

Placed on notice?

The supply and demand of democracy in Africa today

Thomas Isbell

University of Cape Town and Afrobarometer



Bonn, 20 November 2023. Talking about the state of democracy in Africa is an increasingly difficult conversation. Tracking headlines and trends, observers debate whether democratisation has either "run its course" or holds a "stable" course in most countries on the continent.

Indeed, global trends of democratic backsliding, rising authoritarianism and populism have not passed Africa by: from rigged or unfair elections in Sierra Leone, Zimbabwe and Côte d'Ivoire, to increasingly restrictive spaces for political opposition and civil society in Benin, Senegal and Uganda (and elsewhere). Democratic liberties have further suffered in recent years as many governments introduced restrictions on civil liberties and a militarisation of state authority that started during the Covid-19 pandemic but has continued to this day.

Recently, a series of military coups in West and Central Africa have raised further questions regarding democratic prospects in these countries. As new global suitors – namely Russia – line up in the waiting rooms of coup leaders and self-pronounced heads of government, it is unlikely that these actors will place any value on democratic rule in the region and likely even see such form of governance as detrimental to their interests.

These events are reflected in the worsening expert scores and outlook of the state of democracy in many African countries. However, some recent examples highlight how downward trajectories can slow and how critical junctures can provide renewed impetus for the strengthening of democratic elements in a country. Across the continent, some decisive victories for democracy were won: the February 2020 decision by Malawi's Constitutional Court to annul the results of the flawed 2019 presidential election, the Gambia's successful 2021 presidential election, the 2021 ruling-party transition in Zambia, and the first democratic transfer of power in the Seychelles (2020).

“While majorities of respondents in the most recent Afrobarometer surveys appear to demand democracy, the surveys also reveal that many feel that the supply of democracy is lacking.”

Nevertheless, one key perspective that is often missed in democracy scores and indices is whether a majority of Africans want democracy, and if this demand outstrips their propensity to consider non-democratic alternatives. There is a correlation between the state of democracy and the reality of people's lives in countries experiencing democratic downturns or increasing authoritarianism. In other words, the democratic backsliding is not something that just ‘happens’.

Comparing the most recent nationally representative survey data, collected by Afrobarometer, suggests that support for democracy among ordinary Africans has remained remarkably stable since 2014. Around two in three say that democracy is

preferable to any other form of government. Likewise, a substantial majority routinely reject one-man rule (~80%) and one-party rule (~80%). There are, of course, some important country variations. Compared to 2014, support for democracy has increased the most in Sierra Leone (+ 25 percentage points), Tanzania (+ 22) and Uganda (+17), while decreasing the most in Mali (-36), Burkina Faso (-26) and South Africa (-21).

Respondents also widely report support for democratic norms and institutions, such as regular free and fair elections (75% support in 2021/22), presidential compliance with courts (75%) and presidential term limits (74%).

While majorities of respondents in the most recent Afrobarometer surveys appear to demand democracy, the surveys also reveal that many feel that the supply of democracy is lacking. In the past, only around half of the respondents say that they live in a democracy, even if a flawed one. Fewer people (~ 38% in 2021/22) say that they are satisfied with how democracy is working in their country. Of course, some may argue that these subjective views are even too positive given many more negative expert ratings of democracy. Regardless, the key take away is that across the continent ordinary citizens feel that they are not getting what they want or expect from ‘democracy’.

This imbalance may weaken popular support for democracy over time. While respondents' rejection of some non-democratic alternatives – one-man and one-party rule is consistently stronger than their support for democracy as a regime form, the share of respondents who explicitly reject military rule has decreased over time. Around half of respondents now say that it is legitimate for the armed forces to take control of government when elected leaders abuse power for their own ends. As more people report abuse of power among political leaders, military interventions may be welcomed in more and more countries. Democracy has been placed on notice.