures. However, access to social media is limited and risks creating serious inequalities. Despite the widespread penetration of the internet, many people in sub-Saharan Africa still lack access to it, and new digital developments disenfranchise them. Mobile internet adoption (the prevalent form of internet access) stood at 26 % in SSA at the end of 2019.

Political activism through social media has been met with digital restrictions imposed in particular by governments with authoritarian tendencies. They have responded with legislation to control and constrain cyber activities. The practice of internet shutdowns has become widespread in authoritarian and illiberal regimes during elections, economic crises and protests. Chad experienced the longest social media blockage seen in any African country – 16 months – until it was lifted in August 2019. Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp remained shut down for two days in advance of the presidential elections in Uganda in January 2021, and for weeks thereafter. The
internet was cut on elections day in the Republic of the Congo during the presidential elections in March 2021. Tough legislation enacted by several governments to stop the spread of fake news on social media has often been used to stem anti-government criticism, e.g. in Tanzania. Several East African nations have imposed taxes on the use of social media. Uganda levied the world's first tax on social media users in 2018 in the form of a daily tax on the use of 58 websites and applications, including Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and Skype. Tanzania imposed a licence on online content creators, paid yearly and roughly equivalent to the average GDP per capita (US$900). In Benin, a tax on users of online platforms was repealed in 2018 after massive protests.

Social media have been a driver of positive change, particularly in more democratic regimes. In Nigeria in 2020, a social media campaign accompanied and supported young people's street protests in order to put an end to alleged abuses committed by a special police unit. Social media platforms have proven to be a useful tool to hold the police accountable for misconduct, human rights abuses and non-action in countries such as Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. In elections, social media can help to add transparency to the electoral process, to mobilise voters and to give smaller political parties access to voters. Social media can also be used to prevent election violence, by spreading peaceful messages and monitoring violent ones.

The problem of 'fake news', which is particularly widespread in SSA, poses numerous challenges to the region's fragile democracies. As Cheeseman and other experts state, digital communication is highly ambivalent: 'It is clear from the Nigerian elections of 2019 that WhatsApp is operating as "liberation technology" and contributing to "political turmoil" at the same time. These are not mutually exclusive outcomes, but rather two sides of the same coin. … This means that in any given election WhatsApp is likely both to strengthen democracy, by equalizing access to information and facilitating the coordination of opposition and civil society efforts, and to challenge it, by undermining public trust in politicians and the wider political process: Fake social media accounts are used to influence elections against a background of mistrust towards governments; this fosters the need for alternative sources of information. Misinformation compounds the threat of electoral violence in volatile contexts such as in Nigeria or Kenya, Facebook, for example, came under criticism for undermining democracy in Africa, as it allowed its platform to be used for coordinated misinformation campaigns during elections in several African countries. These were often coordinated from abroad and took advantage of the low levels of literacy among the local African population. The pervasive surveillance that social media put in place for economic purposes, such as advertising, can be easily exploited by authoritarian regimes. WhatsApp was allegedly used by authoritarian regimes (such as Rwanda's) to spy on dissidents.

Digital technologies are widely unregulated in SSA. There is a need to address defamation and misinformation education, as well as to adopt laws and regulations to guide their use. However, regulation poses risks in authoritarian regimes, which can impose much greater restrictions than actually needed. In nationally representative surveys across 18 countries, Afrobarometer found that people are generally supportive of press freedoms, but are also aware of the negative side of the new media landscapes and support limits to potentially dangerous messages such as hate speech.

**Impact of the coronavirus pandemic**

Except for South Africa, SSA has been less affected by the coronavirus pandemic than other regions of the world. It has registered relatively low numbers of infections. Possible reasons include the young age of the population and the effectiveness of initial lockdowns, but some experts point out that cases could be significantly under-reported, which skews the picture. At the beginning of the crisis in the spring of 2020, many African governments applied severe restrictions, some of which have had a lasting impact on democracy and human rights. The risk of democratic backsliding due to the pandemic has been most severe in Uganda, according to the V-DEM index. The Global Monitor of COVID-19's Impact on Democracy and Human Rights, launched by the European Union and International IDEA (an intergovernmental organisation supporting democracy and elections), shows that the vast majority of sub-Saharan African countries have been subject to 'concerning
developments’ related to the pandemic, i.e. pandemic-related measures or developments have violated human rights or democratic benchmarks, being either disproportionate, unnecessary, illegal or indefinite. The following countries do not raise such concerns: Cabo Verde, Ghana, Senegal, Republic of the Congo, Madagascar, Mozambique, Malawi and South Africa. According to Reporters without Borders (RSF), the situation of journalists has deteriorated significantly, with governments using force and legal restrictions to prevent them from working and reporting on the Covid-19 situation and the governments’ response: ‘RSF registered three times as many arrests and attacks on journalists in sub-Saharan Africa between 15 March and 15 May 2020 as it did during the same period in 2019’.

**Elections** were impacted, although most were held on time. Some have been postponed, such as the legislative elections in Chad (scheduled for 13 December 2020 but moved to 24 October 2021), the parliamentary election in Ethiopia (scheduled for 29 August 2020 but moved to 5 June 2021), the parliamentary elections in Somalia (scheduled for 27 November 2020) and Somalia’s presidential elections (originally scheduled to take place before 8 February 2021). Yet, it is quite unclear how big a role the pandemic has played, alongside other factors, in postponing these elections in what are some very problematic internal contexts. In Chad, legislative elections had already been postponed by five years before the pandemic. In Ethiopia, the postponement of elections officially because of Covid-19 (but not clear whether in line with the constitution), played a crucial role in the initial phase of the civil conflict in Tigray, whose government defied the federal government and held local elections, leading to the military intervention by federal troops. The pandemic has also largely prevented the work of international observers and deflected international public attention.

### EU support to democracy in Africa

The EU has a long history of engagement and partnership with SSA countries. These have counted among the main beneficiaries of its development aid, particularly under the European Development Fund. It holds regular bilateral political dialogues focusing among other things on human rights and democracy. The EU also engages with civil society, for example, during the AU-EU summits, and has provided aid to it. Democracy, good governance and human rights have been among the priorities included in all of the EU Africa-related strategies developed since 2007. SSA has been in the focus of EU peace keeping and stabilisation efforts, with eight out of 18 ongoing EU peace missions and operations taking place in this region; these have also provided pandemic-related support locally. The EU has supported the capacity building of the African Union and the Regional Economic Communities, which play an increasingly important role in democratic matters. When left with no other option to react to serious violations of human rights, rule of law and democratic norms, the EU has suspended its aid and cooperation, most recently in Burundi in 2016.

The EU is an important electoral observer in SSA and provides electoral assistance over the entire electoral cycle. Half of the some 149 election observation missions (EOMs) it has sent across the world since 2000 were to this region. Most EU EOMs in SSA (73 %, see Figure 3) were in countries classified as electoral autocracies in the respective year under the Regimes of the World classification (based on V-DEM data). These are countries that hold de jure multiparty elections for the chief executive and the legislature, but these elections are neither free nor fair in practice. The second largest group are electoral democracies (20 %) – regimes that hold free and fair elections but have shortcomings on liberal principles (such as institutional checks and balances and individual...
f Freedoms) and the rule of law. Just a few of the countries that have received an EU EOM since 2000 are closed autocracies (four cases – DR of the Congo 2005, Mauritania 2006, Angola 2008, Guinea-Bissau 2013) and liberal democracies (one case – Ghana 2008).

An important aspect of EU support to democracy is represented by EU aid to various sectors of governance, civil society and security. The EU engages with all regimes to fulfil commonly agreed development objectives, in line with the UN SDGs, and particularly with Goal 16. While some aid is disbursed directly to civil society, most priorities for the EU’s governance assistance are established in bilateral dialogue with the countries concerned and depends on the latter’s capacity to realise certain projects and programmes. The 10 biggest beneficiaries of EU aid for government and civil society per capita (including peace and security) between 2010 and 2020 are in decreasing order the Central African Republic, Djibouti, Guinea-Bissau, Somalia, Comoros, Mauritius, São Tomé and Principe, Lesotho, Mali, Cabo Verde, with EU ODA amounting to approximately US$18-46 per capita, compared to an SSA average of US$6.6. They include some of the region’s best democratic performers as well as several conflict and unstable countries. As shown in Figure 4, the amount of EU aid for government and civil society (including for peace and security) per capita and per country in the past decade, does not show any clear correlation with various regime types.

New developments

The main framework for regulating EU cooperation with the region has been the Cotonou Agreement, due to expire this year and to be replaced by a new agreement that will put an equally strong emphasis on democracy, rule of law and human rights. The new partnership agreement between the EU and the ACP will continue the two parties’ broad cooperation in the area. Promoting human rights, democracy and good governance will be one of its six key objectives. It will include the human rights and democracy clause, to which some of the EU’s economic partnership agreements regulating trade with the region link. According to this clause, democracy is an essential element of the agreement; its serious breach can lead to suspension of cooperation with a party.

On 9 March 2020, the Commission and the High Representative presented a joint communication, Towards a comprehensive strategy with Africa, laying out the EU’s position for negotiating a new overarching framework of cooperation with Africa, to be adopted at the next EU-Africa summit (planned for late 2020 but postponed due to the pandemic). Out of the strategy’s five main priorities, the one envisaging a partnership for peace and governance is particularly relevant to democracy. The proposed action under this priority – partnering with Africa for integrating good governance, democracy, human rights, the rule of law and gender equality in action and cooperation – calls for a more strategic and structured approach to human rights political dialogues with African countries, and for consultations with African regional organisations and the EU-AU dialogue. It also calls for supporting credible, inclusive and transparent electoral and democratic processes; for stepping up cooperation on democratic governance and rule of law on both continents; for reinforcing civil society organisations and human rights defenders; for ending impunity; and for the active involvement of women and youth in civic and political life decision-making.

Figure 4: EU ODA for government and civil society (including peace and security) per capita and country (horizontal, US$) and type of regime (vertical)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vertical axis legend</th>
<th>0 closed autocracy</th>
<th>1 electoral autocracy</th>
<th>2 electoral democracy</th>
<th>3 liberal democracy</th>
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The new EU instrument, Global Europe, brings the former European Development Fund (the hitherto main source of aid to the region) within the budgetary framework, together with other instruments. As per the current state of the legislative procedure (not yet completed as at May 2021), the instrument puts a renewed emphasis on good governance, democracy and human rights in both geographic and thematic programmes, including with respect to budget support. Specific democracy support will aim to reinforce political pluralism, representation and accountability, while also enhancing citizen and civil society participation, supporting electoral processes as well as supporting citizens to monitor democratic and electoral systems. The instrument also provides for distinct funding for civil society independently of the country’s government.

The new European Peace Facility, in force since March 2021, will ensure vital EU funding for military peace support operations led by partners such as the African Union AMISOM mission in Somalia. It will support capacity building of third countries’ armed forces, and, as a new element, provide equipment and infrastructure to these, albeit with safeguards aimed at ensuring respect of human rights and preventing this equipment from falling into the wrong hands.

MAIN REFERENCES


ENDNOTES

1 According to Samuel Huntington (1991), this was a third wave following, ‘the first “long” wave of democratization [which] began in the 1820s, with the widening of the suffrage to a large proportion of the male population in the United States, and continued for almost a century until 1926, bringing into being some 29 democracies. […] The triumph of the Allies in World War II initiated a second wave of democratization that reached its zenith in 1962 with 36 countries governed democratically’.

2 Article 45 of ECOWAS’ Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance states that ‘in the event that democracy is abruptly brought to an end by any means or where there is massive violation of Human Rights in a Member State, ECOWAS may impose sanctions on the State concerned’. As a measure of last resort, it can suspended the country concerned.

3 On the subject, see, for example, N. Cheeseman, Drivers of democratic decline, 2018.

4 The project assesses 10 dimensions: electoral laws; electoral procedures; district boundaries; voter registration; party registration; media coverage; campaign finance; voting process; vote count; results; and electoral authorities.

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