GUEST RESEARCH BRIEF

Africans' commitment to democracy declines in the face of growing governance failures

Mo Ibrahim Foundation

AFRO BAROMETER
Let the people have a say

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Introduction

Over the past decade, Afrobarometer data has shown that Africans' evaluations of democracy lag behind their commitment to democracy, revealing a persistent gap between what citizens want and what they receive from their political regimes. (e.g. Mattes 2019; Afrobarometer 2023, 2024).

But recent trends suggest some important adjustments to this larger picture.

We track public attitudes across 28 countries included in every Afrobarometer survey between 2014/2015 (Round 6) and 2024/2025 (Round 10). Across these countries, Africans' satisfaction with democracy has, after a decelerating decline, ticked back upward slightly (albeit at relatively low levels) by 4 percentage points in the past three years to 42%. In contrast, while a larger proportion of Africans support democracy, the trend is moving in the other direction.

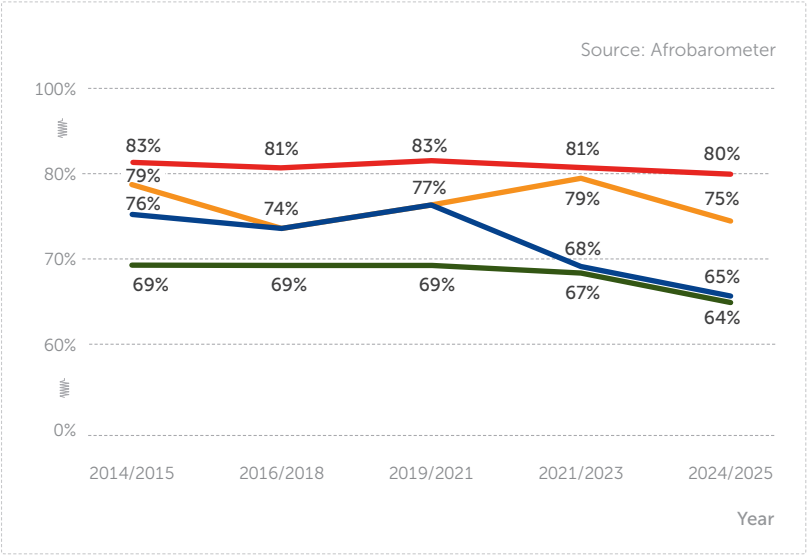
Falling demand

In the most recent Afrobarometer survey, conducted across 38 countries in 2024/2025, strong majorities say they prefer democracy (64%) and reject three different types of authoritarian rule: presidential dictatorship (79%), one-party rule (76%), and military rule (65%).

However, overtime analysis of our 28-country panel shows that support for democracy (as indicated by the belief that "democracy is preferable to any other kind of government") has steadily edged downward over the past decade, particularly in the past five years, falling 5 percentage points from 69% to 64%.

Of greater concern, rejection of military rule has dropped by 11 percentage points over the same period, falling from 76% to 65%. Meanwhile, public opposition to one-party rule and presidential dictatorship are also both lower than they were a decade ago.

Figure 1: Support for democracy and rejection of one-person rule, one-party rule, and military rule (28* countries)(2014-2025)

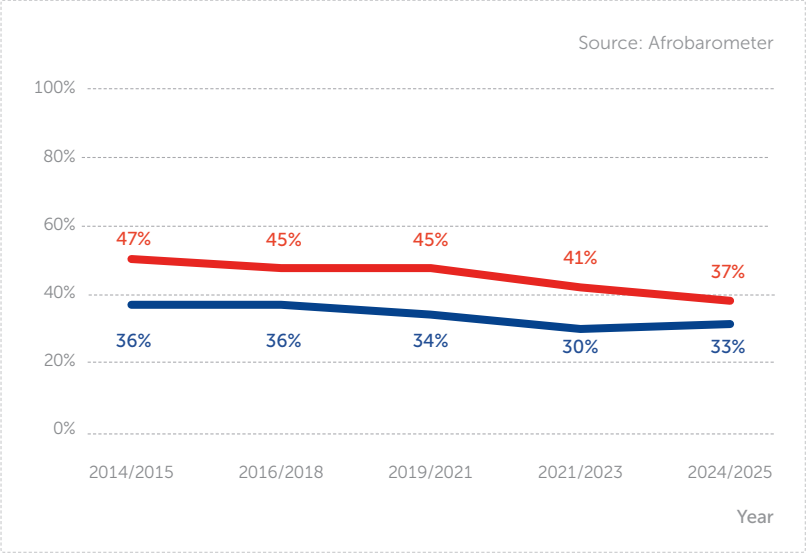


* The question about one-person rule was not asked in Eswatini in Rounds 6 and 7.

Not all people provide consistently pro-democratic, neutral, or anti-democratic replies. Thus, Afrobarometer measures overall "demand for democracy" as the proportion of respondents who prefer democracy and simultaneously reject all three forms of non-democratic rule mentioned above. The latest results indicate that demand has dropped a full 10 percentage points, from 47% in 2014/2015 to 37%.

Thus, the gap between full demand for democracy and its perceived supply (measured as the proportion of those who both rate their country as a functioning democracy and are satisfied with the way democracy works) is now the smallest we have yet seen (4 percentage points). But falling demand, rather than rising supply, is mostly responsible for this narrowing gap.

Figure 2: Demand for democracy vs. supply of democracy (28* countries) (2014-2025)



*For demand figures, round 6 and 7 averages are computed using 27 countries.

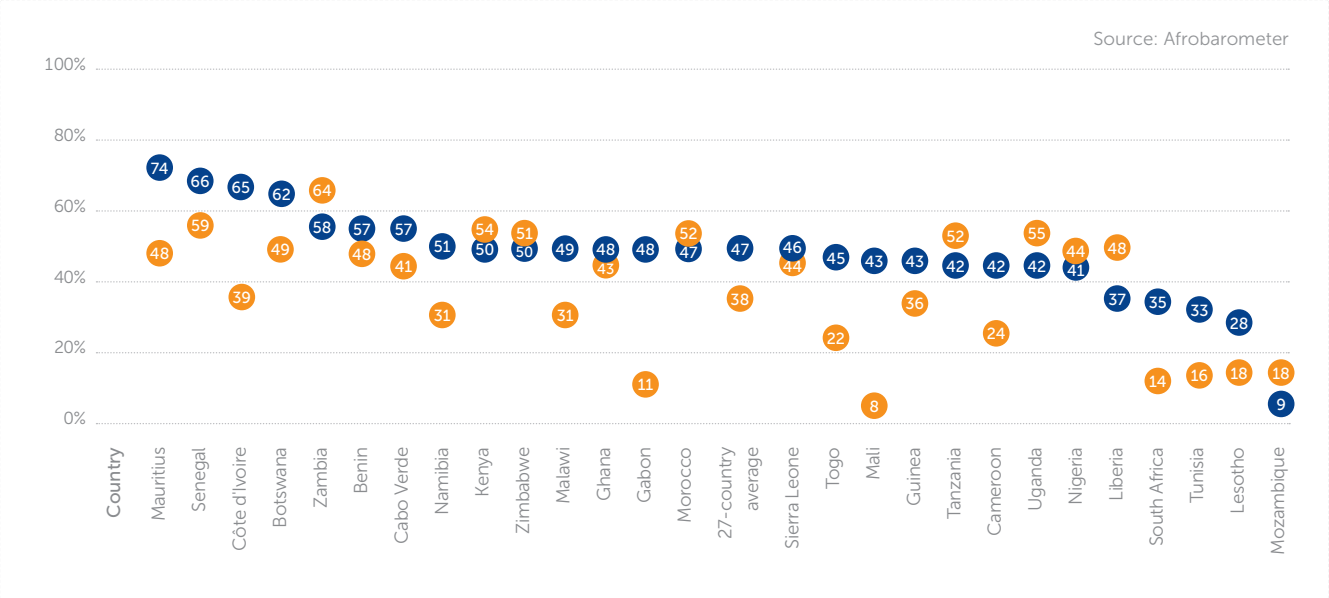
Country trends

Focusing on the country level, demand has declined in 17 of the 27 countries in our panel (defined as a downward shift greater than 3 percentage points).

Declines are greatest in Gabon (-37 points) and Mali (-35), both countries that experienced military coups during this period. Other large regressions are apparent in Mauritius (-26), Cote d'Ivoire (-26), Togo (-23), South Africa (-21), and Namibia (-20).

Yet some grounds for optimism can also be found in increased demand in seven countries: Uganda (+13 points), Liberia (+11), Tanzania (+10), Mozambique (+9), Zambia (+6), Morocco (+5), Madagascar (+5), and Kenya (+4). Tanzania's increase is notable, possibly reflecting a greater sense of activism and boldness of civil society that triggered the CCM-government crackdown on political opposition ahead of that country's 2025 election.

Figure 3: Change in full demand for democracy (27 countries) (2014-2025)



Potential drivers

What are the potential factors driving these downward trends?

Young people consistently vote at lower rates, and tend to exhibit the lowest levels of pro-democratic attitudes in Afrobarometer surveys. One might reason that, with no memories of life under the one-party regimes and military dictatorships that dominated the continent until 1989, young Africans are leading the movement away from democracy. In fact, there is no evidence for this. The drop-off in support among those aged 18-35 years are statistically indistinguishable from older age cohorts.

Another factor might lie in an increasingly critical and negative news environment. Yet we observe that people's demand for democracy increases with the frequency with which they consume any form of news, though this is partially accounted for by the fact that frequent news consumers are also more educated and more interested in politics, which are also associated with greater support for democracy.

However, and perhaps more importantly, there are substantial differences in the magnitude of decline in demand across types of media platform.

While demand for democracy declined by 10 percentage points on average over the past decade, there were much more substantial drops among people who get their news from social media (-20 points) or newspapers (-19) every day or a few times a week. In contrast, there were smaller declines among frequent television (-15) or radio (-10) news consumers.

But while the absolute number of Africans who frequently read newspapers fell by nearly half over this period (23% to 13%), the size of those who frequently get news from social media has more than doubled (22% to 50%).

Moreover, the nature of social media has transformed since the mid-2010s from a place to get news from newspaper or national broadcaster websites to a sea of unregulated small news sites, blog posts, influencers, foreign bots, and unverified information spread through social chat networks (Newman, Arguedas, Robertson, Nielsen, & Fletcher, 2025; Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018).

Others have pointed to worsening economic conditions, as reflected in Zambian President Hakainde Hichilema's (2023) argument that "you cannot eat democracy." Indeed, Afrobarometer (2024) has consistently found that people exposed to high levels of poverty are less likely to demand democracy. But the impact of this effect has been compounded by the increasing numbers of people who live under such conditions. Afrobarometer surveys tracked a consistent decline in lived poverty (the frequency with which people go without a basket of basic necessities), until 2014/2015, after which it has steadily tracked upward. In the decade since, the proportion of Africans who endure moderate or severe levels of poverty has increased from 47% to 59% (Mattes & Lekalake, 2025).

Finally, we also need to look to the non-material, political aspects of governance. We know that people are more likely to demand democracy if they think their national elections are free and fair, or if they perceive low levels of corruption in national leadership. Yet over the past 10 years, the share of those who see their previous national election as "not free and fair" or "free and fair with major problems" increased by 10 points, from 25% to 35%, while the share who say that "most" or "all" officials in the Presidency's office are corrupt rose from 32% to 40% (in 2012/2023, thought it receded back to 35% in the most recent surveys).

Relevance

Why should we care about these trends? Political scientists have demonstrated strong linkages between the level of public support and regime stability, especially in countries that are functioning democracies (Claassen, 2020; Qi & Shin, 2011).

Thus, we are especially concerned with the sharp falls in demand among the citizens of Africa's "full democracies" (as defined by Svend-Erik Skaaning's Lexical Index of Electoral Democracy[1]), namely, Mauritius, South Africa, Namibia (all -18 points), Cabo Verde (-16), and São Tomé and Príncipe (-16). Steep declines are also observed among established democracies such as Malawi (-18) and Botswana (-13).

Attitudes to democracy affect regime stability in several different ways, including whether people vote for pro- or anti-democratic parties (Gunther, Montero, & Torcal, 2007), or what they do in the face of threats to democracy (Gibson, 1996). But shifts in opinion away from democracy may also embolden enable anti-democratic actors to narrow democratic spaces, or in some cases even overthrow elected governments.

[1] "Full democracies are political systems in which citizens have the right to choose the chief executive and the legislature in multi-party, uncertain elections, and enjoy freedoms of expression, assembly, and association." For more information, see Herre, Rodés-Guirao, and Ortiz-Ospina, 2026.

Coups

While Africa enjoyed a welcome reprieve from military coups in the first two decades of democratisation after 1989, the phenomenon has begun to rear its ugly head more frequently.

Without suggesting a one-to-one causal relationship, it is striking to note that there has never been a successful coup in an Afrobarometer country where opposition to military rule persists above 80% (such as Zambia, Uganda, Botswana, Eswatini, Kenya, and Senegal). While popular rejection of military rule was at 76% in Guinea and 75% in Zimbabwe prior to those country's military interventions, public rejection of military rule was significantly lower in all other cases: Gabon (70% in 2022), Madagascar (66% in2008), Burkina Faso (62% in 2013 and 44% in 2020), Mali (61% in 2008 and 64% in 2017), Sudan (50% in 2017), and Egypt (33% in 2013) (as measured at the last Afrobarometer survey prior to a successful coup). Clearly, many other factors are important, but once opposition to military rule drops into the 70s or below, it seems to open a gap that increases coup plotters' calculations of success.

Conclusion

The slow erosion of Africans' commitment to democracy is a cause for concern. As important as it is, reversing these trends requires us to go beyond the usual recourse to civic education, and develop a comprehensive strategy on multiple fronts, including addressing the changing ways people get news, tackling poverty and corruption, and supporting electoral-integrity initiatives.

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