Thoughts & Mace
Advisory

OUTCOME PAPER

Africa and Democracy
Quarterly Dialogue

Beyond the Veil

Addressing the Dangers of Performative Democracy and State Capture

Inaugural Dialogue / 9 September 2026
Pan African Expert Roundtable



Contents

Key Terms 3

I Front Matter and Acknowledgments 4

II Executive Summary 6

III Africa’s Democratic Reality From Form to Function 8

IV The Hidden Architecture of Performative Democracy and State Capture 10

V The Structural Drivers and Limits of Current Responses 12

VI The Human Reality of Democratic Decline 14

VII Emerging Pathways for Democratic Renewal 16

VIII Strategic Recommendations Directions for Democratic Renewal 18

A Five Year Results Framework 21

IX Conclusion Reclaiming Democracy Beyond Performance 22

Notes and References 23

About Thoughts & Mace Advisory 24

READING THE PAPER

Key Terms

Meaning used in this paper

Performative democracy

A system that preserves the visible procedures of democracy while hollowing out meaningful competition, accountability, participation and rights.

State capture

The systematic redirection of public institutions, rules and resources toward private, partisan or elite interests.

Democratic function

The practical ability of institutions to constrain power, protect rights, respond to citizens and deliver fair public outcomes.

Civic power

The organized capacity of citizens to obtain information, shape decisions, resist abuse and enforce accountability between elections.

Front Matter and Acknowledgments

Project Context

The Africa and Democracy Quarterly Dialogue Series is a closed, expert-led platform established by Thoughts & Mace Advisory to examine the difficult questions that public events often gloss over. Its inaugural session brought together democratic governance practitioners, public-interest lawyers, researchers, parliamentarians, civil society leaders and policy specialists from across Africa to confront a widening legitimacy crisis: institutions remain in place, elections continue and constitutions endure, yet citizens increasingly experience governance as distant, predetermined and unaccountable.

This paper records the substance of that conversation and extends it with current continental evidence. Its purpose is not to offer another general diagnosis of democratic decline. It identifies the machinery through which democratic form is separated from democratic function and proposes reforms that can shift power, incentives and accountability in practice.

Methodology and the Chatham House Rule

The paper synthesizes the session pack, the meeting record and contributions made during the dialogue. The meeting was held under the Chatham House Rule. Accordingly, the analysis presents insights collectively and does not attribute individual arguments, examples or recommendations. Country references are retained where they are necessary to understand the institutional pattern, but they should not be read as statements by any named participant.

The dialogue evidence was triangulated with Afrobarometer's Round 10 survey findings from 50,961 face-to-face interviews in 38 African countries conducted in 2024 and 2025, and with the V-Dem Institute's Democracy Report 2026. These sources measure different things: Afrobarometer records citizen attitudes and experience; V-Dem assesses institutions and democratic practices through a multidimensional expert-coded dataset. Used together, they reveal both the public consequences and the institutional direction of democratic change.

The meeting notes were treated as a record requiring judgment, not as a verbatim authority. Claims that could not be independently verified were framed as participant observations or excluded from the quantitative analysis. Data points in this paper retain their source, coverage and period.

Acknowledgments and Cohort Representation

Thoughts & Mace Advisory thanks the lead discussants, moderator and participants whose candour made this paper possible. The cohort represented West, East, Central and Southern African experience, with expertise spanning elections, public finance, human rights, gender equality, security, parliamentary accountability, civic participation, youth organizing and international affairs.

Participants represented in the session materials

Moderator

Dr Mathias Hounkpe

Lead discussants

Dr Gilles Yabi
Eleanor Thompson
Dr Josephine Kulea

Participants

Udo Jude Ilo
Cheta Nwanze
Ibrahima A. Niang
Maureen Oduori
Gladys Hlatywayo
Oscar Meywa Otele
Kemi Okenyodo
Dr Matthew Ayibakuro
U. Obike
Chinecherem Udeh
Cynthia Akamere
Chukwuekem Chibuikem
Maleine Amadou Niang
Prof. Adebayo Olukoshi
Salif Kanoute
Dr. Elijah Ambasa
Dr Hussaini Abdu
Caroline Gaita
Myani Bukar; Jessica T. Ilunga
ChiChi Aniagolu-Okoye
Jessica Oluoch
Joy Ekanem
Ayomide Ojo

II

Executive Summary

Africa's democratic crisis is increasingly a crisis of function. Elections take place, courts sit, parliaments pass laws and oversight bodies publish reports. Yet these institutions can operate inside a system where outcomes are shaped before citizens enter the process, appointments reward loyalty, public resources finance political survival and laws designed to protect the public are selectively enforced. The democratic shell remains visible while its capacity to restrain power weakens.

The dialogue described this condition as performative democracy. It is more durable than a straightforward dictatorship because it borrows the language, institutions and rituals of democracy. A captured system can hold regular elections, invite observers and maintain a constitutional court while steadily narrowing genuine competition. It can repeal a repressive law and introduce a new digital offence that produces the same chilling effect. It can create an anti-corruption institution whose leadership depends on the executive it must investigate. The appearance of compliance becomes part of the method of control.

The evidence in one view

Across 38 countries surveyed in 2024 and 2025, 64 percent of Africans preferred democracy, but only 36 percent met Afrobarometer's fuller test of democratic demand: preferring democracy while rejecting one-person, one-party and military rule. Only 47 percent considered their country a democracy, and 38 percent were satisfied with how democracy worked. V-Dem's 2026 assessment found that nearly one-quarter of the world's countries were autocratizing in 2025, with freedom of expression the most common target.

These figures show that citizens have not simply rejected democracy. Many are withdrawing confidence from systems that claim democratic legitimacy without producing democratic accountability. The gap between demand and perceived supply is narrowing for the wrong reason: public demand is weakening faster than performance is improving. This makes the legitimacy crisis especially dangerous. When elections appear unable to change incentives, courts appear unable to constrain executives and public institutions appear unable to protect people, authoritarian alternatives begin to look less exceptional.

The dialogue identified six connected features of the current crisis: executive domination of appointments and oversight; manipulation of electoral and constitutional rules; the commercialization of political competition; repression through security and digital law; dependence that compromises civil society and media; and an implementation gap that leaves vulnerable communities protected in law but exposed in life.

The paper argues for a shift in democratic reform. Election support remains necessary, but it cannot remain the organizing centre of the field. Reform must operate between elections and below the national level. It must strengthen the independence of institutions through appointment, tenure and budget rules; expose the money and networks behind capture; secure independent public-interest media; build permanent civic infrastructure; and measure democracy by whether people can obtain justice, information, services and influence without fear or patronage.

Priority Directions

From election events to democratic systems

Track the full cycle of lawmaking, appointments, procurement, political finance, information control and enforcement.

From institutional existence to institutional independence

Test whether oversight bodies have autonomous leadership, budgets, access to information and enforceable powers.

From short grants to civic infrastructure

Finance long-term local networks, legal defence, secure data systems and independent journalism.

Symbolic inclusion to substantive protection

Measure whether women, children, youth, minorities and rural communities can use rights and obtain remedies.

From diplomatic ambiguity to evidence-based naming

Use clear thresholds to identify and name electoral manipulation, executive capture and civic repression.

From continental declarations to enforceable regional action

Create transparent triggers, independent review and consequences that apply before crises become coups or violence.

III

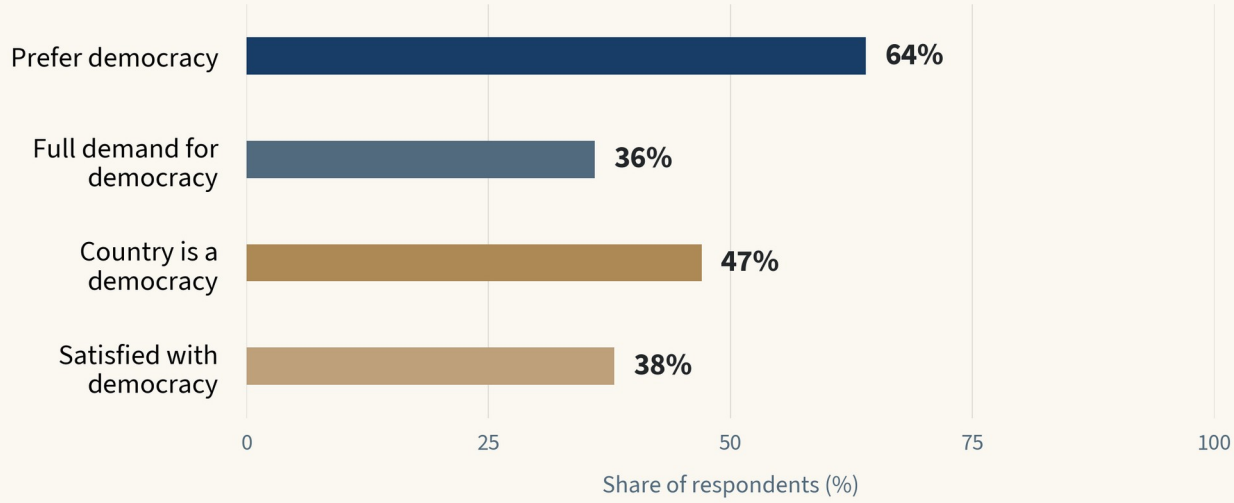
Africa's Democratic Reality From Form to Function

Citizens still value democracy, but confidence is thinning

The African democratic story contains two truths at once. A clear majority still prefers democracy and rejects authoritarian alternatives. At the same time, satisfaction with democratic performance remains low. Afrobarometer's 2026 Pan-Africa profile found that 64 percent of respondents preferred democracy. Seventy-nine percent rejected one-person rule, 76 percent rejected one-party rule and 65 percent rejected military rule. Yet only 36 percent qualified as fully committed democrats across all four measures. Across 29 countries tracked over a decade, full demand for democracy by citizens fell by 10 percentage points

The distinction matters. A citizen may prefer democracy in principle while becoming willing to tolerate military intervention after repeated corruption, insecurity or electoral manipulation. That conditional support is a warning about democratic delivery. It also helps explain why constitutional order can lose public defenders before formal institutions collapse.

Figure 1 Citizen demand and perceived delivery of democracy



Source: Afrobarometer Round 10 surveys in 38 African countries, 2024/2025.

Afrobarometer's comparison also shows a narrowing between demand and perceived supply, from 11 points in 2014 and 2015 to four points a decade later. The change is not evidence of democratic convergence. The survey analysis links weaker demand to worsening evaluations of government performance. Citizens are adjusting expectations downward.

The continental picture is uneven

There is no single African trajectory. The dialogue moved between military regimes in parts of the Sahel, entrenched executive dominance, fragile electoral competition and cases where citizen pressure or institutional resilience altered political outcomes. V-Dem's 2026 report reinforces this mixed picture. It identifies Botswana and Mauritius among three countries newly classified as democratizing in the 2025 data, even as nearly a quarter of countries worldwide were undergoing autocratization. Progress is possible, but it is neither automatic nor secure.

Country differences should not obscure recurring methods. In several contexts, executive power expands through formally legal steps: constitutional amendments, restrictive eligibility rules, partisan appointments, special jurisdictions, procurement decisions and selective prosecutions. Each action can appear defensible in isolation. Together they reduce the uncertainty on which democracy depends: uncertainty about who will win, whether power can change hands and whether institutions will act independently. These are the nuanced dynamics that should inform the response of public interest practitioners, citizens and the international community.

Elections are necessary but no longer sufficient as the main test

The discussion repeatedly returned to the limits of election-centred analysis. Observation missions often arrive after the decisive structural choices have been made. Candidate access may already be restricted. Electoral commissions may lack independent appointment procedures. Campaign finance may be opaque. Public media may favour incumbents. Security agencies may intimidate opponents, and courts may have lost credibility long before petitions are filed.

A technically orderly election can therefore confirm a political settlement produced outside election day. The appropriate question is broader: did citizens have a realistic opportunity to organize, obtain information, compete, vote and seek remedy under rules that did not structurally privilege those already in power? Democratic assessment must move from the visible event to the institutional chain that produces it. This is very critical for election observers and reinforces the need for a more rigorous process before validation of cosmetic election outcomes.

Democratic function is measured in consequences

The dialogue insisted that democracy must be tested where people meet the state. A child-protection statute means little if investigators can be bribed to lose a case file. Compulsory education is not meaningful where schools, teachers and transport do not exist. A public participation requirement is hollow if citizens cannot contact their representatives or if submissions do not affect a decision. Rights become real through budgets, administrative practice, enforcement and remedy.

This approach does not reduce democracy to service delivery. Efficient authoritarian states can provide services without accountability. Rather, it recognizes that democratic legitimacy requires both restraint and response: power must be limited, and institutions must be capable of acting fairly on public needs. A state that cannot do either invites citizens to judge democracy by its failures.

IV

The Hidden Architecture of Performative Democracy and State Capture

Capture works through institutions as often as against them

State capture is frequently imagined as an external assault on public institutions. In practice, it often operates through lawful mandates and routine procedures. Control of appointments shapes who leads the electoral commission, judiciary, prosecution service, anti-corruption agency, military command and state-owned enterprises. Budget dependence disciplines nominally independent bodies. Procurement links political office to commercial patrons. Parliamentary majorities convert executive preference into legislation, while selective enforcement protects allies and exposes opponents.

This is why visible institutional activity can coexist with declining accountability. A captured parliament may sit frequently. A captured court may hear cases. A captured regulator may produce annual reports. The central test is whether these institutions can impose costs on powerful actors when law and evidence require it.

The capture chain

Entry point	Method	Democratic effect
Political finance	Opaque donations, public procurement networks, monetized nominations and high campaign costs	Narrows candidacy to wealthy actors and binds officeholders to financiers.
Appointments	Partisan control of commissions, courts, prosecutors, security leadership and regulators	Weakens independent judgment and makes tenure dependent on executive favour.
Law and procedure	Constitutional amendments, restrictive thresholds, emergency powers and selective offences	Turns legality into an instrument for limiting competition and dissent.
Public resources	Patronage, procurement, discretionary funds and state advertising	Rewards loyalty, finances incumbency and compromises media independence.
Information systems	State-aligned media, platform manipulation, surveillance, shutdowns and cybercrime laws	Distorts public choice and raises the cost of criticism.
Enforcement	Selective investigation, prosecution, policing and administrative sanctions	Creates impunity for allies and uncertainty for critics.
Regional validation	Procedural diplomacy and weak enforcement of democratic standards	Allows regimes to convert recognition into legitimacy despite substantive violations.

Law can conceal coercion

The session highlighted a recurring substitution: governments remove one visibly repressive instrument and replace it with a broader or less familiar one. Criminal libel may be repealed while cybercrime, false-information or public-order provisions are used against journalists, opposition figures and citizens. The legal vocabulary changes, but the chilling effect remains. Because the restriction is presented as regulation, security or digital safety, it may attract less scrutiny than an explicit ban.

V-Dem identifies freedom of expression as the most frequently targeted aspect of democracy among autocratizing countries over the last 25 years. That pattern is logical. Capture is easier to sustain when citizens cannot compare claims, journalists cannot follow money and organizers cannot communicate safely. Information control is not secondary to state capture; it protects the rest of the system.

Political finance closes the gate before voting begins

The financialization of politics emerged as a central concern. When party nominations, campaigns, media access and coalition building require extraordinary resources, political equality is compromised before ballots are printed. Wealthy candidates and their sponsors gain disproportionate influence over legislative priorities, appointments and public contracts. Women, young people, persons with disabilities and locally rooted candidates may appear in inclusion statistics while remaining excluded from viable competition.

The result is a political cartel with incentives that survive changes in party control. Opposition parties may condemn capture while excluded from power and reproduce it once elected. Alternation then changes officeholders without changing the operating system. This helps explain why citizens can experience elections as a movement without transformation.

External interests can reinforce domestic capture

Participants also questioned the credibility of international support for democracy when geopolitical or commercial interests determine which violations attract consequences. Rapid recognition of disputed results, selective concern about repression and competition over strategic resources can signal that procedural stability matters more than citizen consent. Regional organizations face a related conflict when their decisions depend on the same governments they must discipline.

The implication is not that external partnership has no role. It is that democratic support loses legitimacy when standards shift with strategic convenience. Assistance should strengthen transparent rules and citizen agency rather than reward access to incumbents.

V

The Structural Drivers and Limits of Current Responses

The authoritarian state was never fully redesigned

Several contributions traced contemporary capture to colonial, military and one-party state structures. Independence and multiparty rule changed the leadership of many institutions without fully changing their extractive design. Centralized executives retained control over administration, security, land, licensing and public revenue. Later constitutions added rights and commissions, but implementation often depended on the same concentrated state machinery.

This history creates an authoritarian default. Under pressure, governments reach for inherited tools: administrative discretion, emergency law, coercive policing, centralized appointments and patronage. Democratic reform that focuses only on elections leaves those tools available to every new administration.

Institutions are designed to depend on the power they oversee

Many oversight bodies have formal mandates but weak operating independence. Their leaders may be appointed or removed through executive-dominated processes. Budgets can be delayed, cut or controlled by ministries. Investigative access may depend on cooperation from the agencies under review. Decisions may be advisory rather than enforceable. These design choices allow governments to cite the institution's existence while limiting its capacity.

South Africa's Chapter 9 model was raised as a useful constitutional approach because it explicitly establishes institutions to strengthen constitutional democracy. The wider lesson is that independence must be engineered through plural appointment processes, protected tenure, direct and predictable funding, disclosure requirements, judicially enforceable powers and public reporting. Good individuals cannot substitute for durable design.

Civil society has been pulled into the electoral calendar

Traditional donor practice often funds civic work close to elections and withdraws once observation reports are published. This encourages organizations to build temporary coalitions, train monitors and produce recommendations without maintaining the local relationships and institutional memory required to pursue reform between cycles. Repeated participation in flawed processes can also make civil society appear to validate systems it privately distrusts.

Funding dependence compounds the problem. Organizations that rely on governments, corporate patrons or a narrow group of international donors may avoid positions that threaten future access. Media outlets face similar pressure when advertising and ownership are concentrated. Independence is therefore an economic question as much as an ethical one.

Information disorder weakens collective judgment

Citizens now encounter political information through a mixture of state broadcasters, partisan outlets, influencers, encrypted networks and platforms whose algorithms reward attention rather than accuracy. Governments and political actors exploit this environment through coordinated messaging, harassment, surveillance and selective connectivity restrictions. Meanwhile, underfunded journalism struggles to investigate complex financial and institutional networks.

Digital organizing remains essential, particularly for young people, but online visibility is not the same as durable civic power. Movements need secure communications, trusted verification, legal protection, offline community links and structures that survive the news cycle.

Regional responses intervene late and inconsistently

African regional bodies have developed strong normative frameworks on unconstitutional changes of government, elections and governance. Their response is strongest when soldiers seize power visibly. It is weaker when elected governments hollow out institutions gradually through law, appointments and repression. This creates a perverse distinction between sudden unconstitutional rupture and slow constitutional capture.

A credible regional framework must recognize that democratic breakdown can occur without tanks in the capital. Early warning should track constitutional manipulation, attacks on media, politicization of electoral bodies, judicial interference, opposition exclusion and the erosion of term limits. Consequences should be triggered by evidence and applied consistently.

Online visibility is not the same as durable civic power.

VI

The Human Reality of Democratic Decline

The implementation gap is where legitimacy is lost

For many citizens, the state is experienced through a school, police station, clinic, court, local authority or social-protection office. Democratic decline becomes tangible when those institutions respond according to status, wealth, gender, geography or political connection. A constitution may guarantee equality, yet a rural child cannot reach a school. A law may prohibit harmful practices, yet an influential perpetrator avoids prosecution. A citizen may have a right to information, yet public records remain inaccessible.

The dialogue described four overlapping failures: laws without budgets or personnel; officials who do not investigate or enforce; unequal protection for marginalized communities; and political interference that prevents institutions from acting. Together they convert rights into promises that people cannot use.

Vulnerability reveals the quality of the whole system

Women, girls, young people, rural communities, minorities, persons with disabilities and low-income citizens often encounter institutional failure first and most severely. Their experience is therefore not a specialist inclusion concern at the edge of democracy. It is a diagnostic test of whether power is accountable. If the least connected citizen cannot obtain protection or remedy, formal equality is performing a symbolic function rather than a governing one.

This is also why aggregate representation can mislead. A parliament may contain more women or young members while party control, campaign finance and patronage limit their independence. Inclusion should be assessed through agenda-setting power, resource access, constituency contact, legislative influence and safety, not only seats occupied.

Apathy is often a rational response to closed systems

Low turnout and civic withdrawal are frequently described as citizen failure. The discussion offered a different interpretation. People disengage when participation repeatedly produces no observable change, when opposition is unsafe, when public consultation is ignored and when institutions appear predetermined. Apathy can therefore be evidence of perceived powerlessness rather than indifference.

The response cannot be another generic call to vote. Citizens need credible pathways from participation to consequence. They must be able to see how information, organizing, litigation, local monitoring or collective refusal changes a decision or imposes a cost. Agency grows through demonstrated results.

Everyday corruption connects citizens to the captured system

The dialogue also resisted a simple division between corrupt elites and innocent societies. Small bribes, patronage expectations and tolerance for rule-breaking can reproduce the same logic that sustains high-level capture. Yet this observation must not shift responsibility away from those who control institutions. Citizens make choices within systems that often punish integrity and reward connection.

The practical lesson is to connect personal refusal with collective protection. One person who refuses a routine bribe may be exposed; an organized group that documents demands, provides legal support and escalates evidence to credible media can change the risk calculation. Civic courage becomes sustainable when institutions and networks stand behind it.

Agency grows through demonstrated results.

VII

Emerging Pathways for Democratic Renewal

Build permanent civic infrastructure

The most promising proposals moved accountability closer to citizens and extended it beyond electoral seasons. Community information offices can translate budgets, laws and public decisions into forms people can use. Proximity volunteer networks can detect service failures, rights violations and political intimidation early. Local civic forums can turn individual complaints into documented patterns and collective demands.

These structures should not become unpaid extensions of government or short-lived project committees. They require clear mandates, secure records, escalation pathways, legal protection and stable funding. Their value lies in combining local trust with the ability to reach journalists, lawyers, oversight bodies and regional actors.

Protect independent information as democratic infrastructure

Independent media should be treated as a public good without making journalists dependent on government. Possible models include transparent pooled funds administered by independent trustees, membership and subscription models, cross-border investigative partnerships, university-based reporting hubs, philanthropic endowments and public-interest advertising rules with audited allocation criteria.

Support should cover more than content production. Newsrooms need legal defence, digital security, data analysis, long-term investigative capacity and revenue development. Civic organizations also need trusted verification channels so that rapid online mobilization is grounded in evidence.

Their value lies in combining local trust with the ability to reach journalists, lawyers, oversight bodies and regional actors.

Change institutional incentives, not only institutional leaders

Personal integrity matters, but institutional renewal cannot depend on finding unusually courageous officeholders. Appointment rules should require cross-party and public participation, published criteria and reasoned decisions. Terms should be protected and staggered. Budgets should be released automatically according to law. Conflicts of interest, assets, procurement and political donations should be disclosed in usable formats. Sanctions should be enforceable and reviewable.

Constitutional review can help where it begins with a clear diagnosis of how power operates and where citizens have time and information to shape the outcome. The Ghanaian consultation model discussed in the dialogue illustrates the value of examining the gap between stable elections and weak social or economic performance. Reform should not become another elite process designed to ratify a predetermined amendment.

Organize broad coalitions around specific democratic protections

Successful resistance to term extensions, electoral manipulation or repression has often depended on alliances that cross formal civil society, professional bodies, labour, faith communities, media, youth networks and local associations. Broad coalitions are harder to isolate and can translate a constitutional issue into everyday language.

Coalitions work best when they organize around a clear protection or demand, agree on evidence standards and distribute roles. Some actors investigate, some litigate, some communicate, some mobilize and some negotiate. This division of labour reduces duplication and helps movements survive repression.

Use regional solidarity when national institutions close

Cross-border networks can preserve evidence, provide emergency support, amplify local reporting and maintain pressure when domestic civic space contracts. Regional bar associations, journalist networks, research institutes and parliamentary monitoring groups can jointly track patterns that appear isolated within one country. This is especially important where governments borrow legal and digital tactics from one another.

Broad coalitions are harder to isolate and can translate a constitutional issue into everyday language.

VIII

Strategic Recommendations Directions for Democratic Renewal

The recommendations below translate the dialogue into an action framework. They are organized by actors, but their effectiveness depends on coordination. No single institution can reverse capture when political finance, information control, appointments and enforcement reinforce one another.

For National Governments and Reformist Public Officials

- Reform appointments to electoral bodies, courts, prosecutors, anti-corruption agencies, auditors and security leadership through published criteria, multi-actor nomination, public interviews and reasoned selection decisions.
- Protect oversight budgets through direct statutory appropriations and transparent release schedules. Publish any delay, reduction or reallocation.
- Adopt enforceable political-finance rules covering donations, beneficial ownership, campaign expenditure, third-party spending, state resources and online advertising. Data should be published in machine-readable form before elections.
- Review cybercrime, false-information, public-order and surveillance laws against necessity, proportionality and independent judicial authorization. Repeal provisions used to criminalize legitimate journalism, dissent or organizing.
- Create public implementation scorecards for rights-based laws, linking each obligation to a budget, responsible institution, geographic coverage, complaint mechanism and remedy.
- Strengthen local government autonomy and transparency so that participation produces decisions closer to citizens and does not depend entirely on central executive discretion.

For Civil Society and Social Movements

- Shift resources from election-season mobilization to continuous monitoring of appointments, procurement, budgets, constitutional changes, political finance and enforcement.
- Build community information and accountability nodes that can document local problems, verify evidence and escalate cases through legal, media and oversight channels.
- Agree on thresholds for naming democratic violations. Distinguish administrative weakness from capture, and use evidence to identify when institutions are being deliberately neutralized.
- Diversify income through membership, earned services, pooled domestic philanthropy, diaspora support and transparent endowment models. Publish funding sources and conflict-of-interest safeguards.
- Invest in movement safety: legal defence, digital security, psychosocial support, emergency relocation and secure evidence storage.
- Measure civic work by institutional or community change, not only events held, people trained or reports produced.

For the African Union and Regional Economic Communities

- Expand early-warning systems to track gradual constitutional capture, including term-limit changes, opposition exclusion, media repression, judicial interference, partisan electoral appointments and politically selective prosecutions.
- Create independent review panels with civil society, judicial and technical expertise. Publish evidence, findings and dissenting opinions rather than relying only on closed diplomatic assessment.
- Apply graduated consequences before democratic breakdown becomes violent: public findings, mediation deadlines, targeted suspension from governance bodies, restrictions on non-humanitarian support and referral to judicial or human-rights mechanisms.
- Require election missions to assess the pre-election environment and institutional chain, not only polling-day administration. Observation should state clearly when structural conditions prevent genuine competition.
- Protect civic actors through regional rapid-response protocols, emergency legal support and secure channels for submitting evidence.
- Increase member-state funding and disclose external financing so that continental institutions can act with greater autonomy.

For International Partners and Funders

- Align diplomatic recognition and assistance with published democratic standards. Avoid rapid validation where credible evidence of structural manipulation remains unresolved.
- Fund multi-year democratic infrastructure rather than short election projects. Core support should include local networks, independent media, litigation, research, security and organizational reserves.
- Apply transparency and human-rights safeguards to security cooperation, digital technology, critical-mineral partnerships and major infrastructure deals.
- Support domestic reform coalitions without prescribing a single institutional model. Local legitimacy and political understanding should guide adaptation.
- Coordinate funding to reduce duplication, sudden withdrawal and incentives for organizations to chase donor cycles.

For Media and Technology Platforms

- Publish political advertising, content-moderation and government-request data in country-specific transparency reports.
- Establish rapid appeal and preservation systems for journalists, election monitors and human-rights defenders whose content or accounts are removed during political crises.
- Support independent fact-checking and investigative partnerships without controlling editorial priorities.
- Conduct human-rights due diligence before supplying surveillance, identity, connectivity or content-management technology to public agencies.

For Citizens and Community Leaders

- Organize around specific public problems and document interactions with the state. Collective evidence is harder to dismiss than isolated complaints.
- Use access-to-information, budget, procurement and complaint mechanisms consistently, while recording non-response as evidence of institutional failure.
- Support independent journalism and civic organizations through subscriptions, membership, volunteering, local donations and verified information sharing.
- Resist routine corruption collectively and create safe escalation pathways so individual refusal does not become individual exposure.

A Five Year Results Framework

Outcome	Illustrative indicator	Evidence source
More independent oversight	Share of key appointments made through open, multi-actor processes; budget released on schedule	Official records, audit reports, civil society monitoring
More competitive politics	Political-finance disclosure coverage; reduction in misuse of state resources; candidate diversity	Electoral data, procurement records, observer reports
Safer civic space	Trends in arrests, shutdowns, restrictive laws and attacks on journalists or defenders	Court files, media monitors, V-Dem indicators
Stronger citizen agency	Share of documented local demands receiving a reasoned response or remedy	Community accountability records, surveys
Better rights implementation	Budget and enforcement rates for selected protective laws, disaggregated by location and group	Administrative data, independent audits
Improved democratic confidence	Change in full demand for democracy, perceived supply and satisfaction	Afrobarometer and credible national surveys

IX

Conclusion Reclaiming Democracy Beyond Performance

The most consequential democratic failures are often hidden in plain sight. Institutions remain open, laws remain on the books, and elections remain on the calendar. Yet the capacity of citizens to choose, question, organize, and obtain remedy is gradually reduced. This is the strength of performative democracy: it uses democratic form to protect undemocratic power.

The dialogue made clear that Africa's legitimacy crisis will not be resolved by asking citizens to believe more strongly in institutions that repeatedly fail them. Confidence must be earned through visible independence, fair enforcement and meaningful response. Elections should remain central, but they must sit within a wider democratic system that protects information, constrains appointments, exposes political money, secures civic action and turns rights into remedies.

The available data still contain grounds for action. Most Africans prefer democracy, and majorities reject one-person and one-party rule. Countries can reverse decline; V-Dem's latest assessment identifies a democratizing movement in Botswana and Mauritius. Citizen pressure has altered political calculations in difficult environments, and local accountability initiatives continue to show how information and organization can redistribute power.

The urgent task is to convert those assets into durable structures. Democracy should be judged by whether public power can change hands, whether institutions can act against powerful interests, whether a citizen can participate without fear, and whether the person with the least influence can still obtain justice. Anything less leaves the veil intact.

Central conclusion

Democracy survives when citizens can produce consequences. Reform must therefore move beyond maintaining institutions to changing how power is financed, appointed, monitored, challenged and experienced.

Notes and References

1. Afrobarometer. 2026. Democracy Faltering Demand in Africa Policy Paper 106 and accompanying news release, 15 September 2026. Round 10 data cover 50,961 face-to-face interviews in 38 countries in 2024 and 2025.
https://www.afrobarometer.org/articles/international-day-of-democracy-demand-for-democracy-weakens-across-africa-new-afrobarometer-report-shows/

2. Afrobarometer. 2024. African Insights 2024 Democracy at Risk The People's Perspective.
https://www.afrobarometer.org/feature/flagship-report/

3. V-Dem Institute. 2026. Democracy Report 2026 Unraveling the Democratic Era. University of Gothenburg.
https://www.v-dem.net/publications/democracy-reports/

4. V-Dem Institute. 2026. Press Release Democratic Backsliding Reaches Western Democracies with US Decline Unprecedented, 17 March 2026.
https://www.v-dem.net/news/press-release-democratic-backsliding-reaches-western-democracies-with-us-decline-unprecedented/

5. Thoughts & Mace Advisory. 2026. Africa and Democracy Quarterly Dialogue Inaugural Session Notes, 9 September 2026. Internal meeting record.

About Thoughts &Mace Advisory

Thoughts & Mace Advisory is a policy, legal and third sector consulting firm focused on providing excellent resources and support for clients drawing from the extensive governance and policy background of the firm partners. Established in 2006, Thoughts and Mace has an office in Abuja and affiliate offices in Benin, Mali, and Senegal. T&M is a dynamic firm dedicated to anticipating clients' concerns in an effective and cost-sensitive manner. It has a dynamic skill base, especially in capacity building, advocacy, good governance, public policy analysis, strategic planning, team building, program development, legal/legislative research, and public interest litigation. The Firm pays close attention to the interplay between clients' needs and their business and personal goals, with deep appreciation of the impact of its services on good governance and effective organizational operations. T&M has the vision to build long-lasting professional relationships and develop an international network of resources relevant to democracy promotion. Our focus currently has been on supporting and improving the capacity of third sector institutions in Africa to be effective and impactful. We offer an uncommon blend of expertise amongst our partners, with a combined professional expertise of more than 60 years.