

# IMAGINING DEMOCRATIC FUTURES: SOUTHERN AFRICA FORESIGHT REPORT 2025

Discussion Paper, December 2024



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Discussion Paper, December 2024



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The paper was written by Bintu Bali, Irene Postigo Sánchez, Daniela Domínguez and David Towriss and was reviewed by Seema Shah, Massimo Tommasoli, Jakkie Cilliers and Doris Viljoen. It is based on the invaluable work and insights of the participants at the Southern African Democratic Futures Conference (see the Annex for a list of participants), as well as the guidance and input of colleagues at ISS Africa and International IDEA's Africa and West Asia regional office.

# Abbreviations

<b>AI</b>	Artificial intelligence
<b>GSoD</b>	Global State of Democracy
<b>ICT</b>	Information and communication technologies
<b>ISS</b>	Institute for Security Studies
<b>SADC</b>	Southern African Development Community

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Data from International IDEA's Global State of Democracy Indices show that Southern Africa is consistently Africa's best performing subregion in many areas of democracy. However, recent trends appear to contain the seeds of a much less certain future. Economic inequality remains high, governments are struggling to deliver basic goods and services, and citizen satisfaction with democracy is declining. In these volatile times, however, if we wish to adequately prepare democracies in Southern Africa for what is to come, we must go beyond extrapolating from these trends. Stakeholders will have to anticipate and position themselves for a variety of possible long-term futures. How might these futures look?

To help answer this question, International IDEA and the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) convened a multidisciplinary group of experts and practitioners from across the subregion for a foresight conference that aimed to identify and explore future democratic challenges and opportunities in Southern Africa. The outcomes of this conference are contained in the four scenarios that constitute the core of this Discussion Paper.

The scenarios present alternative narratives of how the future of democracy in the subregion might plausibly unfold over the course of the next 20 years. They are based on archetypes that depict different directions of change: continuation, disciplined improvement, collapse and transformation. These narratives were crafted by conference participants using factors they identified as both uncertain and likely to impact this future, such as youth, natural resource management, environmental degradation, information and communication technologies (ICTs), access to information and data governance. The scenarios are therefore grounded in present-day facts but are not predictions of the future. Rather, they are intended to be used by readers to help inspire their own thinking and planning about how best to strengthen and promote democracy in their own contexts.

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**Southern Africa is consistently Africa's best performing subregion in many areas of democracy, but recent trends appear to contain the seeds of a much less certain future.**

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**The scenarios present alternative narratives of how the future of democracy in the subregion might plausibly unfold over the course of the next 20 years.**



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**The scenarios are based on archetypes that depict different directions of change: continuation, disciplined improvement, collapse and transformation.**

The **continuation scenario** depicts a future in which current trends are maintained and democratization in Southern Africa has stagnated. Distrust of democratic institutions is high, which depresses electoral participation and pushes citizens into alternative forms of civic engagement such as online activism and street protest. The freedoms of association, assembly and expression, however, are constrained by repressive public order policing and cyberbullying. Entrenched socio-economic inequalities and lax environmental management mean that many marginalized groups do not have access to basic welfare and are unable to effectively exercise their democratic rights. The scenario stresses the importance of addressing the socio-economic divides and environmental challenges that shape the lives of Southern Africans.

In the **disciplined improvement scenario**, democracy in the subregion has found a new equilibrium, driven by digital solutions to the challenges of the early 2020s. Representation and civic participation have been strengthened by the growing participation of citizens in policy discussions and through direct access to their elected officials. Electoral participation is high due to online voting options and improved civic education. New regulations governing the ethical use of artificial intelligence in elections and governance have enhanced the credibility of elections and reduced discrimination in government decision making. Progress, however, remains fragile, as the fragmentation of online discourse continues to generate disconnects between different communities. This scenario highlights the importance of balancing technological advances with democratic values, notably accessibility, transparency and inclusivity.

In the **collapse scenario**, democracy regresses to a level of extreme dysfunction in the wake of severe drought, which prompts an authoritarian spiral of decline across the subregion. Elections have little credibility and opposition parties are co-opted and weakened by the ruling elite while electoral fraud is a major problem. Participation is limited by a highly restricted civic space and declining faith in the capacity of democratic processes to bring about political change. Civil liberties are curtailed online and offline by draconian states that use ICTs to surveil and control their populations, and deploy their security agencies to stifle dissent. Social and economic inequalities are deep and exacerbated by the discriminatory effects of artificial intelligence, as well as competition over increasingly scarce basic goods and services. This future offers a stark warning of the potential consequences of failing to protect democratic institutions.

In the **transformation scenario**, democracy has undergone a fundamental change and brought about by government policies that promote equitable economic growth and environmental sustainability. In this future, civic engagement has significantly increased, as greater economic equality and broadband expansion have enabled formerly marginalized communities to participate more fully in their democracies. Online political participation has been invigorated by strong data governance and privacy protections. Democratic institutions are now more representative of the subregion's youthful demographic, thereby enhancing trust. The transformation narrative underscores how democratic progress, when rooted in local values and



sustained by regional cooperation, can deliver prosperity, stability and a future shaped by the aspirations of its people.

What can be done now to increase the chances that Southern Africa embarks on a path of democratic transformation? To facilitate thinking around this question, our paper concludes with some questions concerning the themes at the heart of the scenarios. Among other things, these address the connection between community-led natural resource management and democratic governance, mechanisms for youth inclusion, the role of elections in political participation and how best to develop inclusive and affordable Internet access.

# INTRODUCTION



We are living in an age of radical uncertainty in which the effects of climate change, migration, emerging technologies and conflicts are disrupting societies and economies. Unsurprisingly, people are anxious and left without a clear idea of what the future holds or how to plan for it (Casas-Zamora 2024). This uncertainty extends to how we think about and define democracy—especially in the post-colonial world, where the model of liberal democracy may be waning in popularity.

Data from International IDEA's Global State of Democracy (GSoD) Indices show that a decades-long pattern of democratic improvement has given way to one of decline. Economic inequality remains very high, with South Africa, Namibia, Botswana and Eswatini among the most unequal countries in the world (The World Bank 2022). Governments are struggling to deliver basic goods and services, and have made little progress in fighting corruption (International IDEA n.d.). Satisfaction with democratic performance has fallen sharply among citizens of many Southern African countries, and this pattern has been particularly pronounced in countries generally considered to be the subregion's strongest democracies (Afrobarometer 2024).<sup>1</sup>

There are also indications that these negative trends are changing Southern Africans' relationship with democracy. Young people feel particularly excluded from formal democratic institutions and are seeking alternative modes of political engagement, such as participation in protest movements (Dupuy, Arriola and Rakner 2023). Preference for democracy has declined in several countries in the subregion.<sup>2</sup> Across the continent, debates that challenge the legitimacy of the prevailing democratic model and push back against some of its core tenets appear to be intensifying (Afrobarometer 2024; Oluwafemi 2023; Towriss 2024).

Thus, even though Southern Africa has consistently been the continent's highest performing subregion across many of the GSoD Indices, recent trends appear to contain the seeds of a much less certain future. The volatility of our times means that if we wish to adequately prepare democracies in Southern Africa for what is to come, we must go beyond simply extrapolating from these trends. Stakeholders must anticipate and position themselves for a variety of possible long-term futures. How might these futures look?

To help answer this question, International IDEA and the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) Africa convened the Southern African Democratic Futures Conference. The conference, which took place in Pretoria, South Africa, on 9–10 October 2024, brought together a multidisciplinary group of experts and practitioners from across the subregion. Over the course of two days, and under the guidance of facilitators from the Institute for Futures

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**Even though Southern Africa has consistently been the continent's highest performing subregion across many of the GSoD Indices, recent trends appear to contain the seeds of a much less certain future.**

<sup>1</sup> Afrobarometer reports that between rounds 5 (2011–13) and 9 (2021–23) of its public opinion survey, satisfaction with democracy fell by 40 percentage points in Botswana and Mauritius, 35 percentage points in South Africa and 12 points in Namibia. Satisfaction also declined by 25 percentage points in Eswatini and by 24 percentage points in Lesotho (Afrobarometer 2024).

<sup>2</sup> Between rounds 5 and 9 of the Afrobarometer survey, a preference for democracy over other forms of government fell in the majority of Southern African countries surveyed. The biggest declines in the subregion were in South Africa (–29 percentage points), Malawi (–18 percentage points), Mauritius (–15 percentage points) and Mozambique (–14 percentage points) (Afrobarometer 2024).

Research, University of Stellenbosch, these participants engaged in foresight activities that aimed to identify and explore future democratic challenges and opportunities in Southern Africa. This paper contains the outcomes of these exercises.

Before proceeding to the findings, however, it is necessary to provide a brief explanation of foresight and to address the meaning of democracy.

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**Strategic foresight is a 'set of tools, collaborative processes, and mindsets used to anticipate future possibilities and make better decisions in an ever-changing world'.**

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## WHAT IS STRATEGIC FORESIGHT?

Strategic foresight is a 'set of tools, collaborative processes, and mindsets used to anticipate future possibilities and make better decisions in an ever-changing world' (Institute for the Future n.d.). Importantly, it is not about predicting the future. Instead, strategic foresight is grounded in present-day facts that are used 'with synthesis, sensemaking, creativity, and visualization' to create 'plausible, provocative stories about possible futures that resonate and inspire us to act differently today'. These tools facilitate creative thinking that goes beyond the limits of the present, turning 'uncertainty into inspiration' (Forchheimer 2022).

Participants in the Southern African Democratic Futures Conference engaged in a number of exercises that culminated in the development of plausible stories about how the future of democracy in Southern Africa might unfold over the next 20 years and what democracy might look like in 2043.<sup>3</sup> These stories, or 'scenarios', are based on four archetypes that depict different directions of change: continuation, disciplined improvement, collapse and transformation. Each was crafted using the factors discussed below. The scenarios then served as the basis for discussions about what innovations might be required to increase democratic resilience and preparedness for a variety of future possibilities.

The scenarios contained in these pages are lightly edited versions of those developed during the conference. They do not necessarily reflect the views of individual participants or their organizations. The goal is for readers to use the scenarios to inspire their own thinking and planning about how best to strengthen and promote democracy in their own contexts.

The Southern African Democratic Futures Conference is part of an International IDEA initiative, through which the Institute is convening similar strategic foresight workshops in other regions of the world, with the goal of preparing democracies for the future (International IDEA 2023).

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<sup>3</sup> The year 2043 was chosen to align with ISS forecasting work, which is based on the roll-out schedule of the African Union's development framework, Agenda 2063.

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## WHAT IS DEMOCRACY?

Democracy is a highly contested concept and there is little agreement on how it should be defined or practised (Osterberg-Kaufmann, Stark and Mohamad-Klotzbach n.d.). This is particularly true in Africa, where the debate has been further complicated by questions over whether it is a colonial imposition and its suitability to the African context (Cheeseman and Sishuwa 2021). With this in mind, the conference began with a discussion of what democracy meant to participants.

Several people emphasized the salience of citizens' material well-being—socio-economic rights, basic welfare, economic inequality—and the connection between democracy and development. Others spoke of the importance of recognizing the diversity of existing democratic arrangements, as well as democracy's dynamism and context sensitivity, and the impact of a country's history of state formation. Participants also highlighted the centrality of government accountability to its citizens, and the challenges posed by donor dependence and the influence of international financial institutions.

These are all represented in International IDEA's broad definition of democracy, which constituted the point of departure. This definition comprises two core principles: 'popular control over public decision-making and decision-makers' and 'equality between citizens in the exercise of that control' (Beetham et al. 2008). These principles are conceptualized in the framework in Figure 1, which breaks them down into 29 different elements arranged around four core categories of democratic performance: Representation, Rights, the Rule of Law and Participation.

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## FACTORS OF DEMOCRACY

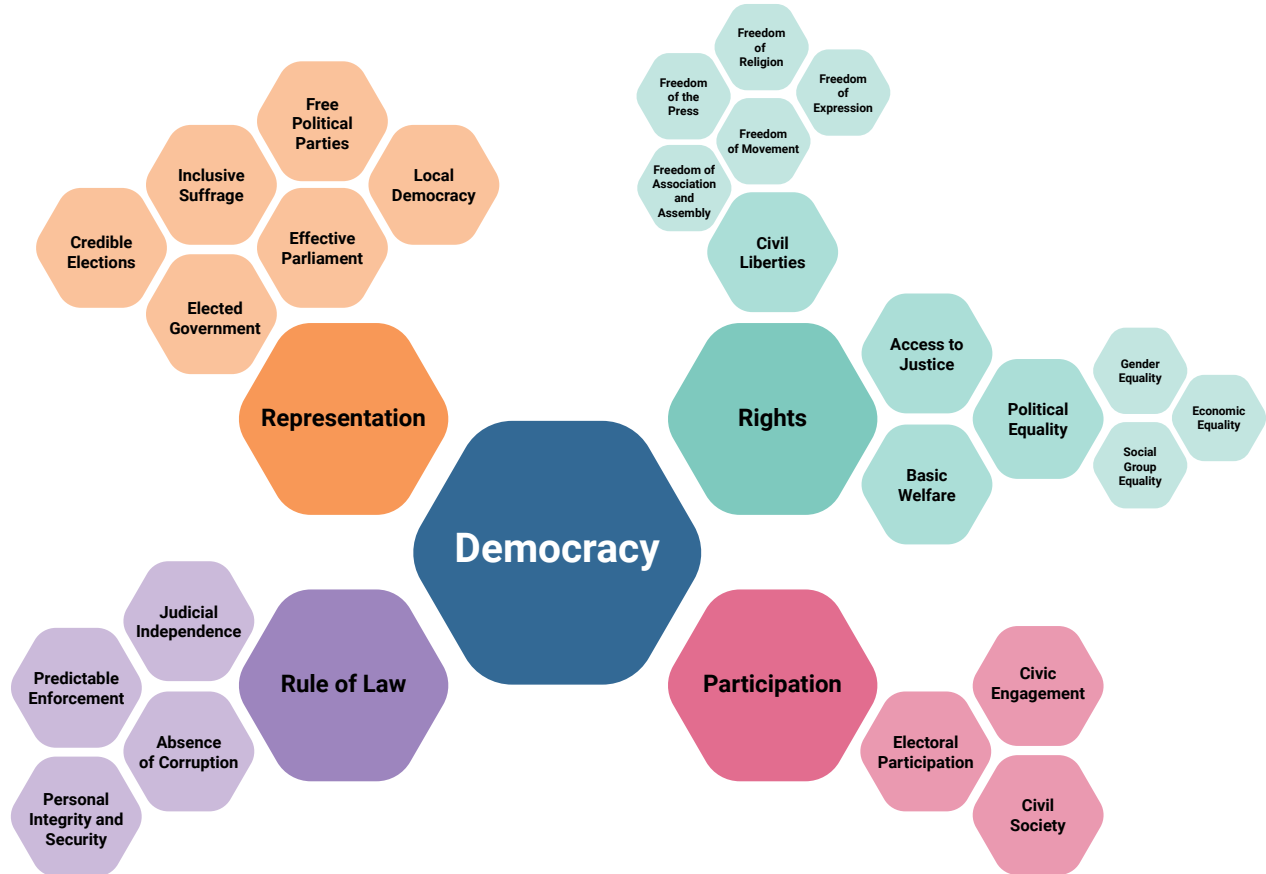
Using the conceptual framework as a launching pad, participants discussed a range of specific factors that might shape the future of democracy in Southern Africa and debated their varying levels of impact on the quality of democratic governance. These factors were then categorized, based on how participants felt about the degree of influence they are likely to have on the future of democracy in the subregion and the level of uncertainty around them—or how much knowledge exists about how the factors operate. Five factors were identified as having the highest levels of impact and uncertainty, and therefore the most disruptive potential: youth, natural resource management, environmental degradation, ICTs and access to information, and data governance. These became the core building blocks for the scenarios set out in Chapter 1.

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**Democracy is a highly contested concept and there is little agreement on how it should be defined or practised. This is particularly true in Africa, where the debate has been further complicated by questions over whether it is a colonial imposition and its suitability to the African context.**



Figure 1. The Global State of Democracy conceptual framework



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy 2024: Strengthening the Legitimacy of Elections in a Time of Radical Uncertainty (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2024), <<https://doi.org/10.31752/idea.2024.55>>.

Chapter 1

# CONTINUATION SCENARIO: ENTRENCHED INEQUALITY





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## HOW WOULD DEMOCRACY LOOK IN 2043?

Democratization in Southern Africa has stagnated. Distrust of democratic institutions has led to dwindling electoral participation and civic engagement increasingly takes the form of online activism and street protest. The freedoms of association, assembly and expression, however, are constrained by repressive public order policing and cyberbullying. Entrenched socio-economic inequalities and lax environmental management mean that many marginalized groups have no access to basic welfare provision and are unable to exercise their democratic rights effectively. This is particularly the case for mining-affected communities, which are excluded from key decision-making processes.

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**This scenario reflects a continuation of the trends observed over the past two decades and is marked by missed opportunities for reform and growing socio-economic divides.**

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## HOW DID WE GET HERE?

This scenario reflects a continuation of the trends observed over the past two decades and is marked by missed opportunities for reform and growing socio-economic divides. Southern Africa's abundant resources continue to be extracted without providing significant local benefits, particularly the highly sought-after transition minerals needed for renewable technologies. Political elites and corporate interests reap most of the revenue, while local communities remain economically excluded and bear the environmental costs. These extractive activities have degraded water sources and affected public health, limiting access to clean water and increasing the risk of disease.

The lack of access to basic welfare provision has further weakened democratic engagement as communities feel abandoned by political structures that fail to protect their fundamental needs. With the support of civil society, some communities, following the example of the Xolobeni community,<sup>4</sup> have been able to gain agency in decision-making processes, but such cases are rare. Unequal access and the exclusion of local voices weaken the democratic principles of representation, participation and accountability, fuelling distrust in political institutions.

Inadequate planning for the youth bulge means that economic and political exclusion persists among Southern Africa's young population, with limited youth representation in parliament and government, as well as disproportionately high youth unemployment. This exclusion has led to widespread despondency and distrust of formal democratic systems and is reflected in declining electoral participation. Many young people seek alternative models of governance and express their dissatisfaction through protest. This is often met with state repression and their concerns are largely ignored by policymakers. Economic migration remains high, and a brain

<sup>4</sup> Since 2007, the Xolobeni community, located on the coast of South Africa's Eastern Cape province, has successfully resisted state-supported efforts by a multinational company to mine titanium deposits on its ancestral land. The resistance has been spearheaded by a community-led organization, the Amadiba Crisis Committee, which has argued that the mining plans constitute externally imposed development and used awareness campaigns and public interest litigation to advance its cause (Tracy-Lynn 2021).

drain to other continents further depletes local talent pools and impacts civic participation. The middle class and privileged groups, however, feel less affected by these issues, leading to a class-based divide in democratic engagement.

Poor environmental management, intensified by competing western and Chinese interests, exacerbates the ecological challenges. Pollution, health issues and the extinction of local species have worsened, often highlighted by open-source intelligence and social media. However, increased awareness has not led to substantial policy change and corporate influence remains strong, limiting accountability and further weakening public trust in democratic governance.

Advances in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have expanded Internet access, particularly through services such as satellite-based service providers, and helped to foster a vibrant civic space online. However, economic barriers limit access by marginalized communities and social media remains both an opportunity and a threat to democracy. Spaces for youth engagement and transparency have been opened up but disinformation and cyberbullying, particularly targeted at political opposition and marginalized groups, present ongoing challenges to the freedom of political parties, as well as gender and social group equality. Data governance and accountability gaps allow social media platforms to operate without clear oversight, hindering the protection of citizens' civil liberties.

Internationally, Southern African talent is increasingly in demand due to aging populations in Europe and North America. Nonetheless, African migrants often face hostile environments marked by nationalism and racism, which complicates the diaspora experience. Educational exchanges, such as scholarships and fellowships, expose Southern Africans to western, Indian, Chinese and other perspectives. Those who return often bring foreign ideals, creating a divide between leaders and their people and echoing historical patterns of externally influenced leadership.

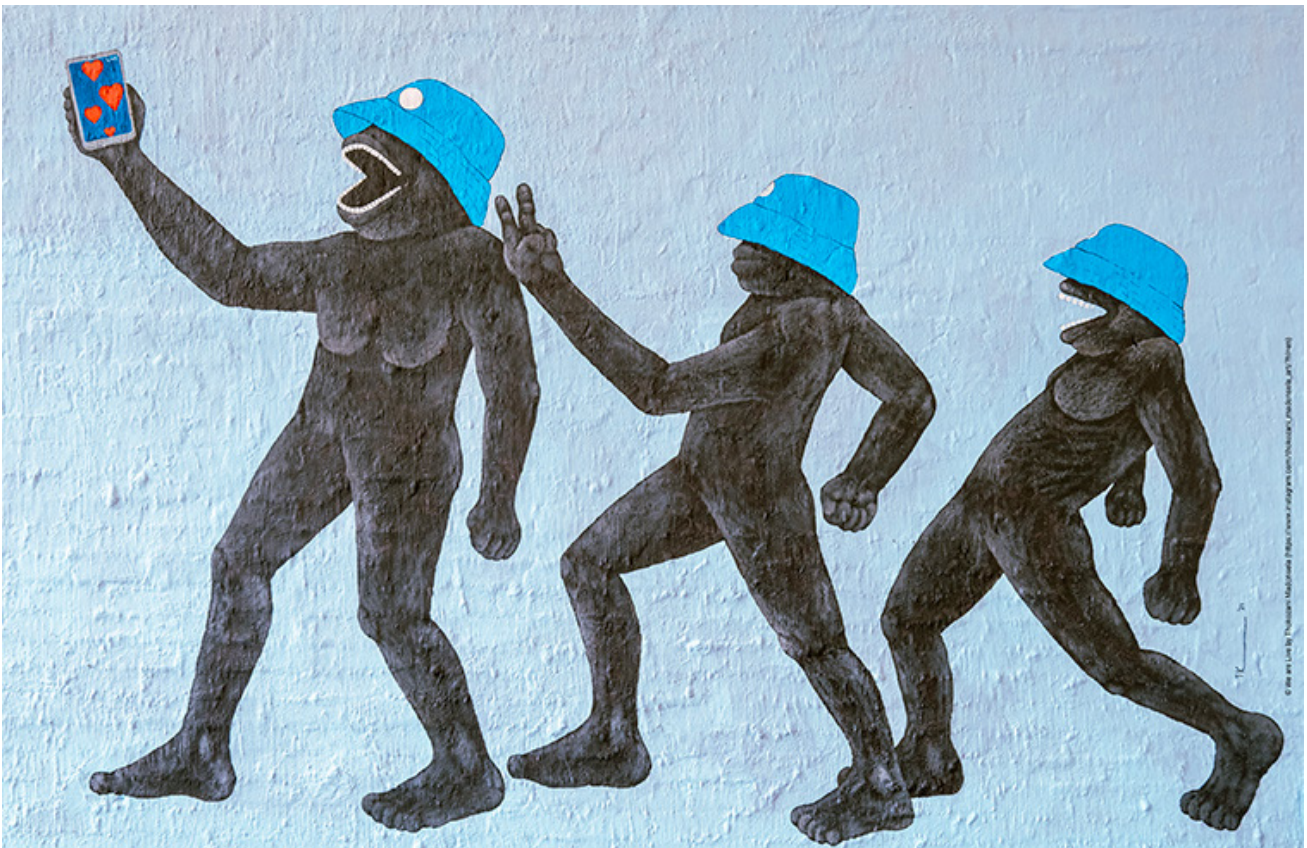
This scenario paints a picture of a subregion grappling with unaddressed inequalities and limited democratic responsiveness. Despite technological advances and the efforts of civil society, the systemic exclusion of youth and local communities hinders democratic progress. The persistence of current trends suggests a democracy at risk of stagnation unless significant reforms can address the socio-economic divides and environmental challenges that shape the lives of Southern Africans.

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**The persistence of current trends suggests a democracy at risk of stagnation unless significant reforms can address the socio-economic divides and environmental challenges that shape the lives of Southern Africans.**

## Chapter 2

# DISCIPLINED IMPROVEMENT SCENARIO: DIGITALLY DRIVEN DEMOCRACY



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## HOW WOULD DEMOCRACY LOOK IN 2043?

Democracy in Southern Africa finds a new equilibrium, having responded to the challenges of the early 2020s. Over time, the political influence of former liberation parties has evolved into dynamic polities that involve robust opposition parties and a regular turnover of governing parties. Representation and civic participation have been strengthened by the growing participation of citizens in policy discussions and through direct access to elected officials. Electoral participation is high due to online voting options and improved civic education. New regulations governing the ethical use of artificial intelligence (AI) in elections and governance have enhanced the credibility of elections and reduced discrimination in government decision making.

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## HOW DID WE GET HERE?

The journey to 2043 began with a concentrated effort to improve digital inclusion and address declining civic engagement. Throughout the 2020s, governments focused on extending Internet access to underserved areas, enabling citizens to participate more actively in democratic processes. By the early 2030s, universal Internet access had been achieved through subsidized data plans, which allowed citizens to attend virtual town halls, track government spending and engage directly with leaders. Digital tools enhanced representation by fostering direct engagement between citizens and officials, although concerns remain about corporate influence over digital infrastructure.

Data governance policies emerged alongside digital inclusion efforts, and there were new standards on citizens' privacy and accountability in data handling by both public and private sector actors. In particular, fears about AI prompted regional agreements on minimum standards for its ethical use, particularly in elections and governance. While compliance with these standards has been patchy, the result has been an improvement in the online informational environment and a reduction in discrimination against minority groups.

This journey has not been without its challenges. Many citizens felt overwhelmed by the high volume of information available to them and some turned to smaller, more focused online communities. The subsequent fragmentation of online discourse generated some disconnects between different communities and—in the worst cases—social conflict. However, coordinated action by politicians and social media companies has prevented these divisions from escalating to the political polarization experienced in the 2010s and early 2020s.

Youth inclusion policies became a central focus in the 2030s, driven by leadership initiatives and electoral reforms that encouraged younger generations to take on public roles. This generational shift brought in leaders who prioritized transparency and accountability, strengthening electoral participation and making democratic processes more responsive to public

needs. By the mid-2030s, younger, digitally fluent leaders had reshaped the political landscape. Open government platforms enabled real-time dialogue between citizens and policymakers in online forums, which made democracy more immediate and responsive as citizens felt renewed confidence in democratic institutions.

The sustainable management of natural resources emerged as an essential focus, and governments ensured that resource revenues supported healthcare, education and infrastructure. These initiatives improved access to basic welfare and fostered greater equality between groups, helping communities to benefit directly from local resources.

New digital and other infrastructure made Southern Africa an attractive destination for foreign investment. This economic boost improved public services and created new jobs in tech-driven industries. As living standards improved and economic inequalities diminished, more citizens felt able to confidently engage in policy discussions.

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**By 2043, improvements in living standards and reduced inequalities had encouraged broader participation and trust in the democratic process.**

By 2043, improvements in living standards and reduced inequalities had encouraged broader participation and trust in the democratic process. Democracy in Southern Africa evolved into a resilient digitally driven system with an engaged society equipped to influence government policies. However, progress remains fragile, highlighting the ongoing need to balance technological advances with democratic values such as accessibility, transparency and inclusivity.



## Chapter 3

# COLLAPSE SCENARIO: DEMOCRACY DISMANTLED



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## HOW WOULD DEMOCRACY LOOK IN 2043?

Democracy in Southern Africa has regressed to a level of extreme dysfunction. Elections have little credibility. Opposition parties have been co-opted and weakened by the ruling elite and electoral fraud is a major problem. Participation is limited by a highly restricted civic space and declining faith in the capacity of democratic processes to bring about political change. Civil liberties are curtailed online and offline by authoritarian states that use ICTs to surveil and control their populations, and deploy their security agencies to stifle dissent. There are deep social and economic inequalities exacerbated by the discriminatory effects of AI and competition over increasingly scarce basic goods and services.

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## HOW DID WE GET HERE?

The origins of this crisis date back to 2024, when a devastating drought led to a severe humanitarian crisis. The failure of governments to adequately respond to the crisis provoked widespread discontent, deep polarization between the 'haves' and 'have nots' and escalating civil unrest. The authorities responded with increasingly repressive containment strategies as they sought to re-establish public order. A 20-year spiral of decline followed, in which governments that lacked popular support and legitimacy entrenched themselves in power by building authoritarian and securitized states. Political and economic power was centralized within small elites and the states were run by politicized bureaucracies. There have been no transfers of power within the subregion since 2025. Democratic processes have become largely perfunctory, offering citizens little influence over decision making or decision makers.

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**A sense of hopelessness now permeates the population, which does not trust any of the political elites.**

A sense of hopelessness now permeates the population, which does not trust any of the political elites. Formerly popular opposition parties are no longer seen as viable alternatives, especially as they have been further weakened by government co-option of their leaders. Those which resisted were often deregistered, starved of state funds or subjected to direct state repression. The dominance of incumbents in fraudulent elections means that many people no longer view political participation as a path to change. This is reflected in declining voter turnout across the region.

Instead of promoting civic participation and advancing civil rights, ICTs have been transformed into instruments of control and exclusion, enabling governments to suppress dissent. The rise of AI technologies has exacerbated unemployment, and the embedding of AI into recruitment perpetuates marginalization by reinforcing discriminatory stereotypes through biased algorithms. This trend has disproportionately affected vulnerable communities, deepening existing social and economic inequalities. Meanwhile, data governance is weak and regional governments reportedly manipulate data and ICTs to control communities and surveil critics.



Relationships between countries in the region have deteriorated. Resource scarcities following the 2024 drought prompted governments to adopt increasingly isolationist policies, blaming their neighbours for their own domestic failures. The ensuing tensions caused the Southern African Development Community (SADC) to collapse and the African Union now has limited sway in the subregion. The closure of regional democracy support initiatives contributed to notable declines in the effectiveness of parliaments and the independence of judiciaries.

For 20 years, local and international players have exploited the region's natural resources, using the revenues for personal enrichment and technologies for population surveillance. Consequently, local populations have little ownership of the region's bountiful natural resources. The uncontrolled extraction model, in turn, has resulted in water contamination, displacement and various health issues for local populations, affecting their ability to exercise their political rights.

As the effects of the climate emergency escalate, severe weather has deepened food insecurity and impacted infrastructure to the point where it is difficult for people to participate in the basics of politics. Access to polling stations is often limited, magnifying problems with voter participation and electoral credibility. A significant increase in the number of climate refugees moving north and east has overwhelmed unprepared states, fuelling social conflict and xenophobia.

Over the past two decades, as those who remain have grown increasingly desperate, the subregion has become a major hub for drug trafficking and small arms smuggling. This has resulted in a sharp rise in violence, and vulnerable communities bear the brunt. In response, governments have shifted away from rule of law approaches, relying instead on military operations that have been marred by human rights abuses and done little to improve safety. Public trust in democratic institutions to uphold the rule of law and ensure personal integrity and security has been steadily eroded.

In 2043, democracy in Southern Africa is in severe decline, marked by authoritarian control, deep inequality and eroded public trust. Elections lack credibility and political engagement feels futile. ICT and AI have become tools of repression, while unchecked resource exploitation and climate crises deepen social fragmentation. Citizens face increasing insecurity, while subverted democracy offers little hope for meaningful change.

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**In 2043, democracy in Southern Africa is in severe decline, marked by authoritarian control, deep inequality and eroded public trust.**

## Chapter 4

# TRANSFORMATION SCENARIO: INNOVATIVE RESURGENCE



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## HOW WOULD DEMOCRACY LOOK IN 2043?

Democracy in Southern Africa has undergone a fundamental change. Civic engagement has significantly increased as greater economic equality and broadband expansion have enabled formerly marginalized communities to participate more fully in their democracies. Online political participation has been invigorated by strong data governance and privacy protections. Democratic institutions are now more representative of the subregion's youthful demographic, which has enhanced trust. Institutions are also more responsive as younger leaders have found new ways to connect with citizens.

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## HOW DID WE GET HERE?

The journey to this transformative state began in the 2020s, when regional leaders, learning the lessons of the Covid-19 pandemic, prioritized democratic resilience by focusing on equitable economic growth and environmental sustainability. Moving away from fossil fuels, the Southern African countries—particularly Botswana, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe—harnessed renewable sources of energy, which facilitated local communities' shared control of such resources. This shift, which was partially inspired by the example set in Namibia and Botswana, strengthened the democratic agency of local communities and led to investment into community development projects, healthcare and educational initiatives. Community involvement in natural resource management has become the norm, aligning practice with the democratic principles of accountability and representation.

Community-led natural resource management has gone hand in hand with strong environmental stewardship marked by sustainable practices and community rights. This approach has resulted in gains such as a reduction in pollution and the preservation of biodiversity. Civil society and local government have collaborated to ensure that environmental policies reflect public interests, creating a powerful model of participatory democracy rooted in sustainable development.

Vocational training and job creation programmes have provided meaningful employment opportunities that honour diverse skills, contributing to a significant increase in gross domestic product per capita and a reduction in extreme poverty that was well above initial forecasts. This success is rooted in investments in social welfare, sovereign wealth funds and effective public-private partnerships, which together reinforce Southern Africa's vision of a democracy that uplifts and empowers its people. Lessons from West Africa's diaspora engagement have been pivotal, enabling Southern African nations to foster strong ties with their diasporas and enhance local governance through skills transfers and support for political fundraising, thereby reshaping the political culture and expanding the region's democratic landscape.

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**The journey to this transformative state began in the 2020s, when regional leaders, learning the lessons of the Covid-19 pandemic, prioritized democratic resilience by focusing on equitable economic growth and environmental sustainability.**

Youth leadership has been a defining feature of this transformation. Starting in the early 2030s, targeted initiatives such as investments in education, mentorship programmes and institutional reforms to create space for young voices encouraged young people to take on significant leadership roles. This resulted in a median age of political leadership of 44 in 2043. The younger generation's rise to leadership positions has precipitated innovative approaches to governance, bridging the gap between government and citizens, enhancing transparency and reshaping policy around equitable economic growth and social cohesion.

The era's technological advances, in particular the expansion of broadband and partnerships with satellite Internet service providers, have connected rural and urban areas alike. Data governance and privacy protections have been strengthened, and regional ownership of data centres ensures safe and equitable access to digital spaces. Southern Africa's approach to technology balances progress with accountability, offering a model for secure civic participation in the digital age.

On the global stage, Southern Africa has emerged as a respected partner, shifting from dependency to equitable partnerships with key trade partners within and outside the region and in the expanded BRICS (formerly Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) platform. This transformation has empowered the region to negotiate beneficial trade agreements and lead innovative projects, such as regional high-speed rail systems, while strengthening its role in multilateral forums. As the region asserts its influence, Southern Africa's successes in democratic governance, economic innovation and environmental sustainability inspire global admiration, solidifying its position as a leader in democratic transformation.

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**In 2043, Southern Africa exemplifies the potential of a democracy built on citizen participation, youth empowerment, sustainable resource management and technological inclusivity.**

In 2043, Southern Africa exemplifies the potential of a democracy built on citizen participation, youth empowerment, sustainable resource management and technological inclusivity. This future illustrates how democratic progress, when rooted in local values and sustained by regional cooperation, can deliver prosperity, stability and a future shaped by the aspirations of all its people.

## Chapter 5

# CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

What can be done now to increase the chances that Southern Africa will embark on a path that results in democratic transformation? Given that contexts vary widely between countries, we close with questions for thought in lieu of policy recommendations.

- To what extent is community-led natural resource management linked to and important for democratic governance? What (and how) can we learn from countries that have existing models of such governance?
- How can existing Southern African strengths, such as natural resources and young populations, be better leveraged for a distinct model of democratic development?
- What mechanisms might facilitate greater inclusion of youth in existing political institutions?
- To what extent do elections fulfil people's desire to participate, especially with regard to youth? What other forms of participation might be more meaningful and how could these be developed?
- What are the models for widespread, inclusive and affordable Internet access, and what safeguards might be needed to mitigate the polarization that could accompany such access?
- To what extent might existing African regional human rights and good governance treaties require updates to reflect contemporary issues, such as the rise of AI, and the need for data governance and privacy protections? How can the national implementation of such regional frameworks be better harmonized and coordinated?

While these questions and the above scenarios reflect issues common to many parts of the continent, they also speak to the peculiarities of the Southern African context and underscore the value of conducting similar foresight workshops in other African subregions.

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# About International IDEA

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) is an intergovernmental organization with 35 Member States founded in 1995, with a mandate to support sustainable democracy worldwide.

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## WHAT WE DO

We develop policy-friendly research related to elections, parliaments, constitutions, digitalization, climate change, inclusion and political representation, all under the umbrella of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. We assess the performance of democracies around the world through our unique Global State of Democracy Indices and Democracy Tracker.

We provide capacity development and expert advice to democratic actors including governments, parliaments, election officials and civil society. We develop tools and publish databases, books and primers in several languages on topics ranging from voter turnout to gender quotas.

We bring states and non-state actors together for dialogues and lesson sharing. We stand up and speak out to promote and protect democracy worldwide.

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## WHERE WE WORK

Our headquarters is in Stockholm, and we have regional and country offices in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Europe, and Latin America and the Caribbean. International IDEA is a Permanent Observer to the United Nations and is accredited to European Union institutions.

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## OUR PUBLICATIONS AND DATABASES

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Data from International IDEA's Global State of Democracy Indices show that Southern Africa has consistently been Africa's highest performing subregion in many areas of democracy but recent trends appear to contain the seeds of a much less certain future. Economic inequality remains high, governments are struggling to deliver basic goods and services, and citizen satisfaction with democracy is declining. These are volatile times. If we wish to adequately prepare democracies in Southern Africa for what is to come, we must go beyond extrapolating from these trends. Stakeholders must anticipate and position themselves for a variety of possible long-term futures. How might these futures look?

International IDEA and the Institute for Security Studies convened a multidisciplinary group of experts and practitioners from across Southern Africa for a foresight conference to identify and explore future democratic challenges and opportunities in the subregion. This Discussion Paper presents the outcomes of that conference.