



Research Paper

Unmasking the Myth of Democratic Rule in East Africa.

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Abstract.

This essay interrogates the paradox of presidential elections in East Africa, revealing how the “ritual” of voting often conceals the consolidation of authoritarian power rather than signalling democratic progress. Through a comparative analysis of Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, the study exposes how hybrid regimes in this region manipulate electoral processes to entrench incumbency, suppress dissent, and secure international legitimacy. Drawing on postcolonial theory, Afrocentric political thought, and the political economy of elections, the paper critiques the liberal democratic model as externally imposed and structurally misaligned with African political realities and needs. It highlights patterns of constitutional manipulation, inflated voter turnout, and shrinking civic space, supported by empirical data and critical case study analysis of these selected East African nations. The findings challenge the normative assumption that elections inherently advance democracy, arguing instead for a reimagining of governance systems rooted in indigenous traditions, participatory legitimacy, and postcolonial agency of the masses. By unmasking the myth of democratic rule in the region, the essay contributes to a growing body of scholarship that seeks to decolonize democratic theory and its practice not only in East Africa but in Africa at large.

KEYWORDS: Electoral authoritarianism; hybrid regimes; postcolonial democracy; Afrocentric political thought; East Africa; presidential elections; constitutional manipulation; civic space; political legitimacy; democratic stagnation; electoral institutions; political economy of elections; indigenous governance; voter turnout; term limits.

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I.INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the global narrative of democratization has often celebrated the holding of regular elections as a hallmark of democratic progress. No where has this narrative been more contested than in East Africa, where presidential elections are frequently held under the banner of democracy, yet often fail to deliver on its core promises. While the region has witnessed a proliferation of electoral processes and promising shift of the political system for instance from movement and single party systems to multiparty political systems, these have not necessarily translated into meaningful democratic consolidation in the region. Instead, elections have become ritualized performances, carefully choreographed to legitimize entrenched authoritarian regimes rather than to empower citizens.

Upon this premise, this paper critically examines the paradox of electoral democracy in East Africa, focusing on presidential elections in seven countries: Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). These nations, though diverse in their political histories and institutional arrangements, share a common trajectory of postcolonial state formation marked by authoritarian resilience, contested transitions, and the instrumentalization of elections as tools of regime survival.

The central thesis of this paper is that the persistence of presidential elections in East Africa has not necessarily signalled democratic deepening. Rather, it has often masked the consolidation of hybrid regimes that combine a kind of shadowed formal democratic institutions with informal authoritarian practices. In these contexts, elections are less about open competition and accountability, and more about managing elite bargains, suppressing dissent, winning and maintaining international legitimacy, over the actual local freedom, empowerment, and needs of the citizens in the country.

This study guided by three interrelated research questions: How have presidential elections evolved in East Africa since the early 2000s, and what patterns emerge across the selected countries? What roles do electoral institutions, legal frameworks, and political actors play in shaping the outcomes and credibility of these elections? And to what extent do these elections reflect or undermine the democratic aspirations of the local electorate?

To answer the above questions, the paper adopts a comparative and interdisciplinary holistic approach, drawing on secondary data from election observer reports, voter turnout data, constitutional texts, and case studies of the various elections that have so far been conducted within these countries. It also engages with postcolonial and Afrocentric critiques of liberal democracy, as well as political economy analyses of elections in hybrid regimes. This theoretical grounding allows for a deeper interrogation of the structural and historical forces that shape electoral politics in the region.

The significance of this study lies in its attempt to move beyond normative assumptions about elections as inherently democratic. By centring African experiences, voices, and critiques, the paper challenges the dominant liberal frameworks that often obscure the realities of power, resistance, and legitimacy on the continent. It argues that understanding the messy road to presidential elections in East Africa requires not only empirical rigor but also a critical rethinking of what democracy means in postcolonial contexts in Africa.

In the sections that follow, the paper first outlines the theoretical and analytical framework that informs the entire analysis. It then provides a historical overview of electoral systems and legal foundations of the case study countries, followed by detailed case studies discussion. The final sections synthesize the findings, present data visualizations, and offer reflections on the future of democratic governance in East Africa and Africa at large.

II. THEORETICAL AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK.

Understanding the paradox of presidential elections in East Africa requires a departure from conventional liberal democratic frameworks and a turn toward more contextually grounded critique. This section draws on postcolonial theory, Afrocentric political thought, and the political economy of hybrid regimes to provide a robust analytical foundation for the paper. These perspectives allow us to interrogate not only the procedural aspects of elections but also the deeper structures of power, legitimacy, and resistance that shape electoral politics in postcolonial East Africa and African states at large.

2.1 Postcolonial critiques of liberal democracy.

Postcolonial scholars have long argued that liberal democracy, as exported to Africa, is not a neutral or universally applicable model. Rather, it is a historically contingent system rooted in Western experiences and epistemologies. When transplanted into African contexts—often through colonial imposition and postcolonial conditionalities, it tends to obscure local political traditions and reinforce external standards of legitimacy (Eyoh 1998).

Mahmood Mamdani's (1996) seminal work on the bifurcated state illustrates how colonial governance created a dual system of power: urban citizens governed by civil law and rural subjects ruled through customary authority. This structure, Mamdani argues, was inherited and adapted by postcolonial regimes, resulting in states that are formally democratic but substantively authoritarian. Elections, in this context, serve to legitimize elite control rather than to empower the electorate citizens.

Achille Mbembe (2001) further critiques the postcolonial state as a site of performative sovereignty, where rituals of power, such as elections, are staged to maintain the illusion of popular rule. These performances often mask the coercive and extractive nature of state authority. Claude Ake (1993) similarly warned against the "democratization of disempowerment," where democratic forms are adopted without democratic substance, leading to widespread disillusionment and political apathy.

These critiques challenge the assumption that elections are inherently democratic. Instead, they highlight how electoral processes can be co-opted by authoritarian regimes to merely reproduce power, suppress opposition forces, and secure international recognition.

2.2 Afrocentric perspectives on governance and legitimacy.

Afrocentric political thought offers an alternative lens for analysing governance in Africa, one that centres African agency, cultural logic, and historical experience. Asante (2003) argues that Afrocentricity is not merely a cultural affirmation but a political imperative. It demands that African societies define governance on their own terms and conditions, drawing from indigenous traditions of consensus, accountability, and moral leadership to reflect their society realities.

In many precolonial African societies, political authority was decentralized and negotiated alongside societal realities and needs. Leadership was often based on communal legitimacy rather than coercive power and international approvals as it appears in the postcolonial state. These traditions were disrupted by colonial rule, which centralized and naturalised authority, imposed artificial hierarchical state structures, and dismantled mutually instituted local arrangements that these societies appreciated. Unfortunately, the postcolonial state, in

many cases, retained these structures with little to no reformation while adopting the language of liberal democracy, dictated by the former colonisers.

Observing these trends, Afrocentric scholars such as Ifi Amadiume (1997) and Kwasi Wiredu (1996) have emphasized the importance of rethinking democracy in ways that reflect African values and social organization. Wiredu, for instance, advocates for a non-party consensual democracy rooted in traditional African political systems. These perspectives challenge the dominance of adversarial, winner-takes-all electoral models and call for more inclusive and dialogical forms of governance.

2.3 The Political economy of elections in hybrid regimes.

The concept of hybrid regimes, political systems that combine democratic and authoritarian elements, provides a useful analytical tool for understanding East Africa's electoral landscape. Levitsky and Way (2010) define competitive authoritarian regimes as those in which formal democratic institutions exist but are systematically undermined by incumbents. Elections are held, but the playing field is heavily skewed in favour of the few ruling elites.

In East Africa, presidential elections are often embedded in political economies characterized by patronage, clientelism, militarization, and external dependency. Incumbents use state resources to finance campaigns, co-opt opposition leaders, and control media narratives through propaganda. Electoral commissions, though nominally independent, are frequently captured by ruling parties. The judiciary, where it exists as a check on executive power, is often constrained by political interference as well.

Donor-driven democratization has also played a paradoxical role. While international actors promote electoral processes as benchmarks of democratic progress, they often overlook the structural conditions that undermine these processes. As Cheeseman (2015) notes, the international community's focus on procedural legitimacy - rather than substantive outcomes, has allowed authoritarian regimes to maintain power through disguised ballot boxes.

2.4 Conceptualizing electoral authoritarianism and democratic stagnation.

The term "electoral authoritarianism" captures the paradox of regimes that hold elections without embracing democratic norms and values. These regimes manipulate electoral rules, restrict opposition activity, and control information flows, all while claiming democratic legitimacy. In East Africa, this phenomenon is evident in the violent suppression of opposition in Uganda and Burundi, the legalistic exclusion of opposition in Rwanda, and the manipulation of electoral commissions in Kenya and the DRC are clear cases as the later will show.

Democratic stagnation refers to the failure of electoral processes to produce meaningful political change or deepen democratic norms and values. Despite multiple electoral cycles, many East African countries remain governed by the same elites, often through constitutional amendments, term limit removals, or disputed elections. This stagnation erodes public trust in democratic institutions and fuels political apathy, cynicism, or unrest.

As Dickson Eyoh (1998) argues, the challenge for African democracies is not merely to hold elections but to transform the institutional and normative frameworks that underpin political life. This requires a rethinking of democracy itself, not as a fixed model to be imported for the sake, but as a dynamic process rooted in local histories, struggles, and aspirations.

III. HISTORICAL AND LEGAL FOUNDATIONS.

The legal and institutional architecture of presidential elections in East Africa is deeply rooted in the region's colonial past and postcolonial state-building processes. While each country has followed a distinct trajectory, common patterns emerge: the centralization of executive power, the instrumentalization of constitutional reforms, and the uneven development of electoral institutions. This section traces the historical evolution of presidential systems in Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), with a focus on their constitutional and electoral frameworks.

3.1 Colonial legacies and the centralization of executive power.

Colonial administrations in East Africa, whether British, Belgian, or German, governed through highly centralized structures designed to simply and only extract resources and suppress any counter oppositions of these systems. These administrations established executive-heavy systems that prioritized absolute control over genuine representation, be it through direct and indirect arrangements. Upon independence, many postcolonial leaders unfortunately, inherited and adapted these very structures, often consolidating power in the presidency under the guise of national unity and development.

In Uganda, for instance, the 1966 "pigeonhole constitution" unilaterally imposed by Prime Minister Milton Obote abolished the federal arrangement and centralized power in the executive. Kenya's post-independence constitution, though initially multiparty, was quickly amended to entrench presidential authority

under Jomo Kenyatta and later Daniel Arap Moi. In Rwanda and Burundi, colonial manipulation of ethnic identities laid the groundwork for post-independence authoritarianism and cycles of deadly violence, which in turn justified strongman rule.

The DRC, formerly Zaire, under Mobutu Sese Seko, epitomized the personalization of power, with the 1974 constitution effectively making the president the embodiment of the state. South Sudan, the youngest nation in the region, inherited a militarized political culture from its liberation struggle, which has shaped its post-independence governance to the extent that the country has never actually held any official presidential election since its independence on July 9, 2011.

3.2 Constitutional frameworks and electoral laws.

As of today, all seven countries in this study have adopted constitutions that formally provide for presidential elections, multiparty competition, and periodic electoral cycles. However, the substance and implementation of these provisions vary significantly.

In Uganda: The 1995 Constitution established a two-term limit and a multi-party system. However, constitutional amendments in 2005 and 2017 removed term and age limits, allowing President Yoweri Museveni to extend his rule indefinitely. The Electoral Commission, though constitutionally mandated to be independent, has been widely criticized for its lack of impartiality.

For Kenya: The 2010 Constitution marked a significant shift, introducing devolution, a restructured judiciary, and an Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC). Despite these reforms, presidential elections have remained contentious, with the 2007 and 2017 polls marred by bloody violence and legal disputes in the country.

Tanzania: The 1977 Constitution, amended multiple times, provides for a two-term presidency. While Tanzania has maintained relative stability, concerns have grown over shrinking civic space, especially during the 5th Presidency of Dr John Pombe Joseph Magufuli's 2015 – 2021 rule. The National Electoral Commission (NEC) is appointed by the president, raising questions about its independence.

In Rwanda: The 2003 Constitution was amended in 2015 following a referendum, allowing President Paul Kagame to potentially remain in power until 2034. While elections are held regularly, opposition parties face legal and extra-legal barriers, and the Rwanda National Electoral Commission (RNEC) operates under close executive oversight.

Burundi: The 2005 Constitution, part of the Arusha Peace Agreement, aimed to balance ethnic representation and limit presidential power in the country. However, President Pierre Nkurunziza's controversial third term in 2015 triggered a political crisis. The 2018 constitutional referendum further expanded presidential powers.

South Sudan: The 2011 Transitional Constitution provides for presidential elections, but ongoing conflict has delayed their implementation. The National Elections Commission exists in law but has not conducted a national election since independence. Meanwhile, general elections slated to be held on 22 December 2026, and if these happen, will mark the first presidential elections since the country's independence. However, considering the unfolding political conflicts, violence, and power struggle between the two main political figures in the country; President Salva Kiir Mayardit and Dr Riek Machar, the possibility of these elections being held seems minimal now.

DRC: The 2006 Constitution introduced term limits and a two-round presidential election system. However, President Joseph Kabila delayed elections beyond his mandate, citing logistical challenges. The 2018 elections, which brought Félix Tshisekedi to power, were widely disputed, with allegations of backroom deals and electoral fraud.

3.3 Electoral Commissions and Judicial oversight.

Electoral commissions across the region are constitutionally mandated to oversee elections, but their independence and credibility greatly vary. In many cases, commissioners are appointed by the executive, undermining public trust. For example, Uganda's Electoral Commission has been accused of bias in favour of the ruling party and incumbent, while Kenya's IEBC has faced internal divisions and public protests several times.

Judicial oversight of elections has also produced mixed results. Kenya's Supreme Court made history in 2017 by annulling the presidential election due to irregularities, a rare assertion of judicial independence not only in the region but Africa at large. In contrast, courts in Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi have consistently upheld disputed results, often citing procedural compliance over substantive fairness.

3.4 Legal manipulation and constitutional amendments.

A recurring pattern in East Africa is the strategic use of constitutional amendments to entrench incumbents. Term limits, once seen as safeguards against authoritarianism, have been removed or circumvented in Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and the DRC. These amendments are often justified through referenda or parliamentary votes, but they reflect the dominance of ruling parties and the weakness of institutional checks as

they're achieved amidst public outcry, chaotic protests and censor of any would be oppositions against these moves.

Moreover, electoral laws are frequently amended close to election periods, creating uncertainty and disadvantaging opposition parties. In Tanzania, for example, the Political Parties Act was amended in 2019 to grant the registrar sweeping powers to deregister parties and restrict political activities.

This section has laid the groundwork for understanding how legal and institutional frameworks shape presidential elections in East Africa. In the next section, we will turn to detailed **comparative case studies** of each country, examining how these frameworks play out in practice.

IV.COMPARATIVE COUNTRY CASE STUDIES.

This section presents a critical comparative analysis of presidential elections in Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Each case study explores electoral history, voter turnout, campaign dynamics, media environment, observer reports, and the broader political context. The aim is to uncover how elections function in practice and what they reveal about the state of democracy in East Africa.

4.1 Uganda: Elections as instruments of authoritarian continuity.

Uganda's presidential elections, held every five years since 1996, are emblematic of electoral authoritarianism. While the country formally transitioned to multiparty democracy with the 1995 Constitution, the electoral process has consistently reinforced the dominance of President Yoweri Museveni as an individual and the National Resistance Movement (NRM). Museveni, who came to power in 1986 following a five-year guerrilla war, has overseen constitutional amendments that removed presidential term limits in 2005 and age limits in 2017, effectively legalizing indefinite incumbency (Mugisha 2021).

The 2021 presidential election was particularly revealing of the state's authoritarian tendencies. Opposition candidate Robert Kyagulanyi, popularly known as Bobi Wine, faced systematic repression throughout the campaign period with his then peer pressure group "People Power Movement" that has since then been developed into an officially registered political party as National Unity Platform (NUP). Meanwhile, Kyagulanyi's rallies were violently dispersed, his supporters were arrested in masse, and he was placed under house arrest immediately after voting. The government imposed a nationwide internet shutdown on election day, severely limiting transparency and communication (Sserwadda 2021, Human Rights Watch 2021).

Official results from the Electoral Commission declared Museveni the winner with 58.6% of the vote, while Kyagulanyi received 34.8% (Electoral Commission 2021). However, the credibility of these results was widely questioned. The Uganda Elections Data Portal revealed that over 400 polling stations reported 100% voter turnout, a statistical anomaly that raised concerns about vote inflation and manipulation (Uganda Elections Data Portal 2021). Regional disparities were also stark, with Museveni securing over 90% of the vote in several districts traditionally aligned with the NRM, suggesting a highly controlled electoral environment.

Independent election observers, including the European Union and domestic civil society organizations, were either barred from monitoring the election or faced severe restrictions. The African Union did not deploy a full observer mission, citing logistical constraints. Domestic observers such as the Citizens' Coalition for Electoral Democracy in Uganda (CCEDU) reported widespread irregularities, including ballot stuffing, voter intimidation, and the militarization of polling stations (CCEDU 2021).

The judiciary, which is constitutionally mandated to adjudicate electoral disputes, has consistently upheld contested results. In the aftermath of the 2021 election, Kyagulanyi filed a petition challenging the outcome, but later withdrew it, citing judicial bias and lack of independence. This pattern reflects a broader institutional capture, where key democratic institutions are subordinated to executive interests.

Uganda's electoral history demonstrates how formal democratic processes can be used to entrench authoritarian rule. Elections are held regularly, but they function more as instruments of regime legitimation than as mechanisms of accountability. The state's control over electoral institutions, media, and security forces ensures that outcomes are largely predetermined. As Mamdani (1996) argued, the postcolonial state in Africa often retains the coercive structures of colonial rule, repurposed to serve new elites under the guise of democracy.

By and large, Uganda's presidential elections reveal the limits of procedural democracy in hybrid regimes. While the country maintains the outward appearance of electoral competition every after five years, the underlying political dynamics are shaped by repression, manipulation, and institutional decay. The myth of democratic rule persists, but the reality is one of authoritarian continuity.

4.2 Kenya: Electoral volatility and judicial intervention.

Kenya's experience with presidential elections offers a compelling case of both democratic promise and persistent volatility. Since the reintroduction of multiparty politics in 1992, the country has held six presidential elections, each marked by varying degrees of competitiveness, institutional reform, and political crisis. While

Kenya has made notable strides in electoral jurisprudence and constitutional reform, its elections remain deeply influenced by ethnic mobilization, elite bargaining, and institutional fragility.

The 2002 election was a watershed moment. For the first time since independence, the ruling party, the Kenya African National Union (KANU), was defeated at the ballot box. Mwai Kibaki, leading the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC), won a landslide victory, raising hopes for democratic consolidation. However, these hopes were quickly dashed in the 2007 election, which plunged the country into one of its worst political crises since independence.

The 2007 presidential election, contested between incumbent Mwai Kibaki and opposition leader Raila Odinga (aka Baba), was marred by widespread irregularities and a deeply flawed tallying process. The Electoral Commission of Kenya (ECK) declared Kibaki the winner under opaque circumstances, prompting mass protests and ethnic violence that left over 1,100 people dead and displaced more than 600,000 (Harneit-Sievers and Peters 2008).

International and domestic observers, including the International Republican Institute (IRI), reported serious procedural flaws and a lack of transparency in the vote-counting process (IRI 2008). The crisis was eventually resolved through a power-sharing agreement brokered by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, leading to the formation of a Grand Coalition Government.

In response to the 2007 crisis, Kenya embarked on a comprehensive constitutional reform process. The 2010 Constitution introduced significant changes, including a devolved system of government, a restructured judiciary, and the creation of the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC). These reforms were intended to restore public trust in electoral institutions and reduce the stakes of presidential contests.

The 2013 election, the first under the new constitution, was relatively peaceful but still contentious. Uhuru Kenyatta defeated Raila Odinga in a closely fought race. Odinga challenged the results in the Supreme Court, which upheld Kenyatta's victory. While the court's decision was accepted, concerns remained about the IEBC's preparedness and the reliability of the electronic results transmission system.

The 2017 election marked another turning point. The IEBC declared Kenyatta the winner, but the Supreme Court, in a landmark ruling, annulled the results due to "irregularities and illegalities" in the transmission and verification of votes (Carter Center 2018). This was the first time in Africa that a presidential election was nullified by a court. The court ordered a fresh election, which was boycotted by the opposition, leading to Kenyatta's re-election with 98% of the vote. The rerun was marred by low turnout, violence in opposition strongholds, and further erosion of public trust in the IEBC.

The 2022 election, which brought William Ruto to power, was relatively peaceful but not without controversy. Ruto narrowly defeated Raila Odinga, who once again challenged the results in court. The Supreme Court upheld the outcome, citing insufficient evidence of fraud. However, internal divisions within the IEBC—most notably the public dissent of four commissioners—cast a shadow over the process and highlighted ongoing institutional weaknesses (Carter Center 2022).

Kenya's electoral history illustrates the dual nature of its democratic trajectory. On one hand, the country has demonstrated a capacity for institutional reform, judicial independence, and peaceful transitions of power. On the other hand, elections remain high-stakes, ethnically polarized contests that often test the limits of the state's cohesion. The judiciary has emerged as a critical arbiter, but its decisions are often shaped by broader political dynamics.

Overall, Kenya's presidential elections reflect both the possibilities and the perils of democratization in a developing country. While the country has made significant progress in legal and institutional reform, the persistence of elite-driven politics, ethnic mobilization, and institutional fragility continues to undermine the credibility and inclusiveness of its electoral processes.

4.3 Tanzania: Stability at the cost of civic space.

Tanzania is often cited as one of East Africa's most politically stable countries. Since the reintroduction of multiparty politics in 1992, it has held six presidential elections, i.e., 1995, 2000, 2005, 2010, 2015, and 2020 - without descending into large-scale electoral violence. However, this stability has come at the cost of shrinking civic space, weakened opposition, and increasing authoritarianism, particularly under the late President Dr. John Pombe Joseph Magufuli.

The 2005 and 2010 elections were relatively peaceful and competitive, with Jakaya Kikwete winning both terms under the ruling Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) party. While opposition parties such as CHADEMA and CUF gained ground in parliamentary seats, the presidential race remained heavily skewed in favour of CCM, which has ruled Tanzania since independence. Observers noted administrative efficiency but raised concerns about the dominance of the ruling party and the lack of a level playing field (NORDEM 2006).

The 2015 election marked a turning point. It was the most competitive in Tanzania's history, with Edward Lowassa, a former CCM stalwart turned opposition candidate, challenging Magufuli. Although Magufuli won with 58% of the vote, the opposition alleged irregularities in vote tallying and access to media. The National

Electoral Commission (NEC), appointed by the president, was criticized for its lack of independence and transparency (Tanzania Elections Watch 2021).

Under Magufuli's presidency (2015–2021), the political environment deteriorated significantly. The 2020 election was held in a climate of fear and repression. Opposition candidates were harassed, rallies were banned, and several were arrested. The government-imposed internet restrictions and blocked social media platforms during the election period. Magufuli was declared the winner with 84% of the vote, while opposition leader Tundu Lissu, who had survived an assassination attempt in 2017, rejected the results and fled the country (African Union 2020).

The African Union Expert Mission noted a sharp decline in voter turnout; from 67.3% in 2015 to 50.7% in 2020; attributing it in part to voter suppression and the exclusion of civil society organizations from observation roles (African Union 2020). Domestic observers were denied accreditation, and international missions were either limited or absent. The NEC's credibility was further undermined by its opaque handling of complaints and its alignment with the executive.

A key legal development during this period was the 2019 amendment to the Political Parties Act, which granted the Registrar of Political Parties sweeping powers to deregister parties, block internal meetings, and vet candidates. This law effectively curtailed opposition activity and consolidated CCM's dominance. Human rights organizations, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, condemned the law as a tool for political repression.

Despite the repressive environment, the transition following Magufuli's sudden death in 2021 offered a glimmer of hope. President Samia Suluhu Hassan, Tanzania's first female head of state, signalled a shift in tone by reopening dialogue with opposition leaders and lifting bans on some media outlets. However, structural constraints on political competition remain deeply embedded in the legal and institutional framework.

Tanzania's electoral history illustrates the paradox of procedural democracy without substantive pluralism. While elections are held regularly and largely without violence, they are conducted in a context where the ruling party enjoys overwhelming institutional advantages, and dissent is systematically suppressed. The country's stability, often praised by international actors, masks a deeper erosion of democratic norms and civic freedoms.

Therefore, Tanzania represents a model of authoritarian stability, where elections serve to legitimize a dominant party-state rather than to facilitate genuine political competition. The challenge moving forward lies in transforming this procedural stability into a more inclusive and participatory democratic order.

4.4 Rwanda: Electoral legitimacy through control.

Rwanda's presidential elections are often presented as models of order and efficiency, with consistently high voter turnout and overwhelming victories for the incumbent, President Paul Kagame. However, beneath this surface of electoral discipline lies a tightly controlled political environment where opposition is systematically suppressed, media is heavily regulated, and the electoral process is used more to affirm state power than to enable democratic choice.

Since the adoption of the 2003 Constitution, Rwanda has held three presidential elections; in 2003, 2010, and 2017. In each of these, Kagame secured over 90% of the vote. In 2003, he won with 95.1%, in 2010 with 93%, and in 2017 with 98.8% (Commonwealth Secretariat 2010; Seburanga and Gatesire 2016). These figures, while impressive on paper, raise serious questions about the competitiveness and credibility of the electoral process.

The 2003 election, Rwanda's first post-genocide presidential vote, was held in a context of national reconstruction and reconciliation. However, observers noted the absence of genuine political pluralism. The Norwegian Resource Bank for Democracy and Human Rights (NORDEM) reported that opposition candidates faced intimidation, and the media environment was heavily skewed in favor of the ruling Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) (NORDEM 2003).

The 2010 election was similarly well-organized but lacked critical opposition voices. The Commonwealth Observer Group noted that while the National Electoral Commission (NEC) administered the election efficiently, the campaign period was dominated by the RPF, and opposition candidates were either co-opted or marginalized. The media played a limited role in fostering debate, and civil society participation was minimal (Commonwealth Secretariat 2010).

Perhaps the most revealing episode in Rwanda's electoral history was the 2015 constitutional referendum, which amended Article 101 to allow Kagame to run for a third term in 2017 and potentially remain in power until 2034. The referendum passed with 98.3% support and a reported voter turnout of 98.3%; figures that suggest not just popular support but also the coercive power of the state (Seburanga and Gatesire 2016). The referendum was criticized by international observers and human rights organizations for being conducted in a climate of fear, with limited space for dissent or public debate.

The 2017 presidential election, held under the new constitutional framework, was marked by the same patterns. Kagame won with 98.8% of the vote, and the NEC reported a turnout of 96.4%. Independent observers

were largely absent, and domestic civil society organizations were either co-opted or silenced. Opposition candidate Diane Rwigara, who attempted to challenge Kagame, was disqualified on technical grounds and later arrested on charges widely seen as politically motivated.

Rwanda's electoral system is designed to project legitimacy and stability, but it does so by eliminating meaningful competition. The NEC, though formally independent, operates under the close supervision of the executive. The media is tightly regulated, with laws that criminalize "divisionism" and "genocide ideology" often used to silence dissent. Political parties are required to register with the government and must align with the goals of national unity and reconciliation, effectively excluding those that challenge the RPF's dominance.

The high voter turnout and near-unanimous results in Rwandan elections are not necessarily indicators of democratic engagement. As Seburanga and Gatesire (2016) argue, such figures may reflect coercion, ballot manipulation, and the absence of genuine choice. In authoritarian regimes, elections are often used not to gauge public opinion but to manufacture consent and demonstrate regime strength.

Rwanda's presidential elections therefore, exemplify a form of technocratic authoritarianism where electoral processes are meticulously managed to reinforce state control. While the country has achieved remarkable economic growth and social stability, its political system remains closed, and its elections function more as instruments of legitimation than as expressions of popular will.

4.5 Burundi: Crisis and constitutional manipulation.

Burundi's presidential elections have been deeply shaped by the country's post-conflict transition and the fragile balance between ethnic power-sharing and authoritarian consolidation. Since the end of the civil war in 2005, elections have been held regularly, but they have often triggered political crises rather than resolved them. The most significant rupture occurred in 2015, when President Pierre Nkurunziza's controversial bid for a third term plunged the country into its worst political and humanitarian crisis since the Arusha Peace Agreement.

The 2005 Constitution, born out of the Arusha Accords, was designed to prevent the monopolization of power by any one group. It introduced ethnic quotas, term limits, and a two-round electoral system to ensure inclusivity and stability. Nkurunziza was first elected by parliament in 2005 and then re-elected by popular vote in 2010. However, his decision to run for a third term in 2015 sparked widespread protests, a failed coup attempt, and a violent crackdown by state security forces (Grauvogel 2016).

The controversy centered on whether Nkurunziza's first term, which was not by direct popular vote, counted toward the constitutional two-term limit. The Constitutional Court ruled in his favour, but the court's vice president fled the country, alleging that judges had been pressured to support the ruling.

The African Union, the United States, and regional leaders, including South Africa's Jacob Zuma, called for the elections to be postponed. Nevertheless, the government proceeded with the vote on July 21, 2015. The election was boycotted by most opposition parties, and Nkurunziza was declared the winner with 73.9% of the vote and a turnout of 73.4%. The legitimacy of the election was widely questioned. Human rights organizations documented extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, and the closure of independent media outlets. More than 400 people were killed in the unrest, and over 240,000 fled the country as refugees (Grauvogel 2016).

In 2018, the government held a constitutional referendum that extended presidential terms from five to seven years and reset the term count, allowing Nkurunziza to potentially remain in power until 2034. Although he later announced he would not run in 2020, the referendum was seen as a clear attempt to entrench executive power. The process was marred by intimidation, lack of transparency, and the absence of independent observers.

The 2020 election brought Évariste Ndayishimiye, a close ally of Nkurunziza, to power. While the government claimed the election was peaceful and transparent, opposition groups and civil society organizations reported ballot stuffing, voter intimidation, and the exclusion of independent observers (Breaking Burundi 2020). The ruling CNDD-FDD party maintained its dominance, and the political environment remained tightly controlled.

Burundi's electoral commissions have consistently lacked independence, operating under the influence of the executive. The judiciary has similarly failed to act as a check on presidential power. The repression of opposition parties, civil society, and the media has created a political climate in which elections serve more as instruments of regime consolidation than as expressions of popular will.

In sum, Burundi's presidential elections illustrate how constitutional manipulation, judicial capture, and political violence can be used to undermine democratic norms while maintaining the façade of electoral legitimacy. The country's experience underscores the fragility of post-conflict democratic institutions and the ease with which they can be subverted in the absence of robust safeguards and international accountability.

4.6 South Sudan: Elections deferred by conflict.

South Sudan, the world's youngest nation, has yet to hold a presidential election since gaining independence in 2011. The country's political trajectory has been shaped by cycles of civil war, fragile peace agreements, and persistent delays in implementing democratic processes. While elections have been repeatedly

promised, they have also been repeatedly postponed, reflecting both structural weaknesses and a lack of political will among the ruling elite.

The 2011 Transitional Constitution of South Sudan provided for democratic elections within the first three years of independence. However, the outbreak of civil war in December 2013 derailed this timeline. A peace agreement signed in 2015 mandated elections to be held 60 days before the end of a 30-month transitional period. Yet renewed conflict in 2016 rendered the agreement void, and the country descended into a second civil war (Deng 2024).

In 2018, the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) was signed, setting a new timeline for elections to be held by December 2022. This deadline was later extended to December 2024, and again in September 2024, President Salva Kiir announced a further two-year delay, pushing the elections to late 2026 or early 2027 (Rift Valley Institute 2025). These repeated postponements have eroded public trust in the transitional government and raised serious concerns about the country's democratic future.

The reasons cited for the delays include insecurity, lack of infrastructure, incomplete voter registration, and the absence of a permanent constitution. However, analysts argue that the primary barrier is political: the ruling elites have little incentive to hold elections that could threaten their grip on power. The transitional government, composed of former warring factions, has prioritized elite power-sharing over institutional development, creating what some scholars describe as a "dominant gun class" that governs through coercion rather than consent (Deng 2024).

The National Elections Commission (NEC), established under the 2011 Constitution, remains largely inactive. It lacks the resources, independence, and legal framework necessary to conduct credible elections. Civil society organizations have been sidelined, and the media operates under severe constraints. According to a 2025 report by the Rift Valley Institute, the majority of South Sudanese citizens want elections to be held as scheduled, even if there is a risk of violence, reflecting widespread frustration with the status quo and a desire for political change (Rift Valley Institute 2025).

The absence of elections has not only delayed democratic consolidation but also entrenched a culture of impunity and unaccountable governance. The transitional government has failed to implement key provisions of the peace agreement, including the formation of a unified national army, judicial reforms, and the drafting of a permanent constitution. These failures have perpetuated insecurity, economic collapse, and humanitarian crises across the country.

South Sudan's case illustrates the challenges of democratization in post-conflict settings. While elections are often seen as milestones of peacebuilding, they require more than just technical preparation—they demand political commitment, institutional capacity, and civic trust. In the absence of these conditions, elections risk becoming either symbolic gestures or triggers for renewed conflict.

By and large, South Sudan's electoral delays reflect a deeper crisis of state formation and political legitimacy. The repeated postponement of elections has become a mechanism for elite survival rather than a pathway to democratic governance. Without sustained pressure from citizens, civil society, and international actors, the promise of democracy in South Sudan may remain indefinitely deferred.

4.7 Democratic Republic of Congo: Disputed transitions and fragile institutions.

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) presents one of the most complex electoral landscapes in East Africa. Since the end of the Second Congo War and the adoption of the 2006 Constitution, the country has held three presidential elections; in 2006, 2011, and 2018. Each of these elections has been marred by delays, disputes, and allegations of fraud, reflecting the fragility of the DRC's democratic institutions and the dominance of elite political bargains over popular sovereignty.

The 2006 election was the first multiparty presidential vote in over four decades and was widely seen as a milestone in the country's post-conflict transition. Joseph Kabila, who had assumed power after the assassination of his father in 2001, won the presidency after a runoff against Jean-Pierre Bemba. The Carter Centre, which observed the election, noted significant logistical challenges but praised the overall conduct of the vote as a step toward democratic normalization (Carter Centre 2006). However, the post-election period was marred by clashes between rival militias in Kinshasa, highlighting the tenuous nature of peace and the militarization of politics.

The 2011 election, by contrast, was far more controversial. The government amended the electoral law to eliminate the two-round system, allowing the president to be elected by a simple plurality. This change, made just months before the vote, was widely criticized by opposition parties and international observers for undermining electoral legitimacy.

Kabila was declared the winner with 48.95% of the vote, defeating Étienne Tshisekedi of the Union for Democracy and Social Progress (UDPS), who received 32.33%. Tshisekedi rejected the results and declared himself president, leading to a political standoff. The European Union and the Carter Center both raised serious concerns about the transparency and credibility of the 2011 election. Observers reported widespread irregularities, including ballot stuffing, voter intimidation, and the manipulation of results at the compilation centers. The Carter

Center concluded that the results “lacked credibility” and did not reflect the will of the Congolese people (Carter Center 2011).

The 2018 election was initially scheduled for 2016 but was delayed multiple times, ostensibly due to logistical and financial constraints. These delays allowed Kabila to remain in office beyond his constitutional mandate, sparking mass protests and international condemnation. When the election was finally held in December 2018, it produced a surprise outcome: Félix Tshisekedi, son of the late opposition leader, was declared the winner, defeating Martin Fayulu, who was widely believed to have won the popular vote.

Leaked data from the Catholic Church’s domestic observer mission, which deployed over 40,000 observers, suggested that Fayulu had secured a clear majority. The Church, which enjoys significant moral authority in the DRC, publicly questioned the official results. Despite this, the Constitutional Court; widely seen as aligned with Kabila; validated Tshisekedi’s victory. It has been argued that the outcome was the result of a behind-the-scenes power-sharing deal between Kabila’s camp and Tshisekedi, aimed at preserving the former’s influence while avoiding a violent confrontation (Figshare 2023).

The Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI) has been at the center of these controversies. Its lack of transparency, politicized leadership, and failure to publish detailed results have undermined public trust. Civil society organizations and international partners have repeatedly called for reforms to enhance its independence and accountability.

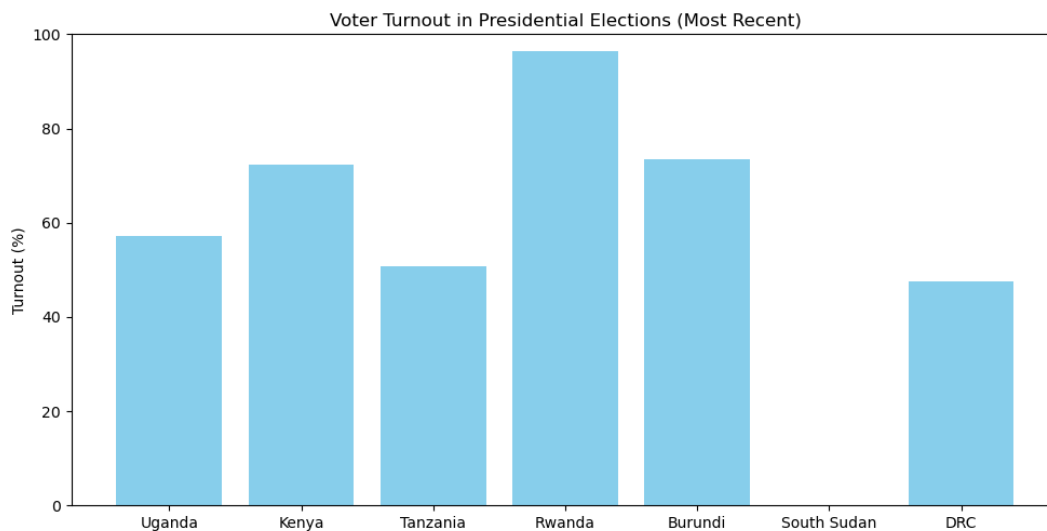
In all three elections, voter turnout has been inconsistent and often difficult to verify due to the absence of reliable data. The 2018 election, for instance, recorded a turnout of just 47.6%, reflecting widespread disillusionment and logistical barriers, including the exclusion of several opposition strongholds due to alleged Ebola outbreaks and insecurity.

Thus, the DRC’s presidential elections illustrate the limits of electoral democracy in a context of weak institutions, elite dominance, and pervasive insecurity. While elections are held and transitions occur, they are often the result of elite negotiations rather than genuine democratic competition. The façade of democracy masks a deeper crisis of legitimacy, where the will of the people is routinely subordinated to the interests of those in power.

V.PATTERNS AND TRENDS.

The comparative analysis of presidential elections across East Africa reveals several recurring patterns that challenge the notion of democratic consolidation in the region. These patterns, visible in voter turnout, margins of victory, and constitutional amendments, highlight the structural and strategic mechanisms through which incumbents maintain power and suppress genuine political competition.

5.1 Voter Turnout: Between Apathy and Coercion.



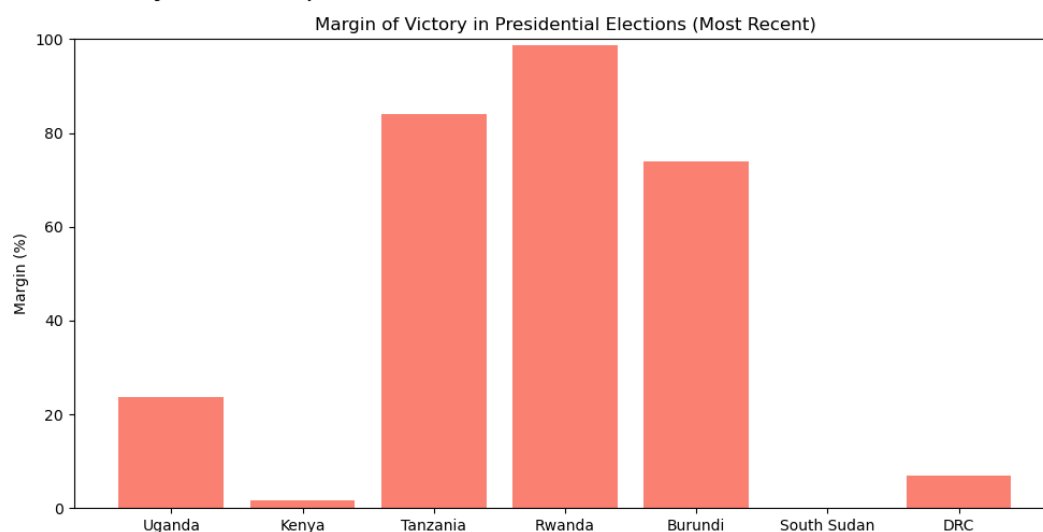
Source: Author compiled.

Voter turnout varies significantly across the region, reflecting both logistical challenges and political dynamics. Rwanda reports the highest turnout at 96.4%, followed by Kenya at 72.3% and Burundi at 73.4%. Uganda and Tanzania show moderate levels at 57.2% and 50.7%, respectively, while the DRC lags at 47.6%. South Sudan has not held a presidential election since independence.

High turnout in Rwanda and Burundi may reflect coercive mobilization rather than voluntary participation. In authoritarian contexts, turnout is often inflated to demonstrate regime legitimacy (Seburanga and

Gatesire 2016). Conversely, low turnout in the DRC and Tanzania may signal voter apathy, disillusionment, or barriers to participation, such as insecurity or repression (Carter Center 2018; Tanzania Elections Watch 2021).

5.2 Margin of Victory: The Illusion of Consensus.

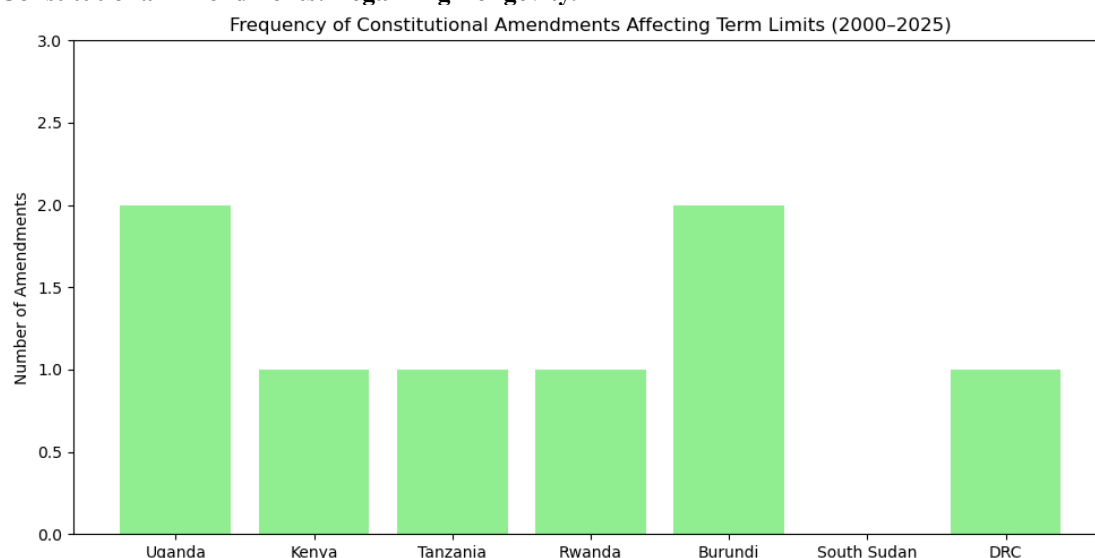


Source: Author compiled.

Margins of victory offer insight into the competitiveness of elections. Rwanda's 98.8% margin and Tanzania's 84% suggest elections with little to no opposition. Burundi and Uganda also show high margins (73.9% and 23.8%, respectively), while Kenya's 1.6% and the DRC's 7% reflect more contested outcomes.

Such disparities point to the strategic use of elections to manufacture consensus. In Rwanda, the near-unanimous results are less indicative of popular support than of a tightly controlled political environment. In Kenya and the DRC, narrow margins have triggered legal disputes and political instability, underscoring the fragility of electoral legitimacy in competitive settings (Carter Center 2011; Commonwealth Secretariat 2010).

5.3 Constitutional Amendments: Legalizing Longevity.



Source: Author compiled.

Constitutional amendments affecting term limits are a common tool for entrenching incumbency. Uganda and Burundi have each amended their constitutions twice since 2000 to remove or extend term limits. Rwanda, Tanzania, and the DRC have each done so once. South Sudan has not amended its constitution in this regard, though elections have been indefinitely postponed.

These amendments often follow a predictable pattern: a referendum or parliamentary vote is held under conditions of limited debate and restricted civic space, resulting in legal changes that benefit the incumbent. The

2015 referendum in Rwanda and the 2018 referendum in Burundi exemplify this trend (Grauvogel 2016; Seburanga and Gatesire 2016).

By and large, the data reveals a region where elections are frequently held but rarely serve their democratic purpose. Voter turnout is manipulated or suppressed, margins of victory are inflated to project strength, and constitutions are amended to accommodate political ambitions. These patterns reflect a broader crisis of democratic legitimacy in East Africa—one that demands not just electoral reform but a rethinking of democracy itself.

VI. DATA ANALYSIS AND VISUALIZATIONS.

To deepen our understanding of electoral dynamics in East Africa, this section presents a comparative statistical analysis of voter turnout, margin of victory, and constitutional amendments affecting presidential term limits. These indicators offer insight into the nature of electoral competition, the legitimacy of electoral outcomes, and the legal strategies used to entrench incumbency.

6.1 Summary Table: Presidential Elections (2000–2025).

Country	Last Election Year	Voter Turnout (%)	Margin of Victory (%)	Constitutional Amendments (2000–2025)
Uganda	2021	57.2	23.8	2
Kenya	2022	72.3	1.6	1
Tanzania	2020	50.7	84.0	1
Rwanda	2017	96.4	98.8	1
Burundi	2020	73.4	73.9	2
South Sudan	—	—	—	0
DRC	2018	47.6	7.0	1

Source: Author compiled.

6.2 Statistical Summary.

- Average Voter Turnout: 66.3%
- Average Margin of Victory: 48.2%
- Average Number of Constitutional Amendments: 1.14
- Highest Voter Turnout: Rwanda (96.4%)
- Lowest Voter Turnout: DRC (47.6%)
- Highest Margin of Victory: Rwanda (98.8%)
- Lowest Margin of Victory: Kenya (1.6%)
- Most Amendments: Uganda and Burundi (2 each)
- No Elections Held: South Sudan

The figures above reveal a stark contrast between countries with inflated margins and high turnout; often under authoritarian regimes; and those with more competitive but volatile elections, such as Kenya and the DRC.

6.3 Interpretation of the above Trends.

- **Turnout and Legitimacy:** High turnout in Rwanda and Burundi may reflect coercive mobilization rather than genuine engagement. In contrast, lower turnout in Tanzania and the DRC may indicate voter apathy or systemic barriers to participation.
- **Margins of Victory:** Extremely high margins, as seen in Rwanda and Tanzania, suggest a lack of electoral competition. Kenya's narrow margins reflect a more competitive environment but also a higher risk of post-election conflict.
- **Constitutional Engineering:** The frequency of constitutional amendments, particularly in Uganda and Burundi, demonstrates how legal frameworks are manipulated to extend presidential tenure. This trend undermines the credibility of democratic institutions and reinforces authoritarian resilience.

These findings will be further contextualized in the next section, where we reflect on the broader implications of these patterns for democratic governance in East Africa.

VII. DISCUSSION

The comparative analysis of presidential elections in East Africa reveals a sobering reality: while elections are held regularly across the region, they often fail to fulfil their democratic promise. Instead of serving as mechanisms for accountability and citizen empowerment, elections in many East African states have become tools for regime consolidation, elite bargaining, and international legitimization. This section reflects on the key themes that emerge from the data and case studies, offering a critical interpretation of what these patterns mean for the future of democracy in the region.

7.1 Elections Without Democracy.

One of the most striking findings is the disconnect between electoral frequency and democratic quality. All seven countries examined: Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, South Sudan, and the DRC; have held or planned presidential elections since 2000. Yet in most cases, these elections have not led to meaningful political change. Incumbents remain in power for decades, opposition parties are marginalized or criminalized, and electoral commissions lack independence.

This phenomenon aligns with what scholars describe as “electoral authoritarianism”, a system in which elections exist but are manipulated to ensure predetermined outcomes (Schedler 2006). In Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi, elections are tightly controlled, with high margins of victory and inflated voter turnout used to project legitimacy. In Kenya and the DRC, elections are more competitive but often lead to post-election violence or elite pacts that bypass popular will.

7.2 The Political economy of incumbency.

The persistence of incumbency in East Africa is not merely a consequence of electoral manipulation or constitutional engineering; it is deeply embedded in the political economy of state power. Incumbents in the region wield a complex web of economic, institutional, and coercive resources that enable them to dominate electoral processes and suppress meaningful competition from opposing forces. In this section, we explore how control over state resources, patronage networks, and international legitimacy sustains long-term incumbency and undermines democratic accountability in the region.

At the heart of this dynamic is the fusion of state and ruling party. In countries like Uganda, Rwanda, and Tanzania, the ruling party functions as an extension of the state apparatus, blurring the lines between public institutions and partisan interests. State resources, including public media, security forces, and development funds; are routinely mobilized during election periods to support incumbents and marginalize opposition candidates (Cheeseman 2015). This structural advantage creates an uneven playing field where opposition parties are not only outspent but also outadministered.

The use of patronage is central to this system. Incumbents distribute jobs, contracts, and services in exchange for political loyalty, creating a clientelist network that binds citizens and elites to the regime. In Uganda, for example, Museveni’s government has expanded the size of the cabinet and created new administrative districts as a means of rewarding political allies and consolidating support (Tripp 2010). In Kenya, the allocation of development projects is often tied to electoral support, reinforcing ethnic and regional patronage systems (Kanyinga 2006).

Security forces also play a critical role in maintaining incumbency. In many East African states, the police and military are not neutral actors but instruments of regime protection. During elections, they are deployed to intimidate voters, disrupt opposition rallies, and enforce restrictive laws. In Burundi and Uganda, security forces have been implicated in extrajudicial killings and the suppression of protests during election periods (Human Rights Watch 2021; Grauvogel 2016). This militarization of politics not only deters dissent but also signals the state’s willingness to use force to maintain power.

International actors, particularly donors and regional organizations, have also contributed - often inadvertently - to the entrenchment of incumbents in power. The international community’s emphasis on procedural benchmarks, such as holding regular elections, has allowed regimes to claim democratic legitimacy while undermining substantive democratic norms. As long as elections are held and violence is minimized, incumbents are often rewarded with continued aid, diplomatic recognition, and access to global financial institutions (Brown 2005; Levitsky and Way 2010).

This external validation reinforces the domestic narrative of legitimacy and reduces the incentive for genuine reform. In the DRC, for instance, the international community accepted the 2018 election results despite credible evidence of fraud, prioritizing stability over electoral integrity (Carter Center 2019). Similarly, in Rwanda, the government’s development achievements have often overshadowed concerns about political repression, allowing Kagame to maintain strong international partnerships despite the absence of democratic pluralism.

The political economy of incumbency thus reveals a system in which elections are not vehicles for change but mechanisms for continuity of the status quo and doing business as usual. Incumbents use their control over state institutions, economic resources, and international narratives to entrench their rule and neutralize opposition. This system is self-reinforcing: the longer incumbents stay in power, the more they reshape institutions and norms to serve their interests, making democratic alternation increasingly difficult.

Thus, the endurance of incumbency in East Africa is not accidental; it is the product of deliberate strategies rooted in the political economy of the state. Addressing this challenge requires more than electoral reform; it demands a fundamental restructuring of how power is distributed, contested, and legitimized in postcolonial African states.

7.3 Constitutional engineering and legalized authoritarianism.

One of the most pervasive strategies used by East African regimes to entrench incumbency is constitutional engineering; the deliberate manipulation of legal frameworks to extend presidential tenure, weaken institutional checks, and consolidate executive power. While constitutions are often celebrated as foundational democratic instruments, in many East African states they have become tools of authoritarian resilience, repurposed to serve the interests of ruling elites under the guise of legality and reform.

The removal or circumvention of presidential term limits is the most visible manifestation of this trend. In Uganda, constitutional amendments in 2005 and 2017 eliminated both term and age limits, allowing President Yoweri Museveni to remain in power indefinitely (Mugisha 2021). These amendments were passed through a parliament dominated by the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM), with reports of bribery and intimidation of MPs who opposed the changes (Tripp 2010). The legal process was framed as democratic, yet it reflected a broader erosion of constitutionalism and institutional independence.

Rwanda followed a similar path in 2015, when a national referendum approved amendments to Article 101 of the 2003 Constitution, enabling President Paul Kagame to run for a third term in 2017 and potentially remain in office until 2034. The referendum passed with 98.3% support and a reported turnout of 98.3%, figures that suggest not only popular mobilization but also the coercive power of the state (Seburanga and Gatesire 2016). The process was criticized by international observers and human rights organizations for lacking transparency and suppressing dissent.

In Burundi, constitutional manipulation reached a crisis point in 2015 when President Pierre Nkurunziza sought a third term despite the two-term limit enshrined in the 2005 Constitution. The Constitutional Court ruled in his favor, but its vice president fled the country, alleging that judges had been pressured to support the ruling (Grauvogel 2016). The decision triggered mass protests, a failed coup attempt, and a violent crackdown that left hundreds dead and thousands displaced. In 2018, a new referendum extended presidential terms from five to seven years and reset the term count, further entrenching executive power.

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) also witnessed constitutional manipulation through delay rather than amendment. President Joseph Kabila postponed the 2016 election beyond his constitutional mandate, citing logistical challenges. This delay allowed him to remain in office until 2019, despite widespread protests and international pressure. The eventual 2018 election, which brought Félix Tshisekedi to power, was widely disputed, with evidence suggesting that opposition candidate Martin Fayulu won the popular vote (Carter Center 2019).

These cases illustrate how constitutional amendments and legal reinterpretations are used to legitimize authoritarian rule. The processes are often framed as democratic—conducted through referenda, parliamentary votes, or judicial rulings—but they occur in environments where civic space is restricted, opposition is suppressed, and institutions are captured by the executive. The result is a form of “legalized authoritarianism,” where the rule of law is hollowed out and repurposed to serve regime survival.

This phenomenon is not unique to East Africa, but its prevalence in the region reflects deeper structural issues. Postcolonial states often inherited centralized governance models that prioritized executive authority over institutional balance. In the absence of strong civil society, independent media, and judicial autonomy, constitutions become vulnerable to manipulation. Moreover, the international community’s emphasis on legal formalism—rather than democratic substance—has allowed regimes to claim legitimacy while undermining democratic norms (Levitsky and Way 2010).

Therefore, constitutional engineering in East Africa reveals the limits of legal reform in the absence of political accountability. While constitutions are essential to democratic governance, they can also be weaponized to entrench power and suppress dissent. Addressing this challenge requires not only legal safeguards but also a vibrant civic culture that can resist and contest authoritarian legalism.

7.4 Civic space and the role of civil society.

The health of any democracy is closely tied to the vibrancy of its civic space; the arena in which citizens organize, express themselves, and hold power to account. In East Africa, however, civic space has been progressively shrinking, particularly during electoral cycles. Civil society organizations (CSOs), independent media, and grassroots movements face increasing legal, political, and physical constraints that limit their ability to operate freely. This erosion of civic space not only undermines electoral integrity but also weakens the broader democratic fabric of society.

Across the region, governments have adopted a range of legal instruments to restrict civil society. In Tanzania, the 2019 amendments to the Political Parties Act granted the Registrar of Political Parties sweeping powers to deregister parties, block internal meetings, and vet candidates. These provisions were used to suppress opposition activity ahead of the 2020 elections, effectively criminalizing dissent (Tanzania Elections Watch 2021). Similarly, in Uganda, the Non-Governmental Organizations Act of 2016 introduced burdensome registration requirements and gave the government broad powers to suspend or dissolve CSOs deemed to be acting against “public interest” (HRW 2019).

Media freedom has also come under sustained attack. In Rwanda, independent journalism is virtually non-existent, with most outlets either state-owned or closely aligned with the ruling party. Journalists who challenge official narratives risk arrest, exile, or worse. In Burundi, the 2015 political crisis led to the closure of nearly all independent radio stations, and many journalists fled the country. Uganda and Kenya, while having relatively more pluralistic media landscapes, have seen increasing use of cyber laws and sedition charges to intimidate critical voices (Freedom House 2023).

Digital repression is an emerging frontier in the shrinking of civic space. Governments have increasingly turned to internet shutdowns, surveillance, and social media regulation to control information flows during elections. Uganda shut down the internet entirely during the 2021 elections, while Tanzania and Burundi restricted access to platforms like Twitter and WhatsApp during their respective polls. These actions not only limit freedom of expression but also hinder election monitoring, voter education, and citizen mobilization (Access Now 2021).

Despite these challenges, civil society remains a vital force for democratic accountability. In Kenya, domestic observer groups such as the Elections Observation Group (ELOG) have played a crucial role in monitoring elections and advocating for electoral reforms. The 2017 Supreme Court annulment of the presidential election was, in part, a result of sustained pressure from legal activists and civil society organizations. In the DRC, the Catholic Church's observer mission provided an alternative narrative to the official 2018 election results, challenging the legitimacy of the declared outcome and reinforcing the role of moral authority in electoral politics (Carter Center 2019).

Youth movements and digital activism are also reshaping civic engagement. In Uganda, the rise of Bobi Wine and the People Power Movement (now under the National Unity Platform Political Party) demonstrated the potential of youth-led mobilization to challenge entrenched regimes. In Sudan, although outside the core focus of this paper, the 2019 revolution underscored the transformative power of civic resistance in authoritarian contexts. These examples highlight the resilience and adaptability of civil society, even in the face of repression.

However, the sustainability of civic activism depends on several factors: legal protection, financial independence, access to information, and international solidarity. Many CSOs in East Africa rely on foreign funding, which makes them vulnerable to accusations of being "foreign agents" or "unpatriotic." Governments have exploited this narrative to delegitimize civil society and justify restrictive laws. Building domestic support and fostering regional networks of solidarity are therefore essential for the long-term viability of civic engagement.

In sum, the shrinking of civic space in East Africa is both a symptom and a driver of democratic decline. While civil society continues to play a critical role in defending democratic norms, it operates under increasingly hostile conditions. Protecting and expanding civic space is not only a matter of rights; it is a prerequisite for meaningful democracy.

7.5 Rethinking democracy in postcolonial contexts.

The patterns of electoral manipulation, authoritarian resilience, and civic repression observed across East Africa compel a fundamental rethinking of democracy in postcolonial African contexts. The liberal democratic model; cantered on periodic elections, individual rights, and institutional checks; has often been adopted in form but not in substance. While this model has provided a framework for political organization, it has also failed to resonate with the historical, cultural, and philosophical foundations of governance in many African societies.

Postcolonial scholars argue that the transplantation of Western democratic institutions into African states occurred without sufficient regard for indigenous political systems and social structures. As Mamdani (1996) contends, the colonial state bifurcated African societies into "citizens" and "subjects," creating a dual system of governance that persists in postcolonial regimes. This legacy has produced states that are formally democratic but substantively authoritarian, where elections serve more as rituals of legitimacy than as mechanisms of accountability.

Afrocentric thinkers have long challenged the universality of liberal democracy, advocating instead for models of governance rooted in African epistemologies and communal values. Kwasi Wiredu (1996), for example, proposed a non-party consensual democracy inspired by traditional African decision-making processes, which emphasized dialogue, consensus, and collective responsibility over adversarial competition. Similarly, Ifi Amadiume (1997) and Molefi Kete Asante (2003) have argued for the recovery of indigenous political philosophies that prioritize harmony, moral leadership, and the interconnectedness of community life.

These critiques do not reject democracy per se, but rather call for its decolonization, something that we share in this paper. They question the assumption that elections alone can produce legitimate governance, especially in contexts where state institutions are weak, civic trust is low, and political power is historically centralized in the hands of a few political elites. Instead, they advocate for a broader conception of democracy - one that includes participatory governance, social justice, and cultural legitimacy.

In practice, this means reimagining democratic processes beyond the ballot box and all practices associated. It involves recognizing and integrating traditional governance structures, such as councils of elders, community assemblies, and customary courts, into national political systems. It also requires creating spaces for

inclusive dialogue, where marginalized voices - especially women, youth, and rural communities - can shape public policy and hold leaders accountable.

Moreover, rethinking democracy in postcolonial Africa demands a shift in international engagement. Donor-driven democratization efforts have often prioritized electoral procedures over democratic substance, rewarding regimes that hold elections regardless of their fairness or inclusiveness. A more context-sensitive approach would support long-term institution-building, civic education, and grassroots mobilization, rather than short-term electoral benchmarks as it is today.

The resurgence of youth-led movements across the continent; from #FeesMustFall in South Africa to the People Power Movement in Uganda, signals a growing demand for democratic renewal not only in these countries but in the region at large. These movements are not merely seeking electoral change; they are challenging the very foundations of political legitimacy, demanding systems that reflect their lived realities and aspirations. They represent a new generation of African citizens who are not content with procedural democracy but are actively shaping its future.

Hence, the crisis of electoral democracy in East Africa is not simply a failure of implementation; it is a failure of imagination. It reflects the limitations of imposing external models without grounding them in local histories, values, and struggles. Rethinking democracy in postcolonial contexts requires a bold and honest engagement with the past, a critical interrogation of the present, and a creative vision for the future, one that centres African agency, dignity, and self-determination.

VIII. CONCLUSIONS AND THE WAY FORWARD.

This paper has critically examined the state of presidential elections in East Africa, revealing a complex and often contradictory landscape. While the region has witnessed a proliferation of electoral processes since the early 2000s, these have not necessarily translated into democratic deepening. Instead, elections have frequently served as instruments of authoritarian continuity, elite consolidation, and international legitimation. The comparative analysis of Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo has shown that the mere presence of elections does not equate to democratic governance.

The data and case studies presented demonstrate recurring patterns: inflated voter turnout in authoritarian regimes, narrow margins of victory in competitive but fragile democracies, and the strategic use of constitutional amendments to entrench incumbency. These trends are underpinned by a political economy that privileges state control, patronage, and coercion over citizen agency and institutional accountability. Civic space continues to shrink, and legal frameworks are increasingly weaponized to suppress dissent and marginalize opposition.

Yet, amid these challenges, there are also signs of resilience and possibility. Civil society organizations, youth movements, and independent media—where they exist—continue to push back against authoritarianism and demand more inclusive governance. Judicial interventions, such as Kenya's 2017 election annulment, offer glimpses of institutional courage. And across the region, citizens continue to engage, resist, and reimagine what democracy could mean in their own contexts.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

Reclaim Democracy Beyond the Ballot.

Democracy must be understood not merely as a periodic event but as a continuous process of participation, accountability, and justice. This requires investing in civic education, participatory governance, and inclusive dialogue that extends beyond election cycles.

Strengthen Electoral Institutions.

Electoral commissions must be insulated from executive influence through transparent appointment processes, secure funding, and independent oversight. Regional bodies such as the African Union (AU) and East African Community (EAC) should develop binding standards for electoral integrity and institutional independence.

Protect and Expand Civic Space.

Governments must repeal laws that restrict civil society and media freedom. International partners should condition support on the protection of fundamental freedoms and support grassroots organizations that promote civic engagement and human rights.

End Constitutional Manipulation.

Term limits must be restored and protected through regional protocols and domestic legal safeguards. Constitutional amendments should be subject to rigorous public debate, judicial review, and independent oversight to prevent their abuse for personal or partisan gain.

Rethink Democracy from the Ground Up.

African states must engage with indigenous governance systems and Afrocentric political thought to develop democratic models that reflect local histories, values, and aspirations. This includes recognizing traditional authorities, promoting consensus-based decision-making, and centering community well-being in governance.

Foster Regional Solidarity and Accountability.

East African civil society, scholars, and activists must build transnational networks to share strategies, amplify voices, and hold governments accountable. Pan-African institutions should play a more assertive role in defending democratic norms and supporting democratic transitions.

In nutshell, the road to democratic renewal in East Africa is neither linear nor guaranteed. It requires courage, creativity, and collective action from down - up. By confronting the myths of electoral democracy embedded from the super structure and reclaiming the political imagination, East Africans can chart a path toward governance that is not only democratic in form but also emancipatory in substance.

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