



Digital Technologies and Election Management in Africa's Democratisation Process: More Technocratic than Democratic?

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Introduction

It has been about three decades since strikes and mass demonstrations in the streets of Benin Republic signalled a continent-wide trajectory in Africa that led to the serial toppling of authoritarian and military regimes. Those events have been described as 'a historic shift in the political landscape of postcolonial Africa'.¹ But perhaps more appropriately, they unleashed Africa's third democratic movement. The first movement took the form of anticolonial struggles, followed by the 'second independence movement' in the immediate post-independence era; both failed to meet the aspirations of Africa's peoples.² However, the limits of this third democratic movement in Africa were, like those before it, fixed as 'orthodox liberal democracy'.³ Within a few years, many African countries ended authoritarian or military rule and began to conduct regular elections. Thus, while in the early 1990s we could count only a few countries that had elected governments, today we can count only a few that have not.

Essentially, this shift was a quantitative one. Observers focused interest principally on the number of African countries that were conducting elections. As the number of elections multiplied, there was a great euphoria and sense of expectation about them, propelling more and more countries to follow suit. But early on, interest began to shift to whether elections would become regular, rather than one-off episodes riding on the crest of the wave across the continent. Thus, the question of the universalisation of elections as the sole legitimate means of changing government, the so-called democratic consolidation, became the focus for many observers. Since then, however, concerns about the real democratic content of elections,

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especially worries about whether their outcomes reflect the true wishes of the electorate, have grown.⁴ In addition, the rising number of visibly flawed electoral processes, the seemingly permanent dominance of ruling parties and concerns about the impartiality of Election Management Bodies (EMBs) have been sources of apprehension among scholars and citizens. Consequently, observers began to focus less on the number of countries holding elections and the frequency of their occurrence and more on the democratic content of these elections. In other words, interest shifted from the quantity of elections in Africa to their quality.⁵

Two issues have been at the heart of the debate about the quality of elections in Africa, namely, the impartiality and the efficiency of election management agencies. The first revolves around the level of human intervention in determining the outcome of elections. Essentially, the question has been one of trust in the election managers – that they will respect the rules, that citizens can participate in elections and make their choices unencumbered, that there will be a level playing field for all candidates and political parties, that outcomes will truly reflect the choices of citizens based on extant rules, and that grievances will be heard fairly. The level of trust of citizens in African elections has progressively declined since the 1990s, with virtually every outcome being hotly contested. The neutrality of EMBs, the judiciary and security agencies in electoral matters has been routinely questioned.

The second issue deals with the efficacy of election managers in delivering quality elections. Elections appear to be poorly planned, the procurement and delivery of materials are slow, the casting of ballots and the tabulation of results are archaic and the declaration of outcomes is tardy and inefficient.

It is not surprising, then, that digital technologies have been promoted widely as the inevitable solution to the problem of election quality in Africa. They are seen as the natural fixes for the two perceived central problems of election quality – human interference and inefficiency. The belief in digital technologies as the panacea for questionable elections in Africa is so pervasive that it is becoming difficult to imagine elections on the continent without them. ‘Digital democracy’, ‘election technology’ and ‘digital elections’ are now commonly used concepts. Indeed, the application of digital technologies in African elections has grown in leaps and bounds in the last two decades. Since South Africa used a centralised electronic election results centre in 1994, and subsequently the ‘zip- zip’ voter registration device, election technologies have come to form an essential part of election management. They are now used in all activities of the electoral management cycle, including the registration of voters, preparation of election plans, procurement, logistics and, in some cases, voting. In addition, digital technologies have become an essential tool

of political participation for voters. Election-related information is shared by EMBs, candidates and the media, using digital technology. Indeed, social media has become one of the most powerful tools of citizen mobilisation and engagement in Africa during elections, especially with an estimated 30 million cellphones on the continent.

It is against this backdrop that the 2019 CODESRIA Democratic Governance Institute was held in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire from 15 July to 2 August 2019. The theme of the Institute was 'Digital Technologies and Election Management in Africa's Democratisation Process'. This theme was chosen:

'to give academics and policymakers involved in academic research and management of elections and the democratisation process in the continent a chance to reflect on the broad questions regarding the implications the increased adoption of digital technologies in the conduct and management of elections has on the quality of election process and outcomes, and ultimately the quality of the democratic process itself. The choice of the theme is also informed by current trends on the continent with respect to the conduct and management of elections as a critical component of democratic evolution.'⁶

This article presents an overview, appraisal and a summary of the outcomes of the Institute, focusing on its organisation and academic programme. The organisational aspects cover the laureates and resource persons, the format of the academic work, as well as the content of the programme. The academic programme covered the lectures, the presentations of the laureates and the core discussions and debates that took place. The article concludes by looking at the future of the study and application of digital technologies in African elections and the prospects of building a community of young academics and practitioners who will drive that future.

Overview of Issues⁷

Several issues around digital technologies and election management in Africa's democratisation were explored at the Institute. However, a few stood out as cardinal to the study of digital technologies and election management in Africa's contemporary democratisation.

The Quality of Elections and the Rise of Digital Technologies in Election Administration

A starting point in unpacking the theme of the Institute was the link between the quality of elections and the rise in the application of digital technologies in the electoral process in Africa. The quality of elections is by and large shaped by a number of requirements. First, rules governing elections, which

include legislation, regulations and guidelines, must be set in advance and in good time. They should also be made public, and all individuals and agencies must adhere to them. Elections are largely dependent on formal rules, and the precedent determinacy of such rules, which usually includes provisions that guarantee the prior indeterminacy of outcomes, is essential to quality elections. Second, citizens who are entitled to vote must be able to make their choices secretly, unencumbered and unhindered. Third, all voters, political parties and candidates should be treated equally. In other words, there must be a level playing field for all participants, parties and candidates, such that all are treated fairly. Fourth, the choices of voters must be the sole determinant of the outcome, based on extant rules. In other words, there must be the highest fidelity of resonance between the choices made by voters and the electoral outcomes. And fifth, there must be ample and genuine opportunities for grievances to be redressed.⁸

It seems that in Africa's contemporary elections these requirements are in decline, arising from three sources, namely, weak institutions, weak infrastructure and weak citizen engagement. In the first place, the weakness of the institutions that manage the electoral process is clear in the instability of rules, poor compliance with them, and an even lower level of trust that electoral institutions will act neutrally and that those who implement the rules will do so fairly, discounting their personal and sectional interests. A widespread perception in African countries – that those who organise elections will use their positions to promote self and sectional interests – has undermined trust in electoral management institutions and therefore weakened them. This lack of trust seems to afflict not just electoral management institutions, but also public institutions at large. A common plausible explanation roots it in the history of these institutions as part of a colonial state that functioned to conquer and control the people and brazenly promote the interests of the colonisers. Alienated from the colonised, this state never earned their trust and so could not evolve as an autonomous force that unified the people-nation. Instead, to date, it has continued to be a ruthless force that acts without consultation and essentially promotes the sectional interests of its controllers – political parties, religious groups, ethnic and other communal groups. The lack of trust in electoral institutions is worsened by their low functional capacity, which includes an absence of the requisite administrative skills, the preponderance of powerful individuals within them who override rules, as well as overall low accountability to citizens.

Apart from weak institutions, the infrastructure for conducting and managing elections is also inadequate. A major source of the operational weakness of African EMBs is the poor national infrastructure. Most parts

of Africa are still very remote with poor communication facilities. But even in the cities, transportation, electricity and telecommunications are in a parlous state, making the organisation of elections extremely tedious and tardy. According to the Global Infrastructure Hub, Africa is underinvesting in all major infrastructure compared to other parts of the world (see Table 1). Yet, population growth in Africa outpaces many other parts of the world. This combination of a rapidly growing population and underinvestment in infrastructure epitomises the weakness of electoral infrastructure in Africa.

The third source of the decline in quality of elections in Africa is weak civic engagement. To be sure, the role of civil society in the electoral process in Africa has been increasing, especially regarding support for election administration, voter education and electoral accountability. In the first instance, civic groups in Africa are becoming a major source of knowledge for EMBs on diverse issues of election administration. Civil society organisations (CSOs) have expertise in voter registration, the application of ICT to elections, legal issues and constituency delimitation, among other factors. Indeed, electoral commissions across the continent are leveraging this pool of knowledge to improve the quality of elections. CSOs provide one other type of support to EMBs – they serve as a line of defence against undue pressure from government, political parties and other vested interests. Civil society organisations have used aggressive advocacy to protect EMBs, enabling them to retain the independence necessary to conduct free, fair and credible elections. Secondly, civic groups have been very active in educating voters and ensuring a higher turnout at elections. Certainly, voter education is a very important part of the election work by CSOs in Africa. Above all, CSOs have been vital in what broadly may be called electoral accountability, especially as entrenched in election observation or monitoring.

Table 1: 2019-Global Infrastructure Investment (USD billions)

Sector	World	Africa	Asia	Diff. World & Africa (%)	Diff. Asia & Africa (%)
Airports	2,100	60	841	97.1	92.9
Energy	26,000	1,600	15,000	93.8	89.3
Rail	10,000	118	7,200	98.8	98.4
Road	26,000	775	16,000	97.0	95.2
Telecom	7,800	747	3,500	90.4	78.7

Source: Global Infrastructure Hub [<https://outlook.gihub.org> – Accessed 12 July 2019]

Despite this activity, civic engagement has been very modest across the continent when the vast population is considered. Moreover, the civic space has seen several strictures imposed on it by government. To illustrate, current data from CIVICUS on the state of civil society in forty-eight African countries shows that civil society in about 19 per cent of the countries is 'closed', 31 per cent is 'repressed', about 42 per cent is 'obstructed' and 8 per cent is 'narrowed'. It is instructive that not a single African country is categorised as 'open', and 90 per cent of civil society in Africa is characterised by CIVICUS as closed, repressed or obstructed.⁹

Given these challenges, two stylised solutions have been offered to African elections. One extreme, which we may call the 'Pebbles Extreme', argues that Africa is ill prepared for the complex election management system of the developed world. Therefore, the solution is to return to the simplest election techniques that would be found in the 'typical' African situation. These must be simple, easily understood and transparent. In 1990s Nigeria, for instance, the military government, as part of its transition to a democracy programme, introduced the 'open ballot system' where people lined up behind their preferred candidates or their photographs and the people in the queues were counted and recorded. The 1993 presidential election was partly based on this approach and is touted to have produced the most transparent elections in Nigeria. In Gambia, pebbles replaced ballot papers in this stylised African solution to an African problem. Kenya's 1988 elections, dubbed *mlolongo*, were similar to the Nigerian example above, but with a twist of outcome in that the longest queues lost and the shortest won.

The second extreme may be characterised as the 'Machine Extreme'. Simply put, since in Africa the level of trust is low and election managers are inefficient, technology is the only solution for making elections honest, impersonal and efficient. At face value, it is this claim – that digital technology will solve the problem of election quality – that ostensibly drives the rash of digital technologies applied in Africa, which are accepted despite the mixed record election technology has in Africa.¹⁰

Digital Technologies as a Terrain of Power

A major point that resonated throughout the three weeks of the Institute was that digital technologies generally, and particularly as applied to election management, are a terrain of global power in which Africa is disadvantaged. This is so because Africa is essentially a consumer of digital technologies produced elsewhere. There is a clear global division of labour in digital technologies. First, the raw materials for most of the hardware come from Africa. Second, the hardware is produced outside Africa, particularly in

Europe, North America and China. Finally, the software that drives the critical hardware comes principally from Europe, North America and Asia. Consequently, Africa is seriously underprivileged and vulnerable in the global power of digital technologies. Although many software production initiatives, especially focusing on small applications, are increasing across Africa, still the big players in terms of election technology are not African.

Election technologies have therefore become a major component of foreign aid and trade for Africa. Aid for elections in many African countries has a major digital technology component, particularly to facilitate voter registration and the tabulation and transmission of results. Incidentally, financial support for the purchase of digital election technology still returns to the producing countries outside Africa. Many times, the terms of financial engagement for that aid are way out of proportion to the needs served, to the point of defeating the very idea of 'aid'. Digital election technology is purchased at exorbitant prices from producing countries. The cost is increased by unfavourable exchange rates and corruption. Ironically, the essential raw materials needed to produce these technologies, including aluminium for Liquid Crystal Display (LCD) screens, lithium for batteries, copper, silver and gold for electrical units, and coltan ores for micro capacitors are sourced from Africa. For instance, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is the world's largest producer of coltan, and in 2013, Rwanda was the world's largest exporter, exporting 2.4 million tonnes of coltan ore.

At the same time, African EMBs have fallen into a technology peonage as a result of the use (or abuse) of election technologies. Experts and consultants come from abroad to set up the systems, costing Africa huge sums of money. Subsequently, malfunctions and problems require the same experts to be flown in to solve even the most minimal issues. Licensing costs for software continue to rise geometrically and the rapid rate of obsolescence of the technologies means that ever more funds must be allocated for upgrades. The participants in the Institute therefore wondered if election technology was not the new imperialism.

Antinomies of Election Technology

Inherent in the use of digital technologies in election management in Africa are several antinomic and paradoxical manifestations. First is what may be described as a paradox of trust. The Institute's participants recognised this paradox as a constant manifestation of election technologies in Africa. Essentially, digital technologies are applied to elections to increase the level of trust in electoral processes and outcomes. Paradoxically, however,

it appears that the more technology is applied, the more contentious the elections on the continent have become and the greater the desire for the 'Pebbles Extreme' cited above. From the registration of voters to the announcement of results, disputations and violence have continued, irrespective of the use of technology. In Kenya's 2017 elections, despite the far-reaching application of technology in results management, the opposition vigorously contested the election outcome. In fact, issues around the application and management of the technology featured prominently, including the unexplained death of the head of ICT at the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission. In Nigeria's 2019 general elections, the issue of result servers of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) became central in the case brought before the elections tribunal by the loser of the presidential election. The same controversies arose after the 2018 elections in the DRC over the use of voting machines. Consequently, the judiciary is becoming more central in electoral outcomes than the ballot box.

Secondly, there is the contradiction between integrity and inclusion. On one hand, this has to do principally with the technology divides in Africa between young and old, urban and rural, rich and poor and between men and women. Consequently, the use of digital election technology could lead to the exclusion of citizens who may feel 'intimidated' by it, may not have the skills to use it, may not live in areas that have access to it, or may not have the resources to acquire it. Therefore, in the quest to use digital technology to increase electoral integrity, African elections may be excluding more and more citizens. On the other hand, it seems that integrity is privileged over inclusion in Africa's electoral process, unlike developed countries, where inclusion is obviously privileged. The desire to digitise integrity speaks very much to the trust deficit in Africa's electoral and indeed governance processes. The excessive emphasis, in African elections, on stringent, technology-based identification of voters in order to eliminate electoral fraud seems not to be the case in the so-called advanced democracies where any form of identification, if at all, is adequate to allow a voter to vote. Also, votes can be cast through mail, sometimes from abroad, with minimal interest in whether they have been cast by the registered voters. But in African elections, special identification sometimes backed by biometric technology is required for voters. The excuse is the elimination of fraud. Yet, there is no scientific basis to argue that voters are more fraudulent in Africa than elsewhere.

A third paradox of digital election technologies, which participants identified, is that, globally, it seems that technologically advanced countries

increasingly are not going all out to apply such technologies, unlike African countries, which can hardly afford them but clamour for their application. Electronic voting is now widely canvassed as the way to go in Africa. Yet, global data does not suggest that countries elsewhere are falling over themselves to adopt electronic voting. Indeed, only twenty-five countries across the globe currently use or have tried electronic voting. Some commenced and subsequently abandoned it, including some of the most technologically advanced countries, like Germany.

The fourth paradox of the application of digital technologies in election management is its janiform character. Indeed, digital technology in election administration appears to always present two contradictory faces:

- Digital technologies have improved the integrity of elections, but they have also been a source of vulnerability. The activities of organisations such as Cambridge Analytica in elections worldwide have brought the pernicious use of digital technologies in elections into very bold relief.
- Digital technologies have been very important sources of information for the electorate, but they have also been sources of massive disinformation. This is exemplified by the increasing role of fake news in elections.
- Digital technologies have improved citizen participation, but they have also excluded citizens by creating a series of technology divides based on rural-urban, gender and age differences.
- Digital technologies have made election administration more efficient, but they have also supported waste and corruption.
- Overall, digital technologies have helped democratisation and the expansion of participation in governance, but they have also helped to narrow the governance base by putting more and more power in the hands of technocrats and those who have a better understanding of technology. This is clearly shown in the prominence of ICT professionals in the running of elections and the rising notion of e-governance. Consequently, digital technologies could make the electoral process more technocratic than democratic.

The Cost of Elections

Elections are becoming too expensive for African countries and digital technology is only driving up the cost. Election technologies form part of the so-called integrity cost of elections, which is presumed to be justifiably high in Africa because of electoral fraud. In Nigeria, the 2019 general elections cost over NGN 189 billion (about USD 525,000,000) in core electoral costs alone, reaching USD 660 million when other costs such as security for the elections are added. In Liberia, the 2017 elections cost USD 38,286,525, which was almost 1.8 per cent of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) that year.¹¹

Participants in the Institute went beyond the monetary costs of elections, however, to look at the long-term social and developmental costs of election technologies to Africa. The concern remains whether Africa is getting value for money from its investments in elections, including investments in election technology. Are elected governments performing well enough to justify such investments? Would these resources not be better used for many of the developmental challenges that confront African countries, including meeting basic needs in health, education and agriculture? Are investments in election technologies stimulating any substantial knowledge and skills transfers to Africa?

Social Media and Election Management

The role of social media in the application of digital technologies in election management in Africa attracted extensive attention in the Institute. Several important points were made during the discussions, including the following:

- Social media are powerful in mobilising popular participation in the electoral process. Therefore, they are a vital tool for candidates, political parties and other stakeholders.
- Social media are useful to EMBs in managing elections, for deployment, dealing with challenges during elections, reporting abuses and for information dissemination, among other purposes.
- Social media have increased youth participation in the electoral process, since young people are the major users of social networking. The voices of the young are now more relevant as a result of social media, which has opened up opportunities for more serious political participation.
- Social media carry fake news and hate speech, which are very damaging to the electoral process. The role of social media in promoting electoral violence is widely reported in many African countries.
- The digital divide between the old and young, urban and rural, male and female and rich and poor also means that access to social media is unequal and skewed. Therefore, the increasing use of social media in the electoral process could alienate some segments of the population.

The Role of Political Parties

The Institute sought to situate political parties in the context of digital technologies in Africa's democratisation. Political parties form a critical part of electoral democracy and many aspects of their functioning are affected by the application of digital technologies in the electoral process, including their internal organisation, membership recruitment, selection of candidates

and campaigns. Clearly, the application of digital technologies has impacted profoundly on the character of political parties:

- First, it has eroded some of the traditional power of the leadership of political parties and increasingly empowered the rank and file membership. By making information readily available, particularly through digital social networks and online sources, the participation of ordinary members has increased, authority has become more diffuse and ordinary members are now more able to demand accountability from party leaders.
- Second, digital technologies have changed how political parties recruit their members. Political parties in Africa can now cast their nets wide, crowdsourcing membership. This large 'virtual membership' contributes not only financially but also to policy debates and campaigns using digital technologies.
- Third, the application of digital technologies has affected the organisational structure of political parties. They are increasingly becoming less vertical and more horizontal, which has enhanced internal party democracy and given more voice to the rank and file.
- Fourth, digital technologies are conducive to the rise of independent candidates, thus challenging the traditional role of parties in political recruitment.
- Fifth, the traditional strategies of fundraising by political parties have been profoundly reshaped by digital technologies, making funding nimbler and more 'tech-driven'. This has enabled parties and candidates to raise money quickly and from diverse sources, leading to positive and negative consequences. On the positive side, more members can make financial contributions to political parties and their candidates, which has strengthened, even if tangentially, their voice in party policies and in holding party leaders and candidates accountable. Conversely, however, the use of digital technologies, including online platforms, for fundraising has led to faceless donations, sometimes from questionable sources. The risk of money laundering through party fundraising has become very high as a result.
- Sixth, digital technologies have enabled political parties to improve internal organisation, particularly recordkeeping, planning and accounting.
- Seventh, digital technologies have increased the level of youth involvement in political parties and this is good considering that Africa is a 'young continent'.
- Eighth, and finally, the proliferation of political parties is fast becoming a hallmark of electoral democracy in Africa. Although this may not be caused directly by the use of digital technologies, these have made it easier for new parties to form and mobilise. With limited opportunities for independent candidature in several African countries, political parties have tended to mushroom. This has been the case even in single-member constituency (SMC), simple-plurality (first-past-the-post) electoral systems.

Large numbers of political parties tend to be sustained by a proportional representation system because of the allocation of seats based on votes won. While this is not necessarily bad for electoral democracy, it points to structural issues in African political parties. For one thing, the proliferation of political parties, driven by communal factors and buoyed by digital technologies, has encouraged the polarisation of society along ethnoreligious lines. For another thing, it accounts in part for kinetic propensities among politicians, that is, their tendency to change from one party to another or to form new parties at the slightest intraparty disagreement.¹² It is often suggested that this is as a result of absence of party ideology and therefore commitment to clear programmes. But, to the contrary, it seems that political parties in Africa are steeped in petty bourgeois ideology, characterised by instability, opportunism and individualism.

How political parties respond to these changes wrought by digital technologies will define their survivability. It seems that African political parties have responded in three ways. Some have adapted and embraced digital technologies, while others have resisted technology and risk becoming extinct or are so already. Yet others have been able to retain a greater part of their traditional organisation while gradually adapting to the inevitable impact of digital technologies. The more contemporary political parties appear to have adapted better than the older parties from the independence and immediate post-independence eras.

A Need for Strong Africanist Knowledge Production

What is the place of research and scholarship in this changing environment? This was the overriding question asked by participants at the Institute. The answer entails an understanding of the study of digital technologies in elections management from an African perspective. Three components of this *problematique* were identified: the subject matter of this study, the study methodology, and the social commitment of African scholars and researchers in this area.

Subject Matter

Several issues were identified as central to the study of digital technology and election management in Africa. To start with, understanding Africa's democratisation process from a historical perspective is key. What type of democracy is on offer in Africa today? What has been Africa's experience with this democracy over the past thirty years? What does this democracy mean for diverse social forces in Africa? Is democratisation the same and moving at the same pace all over Africa? What have been the continuities

and discontinuities in Africa's current democratisation process? Is there a Pan-African organising storyline, with relevant concepts that can be used to theoretically enrich this discussion?

A historical perspective of Africa's current democratisation would show that, at the beginning of the 1990s, when it was gathering pace, the type of democracy that was on offer was a major question. To the first of Africa's democratic movements, the struggle against colonialism ended largely with the enthronement of liberal, multiparty electoral democracy. In the immediate post-independence period, especially in the 1960s, it became clear that this form of democracy fell far short of meeting the democratic aspirations of Africa's peoples, which led to repeated calls for a second independence.¹³ The democratic project embodied by the second independence movement never actualised because an epidemic of military coups and authoritarian regimes stifled it. In this yet unfolding third phase, it has been expected that a central part of the struggle would be waged for the type of democracy that would finally meet the hopes of Africa's people. Calls for a return to the second independence movement have been rife, particularly in the National Conference models that appear to be taking root.

However, this struggle for the essence of the third democratisation movement in Africa has been by no means unanimous because the terrain is replete with several supporters and pseudo-supporters of democracy, each with its own agenda. Claude Ake rightly captures this medley of interests:

The movement has many components: out of power politicians for whom democratization is less a commitment than a strategy for power; ethnic, national and communal groups who are obliged to wage struggles for democratic incorporation because a manipulative leadership has seized state power in the name of an ethnic or national group; ordinary people who are calling for a second independence having concluded that the politics of the present leadership, far from offering any prospect of relief from underdevelopment, has deepened it immensely; international human rights non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which are only just beginning to perceive the relation between human rights and democracy; international financial institutions, especially International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, for whom democracy provides the political requirements for the operation of market forces; and Western governments who support democracy in Africa as the process through which the universalizing of the Western model of society can take place.¹⁴

Indeed, these interests have variously informed the academic debates on Africa's transition to democracy. Some of them, and the several academic positions they have fostered, have variously helped to either elucidate the meaning of democracy or to demean it. It was in fact the powerful forces that

dominated the terrain and their demeaning of democracy that shepherded Africa's democracy movement into the path of orthodox liberal, electoral democracy. Claude Ake described this simply as the democratisation of disempowerment.

For several Western scholars, democracy meant the diffusion of democratic institutions from the West to other parts of the world, including Africa. From this diffusionist perspective, the world at the time was experiencing a 'third wave of democracy', as Huntington saw it,¹⁵ or the third democratic transformation, for Dahl,¹⁶ representing a 'process by which democracy spreads across the world'.¹⁷ Democratisation emerged with the modernisation of the 1990s, a process by which non-Western societies unfamiliar with democracy were sucked into its irresistible and universal vortex.¹⁸ Consequently, Modelski argues, 'for societies unfamiliar with such practices, democracy is indeed a bundle of innovations'¹⁹ and a technique of collective choice, which is spread by diffusion, like other types of technology. It is not difficult to see that in this reincarnation of modernisation,²⁰ 'developing areas' like Africa are 'unfamiliar' with democratic practices, which will inevitably diffuse to them through association. This is the connection between democracy and globalisation.

However, while it is partly true that global events, such as the end of the Cold War, the collapse of Communism in the former Soviet bloc and the end of the sphere-of-influence syndrome among the superpowers, had an effect on democratisation in Africa, they served only as a fillip to the popular discontent that was arising from economic stagnation, social decay and political repression. Ironically, in several cases, these factors were sustained by the policies of Western governments in specific African countries.

To be sure, democratisation in Africa has its own internal logic quite apart from the thaw in East-West relations. But, sadly, the limits of Africa's third democracy movement were prematurely fixed by prevalent orthodoxy at a liberal, multiparty democracy level. Thus, orthodox liberal democracy guillotined the mass ferment and political struggles in which Africa's current democratisation was initially being shaped. Thus, fewer and fewer African countries chose the Sovereign National Conference, and instead allowed authoritarian regimes to hand down Constitutions and even depart as heroes.

As most forcefully argued by Schumpeter, liberal democratic theory was foisted on Africa's third democracy movement. The essence of this democracy, as Schumpeter stated some seventy years ago, is to make the power of 'the people' in deciding political issues secondary to the 'election of men who are to do the deciding'. For him, 'the democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire

power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote'.²¹ To be sure, this perspective precedes Schumpeter. In fact, if we were to excavate a little we would find the Federalist papers. And if we dug even further, we would unearth David Ricardo, who wanted suffrage for only those who would not abolish private property, and Hegel, whose 'universal class' is fitted by property and training to rule. The democratic content of these formulations should not be taken for granted. As Ake has perceptively noted, 'liberal democracy has significant affinities to democracy but it is markedly different'. Instead of the collectivity, liberal democracy focuses on the individual and substitutes government by the people with government by the consent of the people. In place of sovereignty of the people it offers sovereignty of the law. Above all, liberal democracy completely repudiates the notion of popular power.²²

Surely, after the post-independence disappointments, the mass of Africa's peoples were expecting more than quadrennial rituals of selecting men to do the deciding on their behalf, which is what elections represent. Indeed, they were not just looking for elections, they were looking for improved economic conditions, welfare and dignity that would not be blighted by poverty or brazen power. But again, powerful global forces and their intellectuals found a way to demean these unique demands of African democracy, by linking economic reform to market-oriented structural adjustments and political liberalisation.²³ International financial institutions and Western governments made aid and credits dependent on the so-called political conditionality they demanded from Africa's authoritarian regimes. Thus, between 1990 and 1992, the United States suspended military and/or other aid to some of its abiding friends in Africa, like Mobutu, Moi and Doe, over the question of political liberalisation.

Indeed, during the early days of Africa's current democracy movement, the link between democracy and economic wellbeing was viewed in a number of distinct ways. Authoritarian regimes saw political liberalisation and economic development as separate and to be pursued consecutively, with the former coming only after economic development. The position of some African scholars was that the two are separate and should take place consecutively, but in the reverse order. Thus, Anyang' Nyong'o argued that 'political liberties and the accountability of the state to the people (in particular the popular classes) is a precondition for material progress'.²⁴ For the IMF, the World Bank, Western governments and many liberal social scientists, economic reforms epitomised by the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) were separate from political liberalisation but were to be pursued concurrently.

Subsequently, evidence clearly indicated a strong link between SAPs and political repression in many countries. In response, the donors argued that SAPs are not necessarily antagonistic to democratisation; they may give rise to social and political tension, but that does not mean they must result in political repression or undermine the democratic transition process. The farthest the donors went was to acknowledge later that economic reform is a burden on democratisation.

Then there was the position of Africa's masses on democracy, which they had expressed in their struggles against the economic exploitation and political repression of the colonial state, and had maintained in their struggles against the postcolonial state. This position is clear and consistent: material wellbeing and political freedom express an organic unity; they cannot be separated in either a consecutive or concurrent sense. As has since become clear, the issue is not whether SAPs can cohabit with political opening – they can. Instead the issue is whether SAPs is the path to popular economic wellbeing – they are not! Therefore, the people's struggle for democracy was also a struggle against SAPs.

The bottom line is that economic conditions have always been a cardinal component of Africa's democratic struggles. In fact, during the anticolonial struggles and in the immediate postcolonial period, ordinary people in Africa were clear about the organic relationship between democracy and better economic conditions. Popular demands on the colonial and postcolonial governments in Africa were not only about votes and political voice, but also even more emphatically about improved economic conditions. Such demands were at the core of the first independence struggles, against the colonial state, and the 'second independence' struggles, against the postcolonial state in most parts of Africa.²⁵ Not surprisingly, across the continent the land question became the rallying point for mass political struggles. It remains so to date. In short, the people's demands and object of struggle were clear: that there should be an organic unity between economic wellbeing and democracy. The struggle for one is the struggle for the other. And this is where their position diverged from that of the petty bourgeoisie, their allies in the first independence struggle. The latter had admonished the need to seek first the kingdom of political independence and everything else would come thereafter. But when this did not materialise, the people declared the first independence struggle a failure. Writing on Zaire, Nzongola-Ntalaja perceptively observes:

For the people, independence was meaningless without a better standard of living, greater civil liberties, and the promise of a better life for their children. Instead of making these promised benefits available to the masses,

the politicians who inherited state power from the Belgians lived in much greater luxury than most of their European predecessors and used violence and arbitrary force against the people. For the latter, the first or nominal independence had failed. Their discontent with the neo-colonial state served as a basis for an aspiration towards a new and genuine independence, one that the 1964 insurrections were to incarnate.²⁶

In the end, however, Africa's democracy movement lost the second independence and was left with the next best alternative – multiparty electoral democracy. Ake correctly notes that in the face of the powerful international and local forces it had to confront, it was unlikely that Africa's democracy movement would avoid settling for 'the line of least resistance, that is, for orthodox liberal democracy'.²⁷ Indeed, he concluded: 'any deviation from orthodox liberal democracy, any distrust of the market, will invoke retribution'.²⁸

Beyond the content of the democracy that is currently on offer in Africa, a central part of the subject matter is an understanding of the place of elections in Africa's democratisation process. As already argued, Africa's democratisation has been characterised by liberal democracy, defined essentially by multipartyism and periodic elections. This outward form of democracy continues to underprivilege the real content of democracy, which is mass participation and popular welfare. How digital technologies are helping to transcend liberal democracy, guiding us to what should be the real content of democracy, or how they are sustaining and deepening it are interesting issues for study.

Election management and the electoral cycle are also important aspects of the subject matter. Election management is the use of human beings and materials by an election management body throughout the electoral cycle – in the pre-voting, voting and post-voting periods – to improve its internal organisation, strengthen external engagements and conduct better elections. How digital technologies impact on these activities is another important area of study. There have been three phases in the evolution of election management in Africa. In the first phase, the organisation of elections was perceived as routine administration, framed as an aspect of the work of civil servants. Its roots lay in colonial administration when elections were run by civil servants. The weaknesses of this system were all too obvious. Civil servants were known to be beholden to their political masters and there were concerns about their capacity to conduct affairs that required political neutrality. It was important to insulate the civil service from political meddlesomeness in a highly politicised activity like an election.

In the second phase, which in many countries corresponded to the immediate post-independence period, the organisation of elections inevitably passed to specialised permanent bodies that were expected to manage the entire electoral process throughout the electoral cycle, unlike the episodic administration of elections by civil servants. Increasingly, the role of election management bodies expanded to embrace not only the actual conduct of elections but also the registration of voters, the registration and regulation of political parties, the handling of electoral boundaries and even the prosecution of electoral offenders. Of paramount importance in this phase of development of election administration was the independence of the EMB, which was perceived to be lacking in the preceding period. Also, EMBs were expected to show higher levels of efficiency, professionalism and accountability, as well as increased engagement with citizens.

The third phase of this evolution may be characterised as citizen-led electoral governance. It emerged out of the rising interest of citizens and their organisations in pushing for better institutional frameworks, rules and procedures to govern the entire ecosystem of elections. It is widely characterised by demands for the broad participation of citizens in the formulation and functioning of the institutional frameworks for elections. Indeed, citizens are taking elections more seriously, supported greatly by digital technologies. Social media have become an indispensable part of citizen-led election management that no EMB can ignore. Attempts by governments to impose regulatory regimes have not been successful and election management is inevitably adjusting to the realities of social media. Obviously, digital technologies are central to the emergence and development of this third phase of election management.

Electoral governance addresses the broadest 'regimes' that govern elections and their institutional expressions, rather than the mere administration of elections as events or management of the electoral cycles. This phase is in turn situated in an increasingly global movement for electoral reforms and best practice, which include diverse forms of electoral support, multilateral mechanisms and observer missions. These partly have been the harbingers of increasing use of digital technologies in election management in Africa. A critical evaluation of the net effect of this global movement, structures and mechanisms on election administration is an exciting area of study.

Methodology

What should be the methodology for the study of digital technologies in election management in Africa's democratisation? By methodology is meant the three tools of study and research, namely, conceptual tools, research tools

and ideological/ epistemic tools. Conceptual tools deal with concepts, variables and theoretical/ conceptual frameworks. Clarity in the definition of concepts, reliability operationalisation of variables, precision in the construction of measurement scales and fecundity of theories as measured by the number of testable hypotheses they can yield, are all central issues in constructing the methodology for the study of the subject matter. Research tools, on the other hand, refer to the research design, testing of propositions, data gathering and data analysis. Finally, the ideological/epistemic tools recognise that social research is always an ideological category and therefore its subject matter, its concepts and its tools of research always express openly or covertly certain ideological positions and dispositions. These positions and dispositions are expressed in the social commitment of the specific group of scholars.

Social Commitment

What should be the social commitment and characteristics of African scholarship on digital technologies and election management under the aegis of CODESRIA? First, its ultimate social and political goal is the emancipation of Africa's peoples from the throes of poverty and brazen abuse of power. In a nutshell, it is the democratic development of Africa. Second, this scholarship must reject orthodoxy and scrutinise received knowledge. Third, it must depict a profundity of original thinking in order to transcend orthodoxy. Fourth, subscribers to this scholarship may work within national boundaries, but must remain profoundly Pan Africanist. This scholarship must not exhaust itself in sub-national, national or sub-regional consciousness. Fifth, it must be practical and socially relevant, always seeking to unify theory and practice in social action. And sixth, it must be humanistic.

Contribution to Knowledge

What are the academic significance and contributions of the 2019 CODESRIA Democratic Governance Institute? To be sure, the use of digital technology in elections has been appreciably studied and critiqued. Cheeseman et al. provide a useful summary of the important work already done, by authors such as Michael Yard in assessing the benefits and shortcomings of election technology, Evrensel on voter registration, as well as Barkan on Kenyan elections. Cheeseman et al. further provide a critique of the application of digital technologies to elections, pointing out its 'significant opportunity costs'. Most importantly, they question the current rush for election technologies without rigorous assessment of their effectiveness. They surmise that digital technologies in elections may well be generating negative effects even in making procedural improvements.²⁹

The work conducted by the 2019 CODESRIA Democratic Governance Institute sought to go beyond these critiques. First, it looked at how certain structural characteristics in Africa and the introduction of liberal electoral democracy invariably exaggerated the problem of trust in election management and therefore increased faith in solutions that are perceived to wrest control from human beings. This explains the enthusiasm for digital technologies in elections despite their not too glowing record.

Second, the Institute addressed the paradox that despite popular clamour for the use of digital technologies in elections in Africa, the outcomes of the elections in which they are used still end up being seriously disputed, leading to even more demand for technology. In fact, the type of technology, its specific application, who controls it and the level of openness of its application have become contentious issues in African elections. In many cases, there are rising concerns that technology will be used to manipulate the process. This paradox suggests that the answer may not lie in technology, but in rebuilding trust in public institutions, which continue to be seen in the light of their origins in colonial authoritarianism as tools of repression, exclusion and the pursuit of sectional interests.

Third, the Institute raised the issue of the ethnocentric undertones of Western interests that promote election technologies in Africa. Particularly, these interests promote the logic that the integrity of elections in Africa is the paramount quest and must be pursued even to the detriment of inclusiveness. This privileging of integrity over inclusion is contrary to the experience in Western countries, where standards for voter identification are lower. In Africa, voter identification, including biometric registration, has become a fetish, and in the context of poor infrastructure and poverty has led to the unwarranted exclusion of people who are not able to meet certain requirements of personal identification.

Fourth, the focus of the Institute went beyond digital election technologies, and looked at technology more broadly in the electoral process, especially the wide-ranging involvement of social networks/media. With the rising role of social media, elections in Africa are moving beyond EMBs. There is a transition from election management to election governance. Related to this, one significant issue raised by the Institute was how technology is giving more political voice to less advantaged constituencies, such as ethnic minorities and young people, in the political process. These voices have become stronger in policy debates, political mobilisation and in political recruitment, particularly enabled by the impersonality and networking afforded by social media.

Fifth, the Institute emphasised the question of election technologies being part of a global digital political economy in which Africa is disadvantaged. The prevalent global digital division of labour puts Africa in the classic role of providing raw materials for hardware but being a net consumer of election technologies produced elsewhere. The promoters of election technologies in Africa are not interested in building knowledge capacities in Africa. Instead, Africa exists in a technology peonage to big hardware and software companies and vendors.

Finally, a major contribution of the Institute to knowledge was rich case studies of the foregoing issues from across Africa – from Kenya, Zimbabwe, the DRC, Nigeria, Côte d’Ivoire, Cameroon and Burundi, among other countries – adding to existing theories with empirical data and comparative perspectives. Moreover, by bringing together young scholars, professionals and members of election management bodies from across the continent, the Institute provided that necessary nexus between theory and practice that greatly enriches knowledge production.

Epilogue

In final reflection, a number of key lessons about elections in Africa and the role of digital technologies in them can be drawn from the three-week 2019 CODESRIA Democratic Governance Institute. These include:

1. Current democratisation in Africa was defined *ab initio* as ‘orthodox, liberal electoral democracy’, as Ake describes it. This means that discourses on it must be framed within those terms, which are not only ideological, but also practical. As an expression of popular will, this form of democracy has its limits, in that popular will is expressed in the election of people who will exercise the popular will during a specific period. Consequently, an essential part of this type of democracy is the conduct of the elections, and any evaluation of the role of technology in it can only make sense within the limits framed by this type of democracy.
2. A persistent trust deficit afflicts the institutions and officials that conduct elections in Africa. Secondary analysis reveals that this deficit is associated with weak institution-building, weak infrastructure and weak civic engagement. However, a more fundamental, structural level of analysis locates the source of the trust deficit in the liberal state and its origins in colonialism. The history and character of this state has left people suspicious and in awe of its power. The fact remains that this state is seen as a force that brazenly serves the interest of those who control it. Consequently, its institutions and agencies, including those that manage elections, are seen as partial and incapable of acting above personal and sectional interests.

3. Digital technologies generally, and particularly as applied to election management, are a terrain of global power in which Africa is disadvantaged. This is so because Africa is a consumer of digital technologies produced elsewhere. There is a clear global division of labour in digital technologies. First, much of the raw materials for digital hardware comes from Africa. Second, the hardware is produced in specific countries outside Africa, particularly in Europe, North America and China. Finally, the software that drives the critical hardware comes principally from Europe, North America and Asia. Consequently, Africa is seriously underprivileged and vulnerable in the global powerplay of digital technologies. This drives up the cost of elections, leading African countries into technology peonage, and exposes elections in the continent to the pernicious use of technology to undermine them. Ironically, election technology that is supposed to increase confidence in the process has itself become a bone of contention after every election. Strong administrative systems and social values, including trust, are probably more important than technology in determining the quality of elections in Africa. Also, the sensible and measured adoption of new technologies, strict attention to issues of security and cost-effectiveness should be paramount in the choice of election technologies. African EMBs and governments must demand that election technology transfer be included in the contracts to use digital technologies in elections.
4. The quality of elections cannot be divorced from the state of infrastructure, structure and culture of the country in which they are conducted. It is the same roads that are replete with potholes, the same airlines that run late and the same erratic public power supply that EMBs must use to run elections in Africa. There is no Election Transport Company or Election Airlines or Election Electricity Company. At the same time, elections are held within the same conflict structure and insecure environment, the same passive political culture among citizens, the same repressed civil society and the same environment of weak citizen engagement that characterise African countries. All these things impact negatively on the quality of elections.
5. Social media have become important technologies in elections and election management. They have greatly increased the participation of hitherto marginal groups, like young people and minorities. However, some other groups, such as the rural populace and the poor, may not have access to social media as an election tool. Social media have also had some negative impacts on election, particularly the dissemination of false information and hate speech.
6. Digital technologies are having a far-reaching impact on political parties in the mobilisation of voters, recruitment of new members, fundraising, campaign messaging and their internal management. When properly employed, digital technologies have improved the workings of political parties, as well as the level of accountability to members. However, parties have differed in their acceptance of digital technologies. It seems that the survival of political parties will be influenced by their acceptance of new technologies.

7. The cost of elections is increasing across Africa, both in absolute and relative terms. From one election cycle to another, these costs are mounting, and the use of digital technologies is a major part of this increasing cost. This is indeed where Africa is in a bind. Paradoxically, Africa is poor, but its elections are becoming excessively expensive, with countries like Liberia spending as much as 2 per cent of GDP on elections. African countries must find new creative ways of funding elections in a timely manner, without jeopardising the development needs of their people.
8. In the main, the promoters of digital technology in African elections privilege integrity over inclusiveness. A sign of the quality of elections is their inclusiveness, partly measured by the degree to which the majority of citizens can vote with limited hindrance. In many African countries, there is an excessive emphasis on using digital technologies for voter identification, which is not only expensive, but sometimes also ends up excluding voters. This is usually done in the name of integrity and combatting electoral fraud. However, the right balance must be struck between integrity and inclusiveness. In many countries of the West, any identification is enough for a citizen to vote. Sometimes, no photo identification is required at all. African governments must invest more in strengthening the civic identification infrastructure.
9. There is a need for increased peer learning and co-operation among African EMBs on the application of digital technologies in elections. The leadership of EMBs must build their own capacities to understand the rudiments of digital technologies to avoid being taken advantage of. Sharing IT resources among EMBs wherever possible will help to address the skills gap, enable cost-sharing and address common security issues. Perhaps, regional associations of EMBs, such as ECONEC, the umbrella association of EMBs in West Africa, should consider projects that lead to sharing digital technology resources.
10. Finally, as African scholars working in this area, the participants in the 2019 CODESRIA Democratic Governance Institute must adhere to certain shared social commitments. These would include originality, social relevance, praxis, Pan Africanism, humanism and commitment to the democratic development of Africa.

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