

RESEARCH ARTICLE:

Contemporary Trends in African Elections (2013-2023)

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Received: 28 August 2024 | Revised: 19 May 2025 | Published: 10 June 2025

Reviewing Editor: Olumuyiwa Temitope Faluyi, Tshwane University of Technology

Abstract

The paper investigates recent trends in African elections over the past decade and their implications for democracy and political stability. It utilises qualitative research methods and thematic analysis from secondary sources covering a decade spanning from 2013 to 2023. This period is of particular interest due to significant transformation in Africa's electoral processes. Within this period, Africa experienced increased deployment of technology in elections and greater youth political participation through social media and online tools. These factors spurred African people and societies to demand greater transparency and accountability in their electoral systems. To achieve its objectives, the paper employed a simple random selection technique to assess elections in various African countries and identify emerging trends. Based on identified trends, our conclusion reveals a complex landscape shaped by emerging realities of Africa's social, political and economic dynamics. These new trends in Africa's elections include constitutional coups, military resurgence, increasing women participation, youth renaissance, and populism, which underscore the current challenges being faced and emergent opportunities. The paper recommends a multi-stakeholder approach involving, among others, government institutions, civil society organisations, and international partners as paramount for ensuring more credible elections to deepen democracy in Africa.

Keywords: Africa; elections; trends; democracy

Introduction

Over the years, elections in Africa have been marked by a mix of continuity and change, reflecting the diverse political trajectories and contexts across the continent. With elections serving as a crucial mechanism for determining political legitimacy, shaping governance, and guiding socio-economic development, election processes in Africa have profoundly impacted the continent's present state of underdevelopment (Tshishonga, 2022). Within the last decade, significant developments, challenges, and trends have shaped electoral processes and outcomes in various African countries. These changes are particularly instructive, given Africa's long history of undemocratic practices, including the "sit-tight syndrome" manifesting political leaders who cling to power and refuse to relinquish it after losing elections, as well as election-induced violence.

Since independence, these non-democratic vices have persistently posed a significant obstacle to the continent's advancement towards democracy and development. Following the end of the Cold War, there was a widespread transition from single party to multiparty systems, as most countries adopted elections for power transfer (Sanusi and Nassuna, 2022). From the 1990s, Africa witnessed a surge in the number of elections, heralded as the dawn of a new era of multi-party democracy. However, regime changes have historically been periods of heightened risk for political violence in Africa, a trend that persists to this day. For instance, Côte d'Ivoire's, 2002, 2010 and 2020 presidential elections resulted in significant election-induced violence, leading to civil wars, claiming over 3,000 lives (Oyekanmi, 2023). Also, Nigeria witnessed ethnic-induced riots following the election of Goodluck Jonathan in April 2011, resulting in an estimated 500 deaths. In East Africa, between December 2007 to February 2008,

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Kenya experienced widespread tensions due to a disputed presidential election, leading to approximately 1,500 fatalities before a power-sharing agreement was reached. Furthermore, clashes between the African National Congress and Inkatha Freedom Party in South Africa between 1990 and 1994 claimed over 2,000 lives, demonstrating the historical backdrop of electoral conflicts on the continent (Salehyan and Linebarger, 2013). In addition, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has experienced numerous instances of election-related violence. The 2018 presidential election, which saw Félix Tshisekedi declared the winner, was marred by allegations of fraud and sparked violence in various parts of the country (Henry, 2023). Assuredly, the electoral systems inherited from colonialism by most African states, often failed to fully address Africa's reality, thereby limiting the accountability of elected representatives to their constituents. Thus, since the 1990s, there have been continuous efforts to democratise and enhance electoral processes in Africa, through transition towards multiparty systems and the adoption of elections for transferring power (Sanusi and Nassuna, 2022). Nonetheless, these efforts have been stagnated in certain areas, resulting in a gap between citizens advocating for greater democratic rights and leaders striving to retain power (Soest and Bohnenberger, 2016).

Using development indicators, development is measured by considering the social, economic and political factors that affect the standard of living of people in a country. The political factors include the quality of governance, political stability and participation in democratic processes (Altun, 2016; Sanidas, 2017). Within the context of elections, underdevelopment connotes a state in which political, economic, and social progress is hindered due to the inability of electoral processes to facilitate legitimate, inclusive, and effective governance. Hence, the nexus between underdevelopment and elections is drawn from the theory that electoral vices, such as violence, rigging, suppression, vote-buying, and systemic inequalities, not only undermine the process and outcome of elections, but also entrench underdevelopment (Joseph and Vashchanka, 2022). In essence, by eroding public trust in governance, perpetuating poor leadership, discouraging investment in social and economic infrastructure, and exacerbating societal divisions, development is hindered. For example, the mismanagement of elections in Kenya during the 2007-2008 post-election period led to contested results which dovetailed into widespread violence, resulting in over 1,000 deaths, massive displacement, and significant economic disruptions (Khadiagala, 2008; Ajulu, 2008). This is also the case in Nigeria, where electoral fraud and vote-buying entrenched corrupt leadership through the misuse of public funds that has inhibited development. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, persistent electoral malpractices have weakened state institutions, prolonging cycles of instability and delaying economic and social progress (Englebert, 2019; Ezeudu, and James, 2024). Notwithstanding, the appearance of democratic progress with the rise of party politics through the years, the motives behind holding these elections were often varied and ambiguous, leading to varying degrees of conflict. Thus, with emerging trends in African elections within the last 10 years, evident in subtle reshaping of African political processes, elections in Africa exhibit a complex blend of new narratives that could either make or mar democracy through periodic elections.

Using qualitative research methods and thematic analysis from secondary sources, the paper analyses recent developments in African electoral processes over the past decade and their implications for democratic governance and development. Hence, the period spanning 2013 to 2023 is of particular interest due to the rise in youth political participation through social media platforms and increasing use of technology in elections. These factors spurred African societies to demand greater transparency and accountability in their electoral systems. To achieve this objective, the paper employs a simple random selection technique to assess elections across various African countries, using documentary sources to identify emerging trends. Thus, the paper is structured into four sections: background on African elections; objectives, scope, and methodology; emerging trends in African elections, conclusion and recommendations.

Undermining Democracy: Authoritarian and Institutional Trends

Considering that in many African countries, presidential term limits are typically set to two terms, where a president can serve a maximum of two consecutive terms in office before stepping down from office, virtually all African countries have conducted one form of general elections or the other within the period. However, there are exceptions, as some countries have altered their constitutions or legal frameworks to allow for additional terms or to remove term limits altogether. Be that as it may, since 2013, numerous elections have been held across Africa, varying in frequency and scale from country to country; nevertheless, they exhibit some similar emerging trends with complex reaction to Africa's democracy. To this end, four issues or cases of emerging trends in African elections are discussed below, highlighting the phenomena surrounding each. These four issues highlight the

authoritarian and institutional trends that undermine democracy in Africa namely: constitutional coups, judicialisation of electoral politics, military resurgence, and militarisation of politics in Africa.

Constitutional coups

The prevalence of constitutional coups in the political system of most African countries is alarming. These coups represent a concerning trend where leaders exploit legal mechanisms to prolong their rule or manipulate electoral processes, often at the expense of democratic principles and constitutional norms (Powell, 2022). Prior to constitutional coups, especially before the wave of democratisation that swept through Africa in the 1990s, military coups or traditional coups had long been a recurring feature of political instability in Africa. These coups were often characterised by the overthrow of democratically elected governments by the military, resulting in the suspension of constitutional order and the imposition of military rule. However, in recent years, there has been a shift towards more subtle forms of coups, known as constitutional coups, where leaders exploit legal loopholes or manipulate constitutional processes to extend their stay in power beyond term limits or to consolidate authoritarian rule under the guise of democratic principles (Fox, 2022). This evolution reflects the adaptability of authoritarian regimes in Africa and highlights the ongoing challenges to democratic governance in the region. For example, in the eastern region of Africa, President Pierre Nkurunziza of Burundi in 2015, sought a controversial third term in office. This sparked widespread protests and a failed coup attempt. Despite constitutional term limits, Nkurunziza argued that his first term, won by parliamentary appointment rather than popular vote, did not count towards the two-term limit. This manipulation of the constitutional interpretation led to a violent political crisis and instability in the country.

Still within the East African region, President Yoweri Museveni of Uganda has been in power since 1986 and has faced criticism for extending his rule through constitutional amendments. In 2005, term limits were removed, allowing Museveni to run for office indefinitely. Despite the widespread opposition and calls for democratic reforms, he has continued to win re-elections, often amid allegations of electoral fraud and irregularities (Africanews, 2019). Furthermore, even though, Rwanda has made significant strides in stability and development, thereby undergoing a remarkable transformation to become one of the most promising economies in Africa, it is not free from constitutional coups. President Paul Kagame has been in power since 2000 and orchestrated constitutional changes to extend his tenure. In 2015, a referendum was held to amend the constitution, allowing Kagame to potentially remain in office until 2034. Regardless of criticism from human rights groups and opposition parties, the referendum passed, enabling Kagame to continue his presidency not just for a periodic term but in practical terms, as president for life (Kiwuwa, 2020; Versteeg, Horley, Meng, Guim, and Guirguis, 2020). In the Indian Ocean, off the eastern coast of Africa, Comoros President, Azali Assoumani sought a fourth term, aided by a contentious 2018 referendum that allowed him to bypass presidential term limits. This referendum resulted in significant changes to the 2001 Fomboni Agreement, which had provided over 15 years of political stability to the archipelago, home to 880,000 inhabitants. The agreement had established a power-sharing arrangement where the presidency rotated among the three main islands, Grand Comore, Anjouan, and Moheli, after each presidential term. This significant agreement marked the end of a period during which Comoros endured 20 coups since gaining independence in 1975 (Siegle and Cook, 2024).

The case is not different in West Africa, where President Alpha Condé of Guinea controversially sought a third term in office after pushing through constitutional changes that allowed him to reset term limits in 2020. This political move triggered mass protests and violence, with opposition leaders and civil society groups accusing Condé of undermining democracy and exploiting legal loopholes to cling to power. Also, within the region, in Togo, President Faure Gnassingbé succeeded his father, Gnassingbé Eyadéma, who had ruled Togo for 38 years. In 2019, Gnassingbé won a controversial fourth term in office after constitutional changes allowed him to run again. The amendments also extended presidential term limits and strengthened executive powers, raising concerns about the country's democratic future. Again, the French-speaking country of Côte d'Ivoire, despite its political instability and history of conflicts triggered by elections, has observed a trend of constitutional coups. In 2020, President Alassane Ouattara extended his tenure by running for a controversial third term, despite the constitutional two-term limit, and the widespread protests and political tensions it generated. Conversely, after a failed effort to extend former President Macky Sall's term beyond the constitutional limit in February 2024, Senegal avoided a constitutional coup, establishing a precedent for bolstering democracy in West Africa. This was largely factored by strong opposition from both domestic and international entities, condemning elongation of tenure and delay of the presidential election (Ejekwonyilo, 2024). Likewise, in the Southern African region, former President Robert Mugabe, who ruled Zimbabwe for nearly four decades, manipulated the constitution to maintain his grip on power. In 2013,

a new constitution was adopted, which allowed Mugabe to run for another term in office. However, he was ousted in a military-backed coup in 2017.

In central Africa, former President Joseph Kabila of the Democratic Republic of Congo, after serving two terms, delayed elections and attempted to amend the constitution to extend his rule. Amid widespread protests and international pressure, Kabila eventually agreed to step down, and Félix Tshisekedi was elected president in 2018. However, questions persist about the legitimacy of the election and the influence of Kabila's political allies (Dawson, and Young, 2020). Arab world's most populous country is not left out. In Egypt, El-Sissi overthrew democratically elected Islamist Mohamed Morsi in 2013 and proceeded to win his first election the following year. Re-elected in 2018, he extended the presidential mandate from four to six years and amended the constitution to raise the limit on consecutive terms in office from two to three (Africanews, 2024). Apart from scenarios outlined above, Congo Republic, Djibouti, Cameroon, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Tunisia, Algeria, Chad, South Sudan, to mention a few, have either modified or eliminated term limits. Thus, these examples underscore contemporary trends of leaders in Africa using constitutional amendments and legal manoeuvres to prolong their stay in power, often at the expense of democratic principles and political stability. Significantly, enablers to these actions, are, the growing judicialisation of politics, where courts are increasingly called upon to validate or challenge constitutional amendments and legal manoeuvres by leaders to extend their stay in power, and the role of the military in reviving the powers of the incumbent legally.

Judicialisation of electoral politics in Africa

A significant machinery for constitutional coups is the judicialisation of electoral politics. While this machinery has endured since the wake of colonial independence in Africa, in the recent years, it has become a defining feature of African democracies. Anchored on the theory, that the court is the last hope of the common man, the increasing reliance on the judiciary to resolve electoral disputes, interpret constitutional provisions, and safeguard the integrity of democratic processes, has been far-reaching. Considering that almost half of conflicts in Africa arise from election outcomes, driven by disputes over the legitimacy of electoral results, including controversies over elongated terms (Deych, 2020), the courts have become popular in mitigating this growing anomaly. Hence, concerted efforts to convince aggrieved contestants during elections to go to court presents the judiciary as a better choice for democracy.

This suggests the increasing demand by the public for credible elections and the growing distrust for electoral umpires in African states. However, the integrity and independence of the judiciary in delivering on the gains of elections is in doubt, with the politicisation of its processes. According to Odinkalu (2024), as a result of delayed verdicts by the court, elections can linger long after the ballots have been cast, with the outcomes decided by unaccountable judges. This is more typical in hybrid regimes where there is a mix of democratic and authoritarian elements. In such regimes, the court, acting as electoral arbitrators, often operates in settings imposed and controlled by authoritarian rulers masking under democratic rule. The intended objective, therefore, is to use the judiciary to gain political advantage by using the courts to disqualify opponents, validate controversial elections, or suppress dissent under the guise of legality. For instance, Kenyan highest courts have adjudicated 224 electoral disputes in the past 30 years due to the abuse of power by the incumbency who often weaponise formal institutions to remain in power (Gerzso, 2023). The Mali scenario in April 2020, when the Constitutional Court of Mali reversed the opposition's victory in 31 legislative seats, is instructive. The decision to cede these seats to the ruling party set off a chain of events that resulted in the Constitutional Court's dissolution and, eventually, the military takeover of the country (Odinkalu, 2024). This was also the case in Malawi, when the president attempted to remove the Chief Justice to secure a favourable Supreme Court panel ahead of a presidential re-run after a rigged election was nullified.

Likewise, in Nigeria, judicial interventions have often shaped electoral outcomes at state and federal levels, with judges playing a decisive role in over 80 per cent of contested electoral positions during any election cycle (Odinkalu, 2024). Courts frequently overturn official results declared by the Electoral Management Body (EMB), either replacing them with their own decisions or recalculating the outcomes. This level of judicial involvement signals a potential overreach of judicial authority. Following the 2023 elections, the judiciary upheld the election of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu amid petitions alleging voter suppression and irregularities. Similarly, gubernatorial disputes, such as the protracted legal battle over the 2019 Imo State elections birthed terms like "The Supreme Court Governor", where the Supreme Court declared Hope Uzodinma of the ruling party in Nigeria, the winner, despite finishing fourth in the vote count (Ngwu, and Ogiri, 2022). The situations in Zimbabwe in 2018 and 2023

further reveals the difficulties of judicialisation under hybrid regimes. Opposition leader, Nelson Chamisa, contested Emmerson Mnangagwa's election in 2018 on the grounds of fraud. Even though the Constitutional Court maintained Mnangagwa's win, the procedure brought to light the difficulties of resolving electoral complaints under hybrid regimes and the judiciary's reliance on the government (Ezeh, 2022). As such, in high-stakes presidential and gubernatorial elections in Africa, opposition candidates rarely concede defeat without pursuing legal challenges. When these cases are judicialised, they become fiercely disputed mega-political disputes, based on allegations of electoral irregularities, fraud, ineptitude of electoral organisations, violence, and an unfair playing field, among other things (Gathii and Olabisi, 2021).

Military resurgence

Military coups exhibited a marked prevalence from the 60s to the 80s, and then experienced a hiatus, given the democratisation campaign of the 1990s across Asia, Latin America and Africa. In the recent past, particularly within the last decade, military seizure of democratic government has resurged. This practice, which is fast becoming a trend in West Africa, in particular, underscores a broader narrative of governmental inadequacies across the continent (Akwei, Machar, and Mnyandu, 2023). In the past, military coups often emerged as responses to grievances against authoritarian regimes, corruption, or economic mismanagement. However, the dynamics have evolved over time. In some cases, coups are driven by power struggles within the military itself, or they exploit existing social unrest. However, the resurgence of military coups in Africa emerge in the wake of widespread disillusionment with elected administrations, which have failed to fulfil their electoral mandates (Odigbo, Ezekwelu and Okeke, 2023). The inability of African governments to deliver on the promises made during election campaigns contributes to a growing sense of disenchantment among citizens. Periodic elections, intended to serve as mechanisms for democratic accountability and representation, have, in many cases, fallen short of their promises. This failure has eroded public trust in democratic processes, creating fertile ground for military intervention as an alternative to what is perceived as ineffective governance.

As such, there seems to be a losing war going on between the democracies in West Africa, and the Sahel. Nine coups d'état have occurred in the region since 2020, five of which were successful. Consequently, Chad, Mali, Guinea, Sudan, and Niger experienced military incursions in 2020/21, while five attempts were made in 2022 as well, with two of them in Burkina Faso, being successful. Basically, since 2017, 17 of the 18 coups reported globally, have occurred in Africa. The latest of these was the overthrow of President Ali Bongo of Gabon on August 30, 2023, which ended his family's 55-year rule over the country, since its independence through a palace coup. The ouster of President Mohamed Bazoum of Niger in July 2023 was only a few weeks prior to the revolution in Gabon. Military authorities have seized political power in Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Mali prior to Niger (Dataphyte, 2023). Likewise, a military takeover brought Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe's 37-year rule to an end (Mwai, 2023). On several counts, military resurgence has been justified by perpetrators, on the basis of bad civilian governance. As in the case of Niger, the military promised a transition period of three years maximum before returning power to civilians (Africanews, 2023). Also, in Burkina Faso, Captain Ibrahim Traoré was inaugurated as transitional president until a presidential election, scheduled for July 2024 (Africanews, 2023). The elections were postponed due to security challenges, on the basis that elections would be unrepresentative if large portions of the population, particularly in conflict zones, were excluded. In Guinea, the military has also promised to return power to elected civilians by the end of 2024.

The case was no different in Gabon, where the election results were annulled. Following the elections, a contingent of Gabonese military officials proclaimed their assumption of control and annulled the outcomes of the recent election, contending its perceived lack of legitimacy. This pronouncement closely followed the declaration by the state electoral commission affirming President Ali Bongo Ondimba's re-election for a third term amid widespread contestation regarding the electoral process (AJLabs, 2023). In effect, with growing citizens' dissatisfaction with African governments, the negative trend of the military usurping constitutional power is most likely to remain significant in Africa's election.

Militarisation of politics

Another major factor legitimising constitutional coups and entrenching incumbents outside the law is the deployment of military during elections or under the guise of maintaining national security or stability. This phenomenon is apparent in various regions, where military influence has shaped political dynamics, frequently eroding democratic processes and fostering authoritarianism. In many African countries, the military have been

abused by those in power, in order to retain power or disrupt the system (Brooks, 2013; Frantzeskakis and Park, 2022). For instance, the military was very instrumental to Chad's President Idriss Déby, who utilised military support to maintain his grip on power for more than three decades (Welz, 2022). Through the influence of the military, the Chadian National Assembly in 2018, abolished term limits, effectively allowing Déby to remain in power indefinitely. The military was effective in suppressing opposing views and ensuring the smooth passage of the bill abolishing term limits. On the other hand, the case of Mali is significant, given that the military was used as a weapon for ousting a democratically elected president. The military coup was largely justified as a response to Keïta's failure to effectively govern, amid growing insurgencies and corruption scandals.

Reshaping Democracy: Participatory and Technological Shifts

Contrary to the authoritarian and institutional mechanisms that continue to undermine democratic consolidation in Africa, recent developments also reveal emerging trends that signal a shift towards participatory democracy. Over the past decade, a new wave of political consciousness has emerged, characterised by the increased involvement of young people and women, the strategic use of information and communication technology (ICT), and the growing influence of populist movements. To this end, four key issues again are examined below namely: youth renaissance, ICT, women's participation, and populism.

Youth renaissance

With 70 per cent of sub-Saharan Africa, a significant proportion of African population, made up of young people under the age of 30 (UN, 2024), the emergence of a youth renaissance in African elections reflects a notable shift in the political landscape. In the past, African presidential aspirants and mainstream politicians were typically older leaders who held power for long durations. Characterised by increasing youth involvement and activism, a younger cohort of leaders is now challenging this norm by bringing new perspectives, vitality, and aspirations to governance. This trend marks a departure from traditional political dynamics, as young people assert their influence and demand greater representation in governance and decision-making processes. This demographic shift is accompanied by a growing demand for transparency, accountability, and political representation among younger generations. More so, bearing in mind that political elites often exploit the energy and frustrations of young people for their own ends, youths are sometimes used for electoral violence and hooliganism. However, within the last decade, more youths have engaged in more constructive activities, ranging from campaign and rally for party registrations, to voter registration drives, activism, vying for parliamentary seats and ultimately winning elections.

In particular, the youth revolution in African elections took a positive turn, with the emergence of the youngest president in Africa, Bassirou Diomaye Faye of Senegal at age 44. His ascent to the presidency signifies a transformative moment in which young Africans are, not only participants, but also leaders in the political landscape. Faye's victory, challenges the traditional notion that political power is the domain of older generations, offering a beacon of hope and empowerment for the continent's youth. Likewise, the last presidential elections in Africa's largest country, Nigeria, was remarkable with regard to youth's engagement. About 76 per cent of newly registered voters in the 2023 elections were under the age of 35, with 40 per cent of them identified as students (ISS, 2023). One of the three main contenders, Labour Party's presidential candidate Peter Obi, had the overwhelming support of Nigerian youth, mainly because he presented an opportunity for a new kind of governance with more transparency and accountability (ISS, 2023). To solidify their support for him, the campaign cascaded into the #Obidient movement, which was dominated by young middle-class Nigerians from urban areas. Despite Obi's defeat in the elections, Labour Party became victorious in both the presidential elections held in Nigeria's capital, Abuja, and the commercial city of Lagos, two major cities in Nigeria, outside Obi's stronghold. This represents a historical milestone in the politics of the largest black country, and youth renaissance in the continent.

Consequent on the botched tenure elongation attempt of the former Senegalese government, as well as the postponement of general elections, the influence of the youth in elections generally is significant. After the failed attempt to extend the former administration's tenure and the delay of the national elections, demonstrations by young people ensued, sparking violent confrontations with law enforcement, leading to casualties and the detention of youthful protestors. The participation of youths in these demonstrations emphasises their proactive stance in seeking political reform and their readiness to confront established authority (Oxford Analytica, 2022).

Prior to Bassirou Diomaye Faye of Senegal's feat, a generational shift was also recorded in 2019, with the emergence of Felix Tshisekedi as the President of the Democratic Republic of the Congo at the age of 55. Though

not within the African Union age categorisation (18-35), his ascent to power reflects a departure from the longstanding dominance of older political figures in African leadership, thus embodying a potential transition towards younger and more dynamic governance. In the same vein, Liberia's George Weah, a former professional footballer, was elected President in 2017 at the age of 51, representing a significant victory for the youth demographic in the country. This was also the case in Sierra Leone, where Julius Maada Bio won the presidential election in 2018 at the age of 54, riding on a wave of youth support and promising to prioritise their concerns in his administration. In effect, since the past decade, heightened youth engagement, particularly in rallying behind candidates who may not belong to their age group but considered capable of representing their interests effectively, has demonstrated significant influence on reshaping the dynamics of African elections. Furthermore, Africa has witnessed the emergence of transitional presidents, such as Mahamat Deby of Chad (39), who succeeded his father, former President Idriss Déby, following the latter's death in 2021. This trend also resonates with Ethiopia, where Abiy Ahmed (Age 47) emerged as the prime minister of the country in 2018, as well as in Madagascar where Andry Rajoelina (Age 49) who led the country from 2009 to 2014 after seizing power in a coup and thereafter became president since 2019 (Oyedokun, 2024). Still within West Africa, more young leaders have assumed as heads of state through military coups, and not the polls. For instance, Ibrahim Traoré (Age 36) emerged as the leader of Burkina Faso in September 2022, following a coup that ousted interim president Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba. Also, since May 2021 in Mali, Colonel Assimi Goïta (Age 41) has served as head of state and acting president, after leading the National Committee for the Salvation of the People in overthrowing former President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta during the Malian coup of 2020. Similarly, Mamady Doumbouya (Age 44) became Guinean's interim president in October 2021, after he staged a coup that deposed the former president, Alpha Condé, in September 2021 (Oyedokun, 2024).

South Africa's May 29 election also reveals the trajectory of youth reawakening in the continent. The African National Congress (ANC), the main political party, which has been in power for the last 30 years, had a tough win, given the trajectories that shaped the elections (Hunter, 2024). The Democratic Alliance (DA) party led by John Steenhuisen (48 years), was the main opposition to the ANC in the May 2024 elections. John previously held the position of interim Federal Leader, starting from November 2019, following his tenure as the Chief Whip of the Official Opposition from May 2014 to October 2019. With over two decades of experience as a public representative, he has served as a member of the National Assembly since July 2011. Before joining the National Assembly, John was actively engaged in KwaZulu-Natal politics, beginning as a councillor in Durban at the age of 22 and later assuming roles such as Provincial Leader of the DA and Caucus Leader in the KwaZulu-Natal Legislature. His experience and youthful aura along several other factors, account as one of the factors that limited ANC's chances of an easy win. Hence, youth mobilisation around his candidacy played a major role in determining, not only the outcome but also the process of the 2024 Presidential elections in South Africa.

In the same vein, the ANC was confronted by the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) party under the leadership of the outspoken former ANC Youth League leader, Julius Malema (43 years) (Mtimka, and Prevost, 2021). The EFF advocates for populist measures like government-provided housing, nationalisation of key industries, such as mining, and land redistribution. In addition, Malema entered the national political arena first as the president of the ANC Youth League, and then as the leader of the EFF, the leftist political party that he helped launch in 2013. Thereafter, he became a Member of Parliament in the National Assembly in 2014. With the youth reawakening in the South African political space, the ruling party, ANC, did not have the majority needed to form a national government. From the foregoing analysis, the rise of youth engagement and activism in recent times, is reshaping African elections, challenging traditional political structures and advocating for new leadership paradigms.

Information communication technology (ICT)

Information Communication Technology (ICT) is transforming every aspect of Africa, including its electoral environment, thereby emerging as a crucial trend moulding the continent's democratic procedures. With the proliferation of mobile phones and internet access, African states are increasingly catching up with the West, and leveraging ICT to enhance campaigns, voter registration, streamline ballot counting, and ensure transparent election procedures. Thus, the adoption of technology over manual processing is essentially to enhance the transparency and credibility of elections (Ogunyemi, 2023). In recent times, mobile applications and online platforms have empowered citizens to engage more actively in the political process, from accessing voter information to reporting irregularities in real-time. Notable advancements, such as, biometric voter registration systems and electronic voting machines are promoting efficiency and accuracy in elections, ultimately fostering

greater trust in democratic institutions (State of internet freedom in Africa, 2024). In particular, social media platforms play a significant role in shaping youth engagement in politics (Qosja, 2022). Compared to other platforms, social media provides more avenues for young people to voice opinions, connect with like-minded individuals, and engage in activism, influencing political participation. As a new trend shaping youth renaissance in politics, social media platforms and online activities transform political engagement patterns among youth, fostering unique forms of activism.

Again, the history of ICT in African elections is relatively recent, but has rapidly evolved over the past few decades, with the increase in Africa's internet users by 20 per cent since 2018 (Mumbere, 2018). As such, technology is increasingly becoming a contemporary trend in Africa's elections, revolutionising various aspects of the electoral process. Many African countries like Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa have adopted biometric voter registration systems and Electronic Voting Machines (EVM) to streamline the voting process and reduce the likelihood of electoral malpractice. Biometric data such as fingerprints and facial recognition are collected from voters during registration, helping to prevent multiple registration and voter fraud. For example, Ghana implemented a biometric voter registration system for its 2012 elections, which improved the accuracy and credibility of the voter register, Namibia utilised EVMs in its 2014 presidential and parliamentary elections to enhance efficiency and transparency in the electoral process. Also, Kenya (2017) and Nigeria (2023) both deployed electronic results transmission systems during their general elections to enhance the credibility and transparency of the electoral process. Nigeria's system, however, faced significant challenges, particularly during the presidential election, where implementation of electronic result transmission was not fully realised. Across these elections, though there have been glitches, ICT has facilitated the development of electronic results transmission systems, enabling faster and more transparent dissemination of election results. These systems allow electoral authorities to transmit results from polling stations to central databases in real-time, reducing delays and minimising opportunities for manipulation. Essentially, the 2010s marked a significant shift towards the digitalisation of electoral processes in Africa, where many countries adopted electronic results transmission systems to expedite the collation and dissemination of election results. Social media platforms also became increasingly influential in shaping political discourse and mobilising voters, with political parties and candidates leveraging platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp for campaigning and voter engagement. Thus, these social media platforms became powerful tools for political communication and campaigning in African elections.

For example, during Nigeria's 2015, 2019, 2023 presidential elections, social media emerged as a powerful tool for political campaigning and citizen engagement. Within these periods, platforms like Twitter and Facebook were used extensively by candidates and supporters to reach voters, share campaign messages, and monitor election developments. Social media influencers also played a major role in shaping public opinion and mobilising support for political parties. Also, in Kenyan politics, particularly during election periods, platforms like Twitter and WhatsApp were widely used by political parties, candidates, and citizens to disseminate information, engage in political discourse, and mobilise voters. However, social media has also been implicated in spreading misinformation and inciting violence, as seen during the 2007-2008 post-election crisis in Kenya (Njuguna, Gikandi, Kathuri-Ogola, and Kabaria-Muriithi, 2020). Furthermore, as in the case of the Nigerian government banning twitter for seven months in 2021 (Obadare, 2022), in Uganda, social media became a battleground for political contestation and government censorship. During the 2021 presidential elections, the government imposed a social media blackout in an attempt to stifle dissent and prevent the spread of fake news and incitement to violence. However, many Ugandans circumvented the ban using virtual private networks (VPNs) to access social media platforms and express their views (Reuters, 2021). In addition, not less than nine other African countries have experienced internet shutdowns enforced by their governments since the start of 2019 (Sesan, 2023). This indicates the unwavering influence of social media over electorates, particularly youths who make up a larger sum of Africa's population.

In the same vein, technology has been leveraged to improve voter education and participation in African elections, through mobile apps and SMS-based platforms. Electoral bodies, Ministries of Information and Orientation use such platforms to provide voters with information about the electoral process, including voter registration procedures, polling station locations, and candidate profiles. For instance, in South Africa (2014) Zimbabwe (2018), and Nigeria (2018), the Electoral Commission launched mobile apps ahead of their elections to educate voters and facilitate voter registration (Electoral Commission of South Africa, 2024; Akinwale, 2019). Overall, ICT has had a transformative impact on political discourse, citizen engagement, and electoral processes across Africa. Given its direct penetration to electorates, facilitated through greater connectivity and information sharing, ICT plays a pivotal

role in Africa's electoral systems. However, it also raises concerns about privacy, misinformation, and government censorship. In other words, while ICT integration promises to drive increased transparency, accountability, and inclusivity in future elections across the continent, addressing its potential risks is crucial to ensuring its positive impact. Its evolving role in shaping African politics underscores the need for balanced adoption strategies that protect digital rights while enhancing democratic processes.

Increasing women's participation

In Africa, the percentage of women in politics is steadily rising. From 1980 to 2015, the percentage of women in politics climbed five times to 22 per cent (Mambula, 2021). Though women's involvement in African politics is generally low, there is a noticeable trend of increasing women's participation in elections, as well as measures to enhance their participation in decision-making. These measures aim to address the historical underrepresentation of women in decision-making positions and ensure their equal participation in electoral processes. Over the past 10 years, there has been a continuous increase in the number of women running for office at different levels of government, and women voting at higher rates (Michel, 2023). Furthermore, regional and international organisations, women's organisations and civil society groups have been actively advocating for greater representation of women in politics, leading to the adoption of gender quotas and affirmative action measures in some African countries. This is corroborated by the growing recognition of the importance of women's voices and perspectives in shaping political agendas and policies. As a result, political parties and electoral institutions are increasingly prioritising gender diversity and inclusivity in candidate selection processes and campaign strategies. This has contributed largely to the participation of women from mobilising support to actual election wins.

Notable examples include Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia, who served as the President of Liberia from 2006 to 2018, becoming the first female head of state in Africa; Joyce Banda of Malawi, President of Malawi from 2012 to 2014, the first female president in Malawi and the second in Africa; Agnes Monique Ohsan Bellepeau, Acting President of Mauritius (March – July 2012 and May – June 2015); President Ameenah Gurib-Fakim of Mauritius (June 2015 – March 2018); Catherine Samba, Acting President of Central African Republic (2014-2016); Namibian Prime Minister, Saara Kuungonelwa-Amadhila (March 2015 – present); President Sahle-Work Zewde of Ethiopia (October 2018- present); Prime Minister Rose Christiane Ossouka Raponda of Gabon (July 2020 – present); Prime Minister Victoire Sidémého Dzidudu Dogbé Tomegah of Togo (September 2020 – present); President Samia Suluhu Hassan of Tanzania (March 2021 – present); Prime Minister Robinah Nabbanja of Uganda (June 2021 – present); and Prime Minister Najla Bouden Romdhane of Tunisia (October 2021 – present) (ADC, 2022). Furthermore, just 24 per cent of the 12,113 national legislators in Africa are women, with 25 per cent serving in the lower houses and 20 per cent in the upper chambers of parliament, and 21 per cent of council members in the 19 nations for which comprehensive data is available are female (IDEA, 2021). Be that as it may, there has been steady progress with women's participation in politics and elections, even though it is slow. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), out of all the regions, sub-Saharan Africa shows the most improvement in women's parliamentary representation in 2023. With a rise of 0.6 per cent in 2020 and 0.6 per cent in 2021, even though the growth was slower than the prior two years, it was comparable to the increase in 2022. Essentially, considering an African country, Rwanda, topping the global rankings, with women holding 61.3 per cent of the seats in the parliament, increasing women participation in Africa's elections has come to stay.

This increasing trend of women's participation has informed the incessant campaigns and advocacies for more women's representation and inclusion in government. Hence, most African countries (Rwanda, South Africa, Uganda, Tanzania, Senegal, and Burkina Faso, etc.) in response to these, have developed mechanisms, such as legislative quotas, reserved seats for women in parliament, and affirmative action policies to advance women's involvement in decision-making through elections in Africa.

Populism

Another significant trend influencing African elections is the rise of populist uprisings and use of populist tactics by presidential contenders across the continent (Resnick, 2010). Populism, characterised by its appeal to ordinary citizens and its opposition to traditional elites, has gained traction in various African countries due to widespread dissatisfaction with established political systems. These uprisings often emerge in response to perceived corruption, economic inequality, and the failure of mainstream political parties to address the needs of the people.

One notable example of populist uprising in Africa is the #EndSARS movement in Nigeria, which began as a protest against police brutality and evolved into a broader movement calling for political reform in 2020. Led primarily by young Nigerians, the movement challenged the authority of the government and demanded greater accountability and transparency in governance. Despite facing repression from security forces, the #EndSARS movement succeeded in drawing international attention to issues of governance and accountability in Nigeria. The #Obedient movement (support for Peter Obi, a major opposition candidate at the 2023 elections) is, however, adjudged to be an extension of the #EndSARS movement, thereby influencing the rhetoric of the 2023 presidential elections. Thus, the surge of 10 million newly registered voters for the February 25 and March 11 elections in 2023 is credited to the momentum generated by the #EndSARS movement (Africanews, 2023). This is essentially because historical elections in the past often witnessed low youth participation. However, there was a palpable shift as young people aspired to transition from the traditional to a more progressive governance paradigm, reclaiming ownership of their nation. This shift was evident during the voter registration drive, marked by a significant increase in youth turnout, reflecting their determination to reshape the political landscape (Eshokeme and Taylor, 2023).

In the same vein, the emergence of the "Not Too Young To Run" movement in Nigeria exemplifies the rise of populist mobilisation among youth. The movement, which advocated for constitutional amendments to lower the age limit for political office, resonated with Nigeria's youthful population, many of whom felt excluded from traditional political structures dominated by older elites. The success of the movement led to legislative changes that opened up opportunities for younger candidates to participate in politics, challenging the dominance of established parties and politicians. Still on West Africa, populist mobilisation has played a significant role in shaping electoral dynamics. The 2020 presidential elections in Ghana saw the rise of populist rhetoric from opposition candidates, particularly John Mahama of the National Democratic Congress (NDC). Mahama's campaign focused on addressing economic inequality, corruption, and youth unemployment, tapping into popular grievances to mobilise support (Mahama and Ziblim, 2023). While incumbent President Nana Akufo-Addo ultimately won re-election, Mahama's populist message resonated with many Ghanaians and highlighted the role of populist discourse in shaping electoral debates.

Similarly, the 2019 presidential elections in Senegal witnessed the emergence of populist challengers, including Ousmane Sonko of the Pastef party. Sonko, a former tax inspector, positioned himself as an anti-establishment candidate, promising to tackle corruption and promote social justice (Niang and Tandia, 2019). Despite not winning the presidency, Sonko's populist appeal attracted significant support, particularly from young voters disillusioned with traditional political parties. This trend in populism that swept through Senegal, accounts as one of the reasons, Africa has produced the youngest president, Bassirou Diomaye Faye of Senegal. Equally, populist movements have emerged in other African countries, such as Uganda, Zimbabwe, and South Africa, where citizens have mobilised against entrenched political elites and demanded change. In South Africa, in particular, the EFF led by Julius Malema, emerged as a prominent populist force in South African politics, since its formation in 2013. The party's populist platform, which advocates for radical economic transformation, land expropriation without compensation, and increased social welfare, has resonated with many disaffected South Africans, particularly youth and marginalised communities (Mtimka and Prevost, 2021; Bekker, 2023). In the 2019 general elections, the EFF increased its share of the vote, positioning itself as a key player in South Africa's political landscape and challenging the dominance of the ruling ANC. This populist tendency, among other factors, changed the dynamics of South African elections, given the perceived allegations and disenchantment with the ANC government, who were accused of nepotism, corruption and maladministration.

While the outcomes of these populist uprisings vary, they reflect a growing disillusionment with traditional political institutions and a desire for greater democracy and accountability in African governance. Overall, the trend of populist mobilisation in Africa has contributed to electoral competition by amplifying populist rhetoric and challenging incumbent political elites. These movements have capitalised on public dissatisfaction with established political systems, offering alternative visions of governance and amplifying the voices of marginalised groups, particularly youth.

Concluding Thoughts and Recommendations

The analysis of contemporary trends in African elections spanning from 2013 to 2023 reveals a complex landscape shaped by emerging realities of Africa's social, political and economic dynamics. These new trends in Africa's elections, such as, constitutional coups, military resurgence, increasing women participation, ICT, youth renaissance, and populism, underscore the challenges and opportunities facing, not only election outcomes and

processes, but also essentially democratic governance in Africa. On one hand, the increasing participation of women and youth in electoral processes represents a positive development, signalling efforts towards inclusive and representative democracy within the last decade. Though the progress of women involvement in elections is slow, but by amplifying the voices of traditionally marginalised groups, these trends have contributed to broader political engagement and fostered greater diversity in decision-making bodies. The emergence of youth renaissance injects fresh perspectives and energy into the political arena, driving demands for accountability, transparency, and responsive governance. Also, ICT is transforming African elections by enhancing transparency, accessibility, and participation through tools like biometric registration, electronic voting, and social media platforms for voter engagement. In the same vein, populism in Africa has reshaped elections and political discourse by challenging traditional power structures, and fostering greater accountability among leaders, ultimately enhancing democratic participation and representation. However, alongside these positive trends, Africa has also witnessed concerning developments, such as constitutional coups and military interference, which pose significant threats to democratic stability and the rule of law. Constitutional coups, characterised by attempts to circumvent term limits or manipulate electoral processes, through the influence of the military and judiciary, undermine the principles of democratic governance and erode public trust in institutions. Similarly, the resurgence of the military in politics risks undermining civilian authority and reversing hard-won democratic gains, leading to increased political instability and conflict.

While contemporary trends in Africa's elections reflects a mix of challenges and opportunities, they remain significant in actualising free and fair elections and strengthening democratic governance in Africa. From the foregoing analysis and conclusion, a multi-stakeholder approach is paramount for ensuring more credible elections for democratic deepening in Africa. This involves the populace, greater citizen engagement, government institutions, especially election management bodies and other democratic institutions like political parties, civil society organisations, and international bodies. There will be the need for among others: enacting legislation to ensure the independence, transparency, and accountability of electoral commissions, the judiciary, and legislative bodies; establishing oversight mechanisms and carrying out regular evaluations to monitor progress towards conducting credible elections, achieving good governance and ultimately, democratic consolidation; allocating resources for carrying out these activities. With regard to civic education and engagement, civic education should be integrated into school curricula and adult education programmes to promote understanding of democratic values, rights, and responsibilities whilst utilising various media platforms and community outreach initiatives to raise awareness and empower citizens to participate in democratic processes. It will also be crucial to implement targeted policies and affirmative action measures to increase the representation of women and youth in electoral processes.

Similarly, capacity-building programmes, mentorship opportunities, and creation of e-platforms for women and youth participation in decision-making will boost equality. In turn, these policies will need to be evaluated periodically to conform to present reality. To address misinformation spread through social media, fact-checking and media literacy campaigns, through widespread media literacy programmes to educate citizens on identifying credible information sources should be regularly done. Also, technological infrastructure and training for result uploads should be enhanced to manage and troubleshoot digital result systems. In order to stem military resurgence, there is the need to enhance and strengthen civil military relations by reinforcing legal frameworks to delineate the roles and responsibilities of the military and civilian authorities; conducting training programmes to instil respect for democratic principles and civilian control among military personnel; and fostering dialogue and collaboration between civilian and military leadership to build mutual trust and understanding. Finally, African regional bodies, supported by member states and international partners will need to build and fortify regional cooperation through evaluating and strengthening already established mechanisms for information sharing, capacity-building, and peer review among the continental and other regional organisations. Regular and specific summits and conferences on electoral challenges should be organised, evaluated and implemented where necessary and resources should be considered for pooling to support member states in strengthening electoral processes and democratic governance.

Declarations

Interdisciplinary Scope: This article reflects a comprehensive interdisciplinary scope by drawing on political science, law, sociology, gender studies, ICT, and development studies. It examines the multifaceted nature of

electoral governance in Africa by analysing key trends such as constitutional coups, judicialisation of electoral politics, militarisation, youth renaissance, populism, military resurgence, and the growing influence of ICT and social media. By exploring how legal structures, technological innovations, and socio-political movements, especially those involving youth and women, are reshaping electoral processes, the paper provides valuable insights for political analysts, development practitioners, civil society actors, and policymakers committed to strengthening democratic governance and institutional accountability across the continent

Author Contributions: Conceptualisation (Simbine and Oyekanmi); literature review (Simbine and Oyekanmi); methodology and analysis (Simbine and Oyekanmi); investigation (Simbine and Oyekanmi); drafting and preparation (Simbine and Oyekanmi); review and editing (Simbine and Oyekanmi). Both authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest

Funding: The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Availability of Data: All relevant data are included within the article. Further information can be made available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author.

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