



19-20 June 2025, Pretoria, South Africa

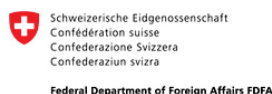
THE PRETORIA CONSENSUS

Communiqué Arising from the High-Level Dialogue on
Reimagining Democracy in Africa: Comparative
Experiences from the Global South.

Co-Hosted by:



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PREAMBLE

We, the participants of the high-level dialogue held from 19-20 June 2025, under the theme “Reimagining Democracy in Africa: Comparative Experiences from the Global South”, co-convened by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), the African Union (AU), the Open Society Foundations, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), the European Union, and the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) of the Republic of South Africa, hereby issue this communiqué.

The high-level dialogue brought together over 200 stakeholders from across Africa and the Global South, including state actors, parliamentarians, civil society organisations (CSOs), youth organisations, academics, media outlets, and representatives of regional bodies such as the African Union (AU), African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), SADC Secretariat, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations-Economic Commission for Africa (UN-ECA), and various Election Management Bodies (EMBs). These diverse stakeholders participated in discussions that underscored the need for a fundamental reimagining of democracy, recognising that the democratic frameworks inherited or adopted by many nations must evolve to meet the dynamic realities of contemporary governance challenges.

Acknowledging the Context and Background

Participants noted that the trajectory of democracy, especially in Africa, has been deeply influenced by historical legacies, colonialism, and the complexities of state-building. In this context, the high-level dialogue recognised that democracy must transcend the procedural aspects of elections and political representation, emphasising the deeper, substantive dimensions of governance that directly impact the lives of ordinary citizens.

In many African countries, democratisation has been accompanied by challenges such as poverty, inequality, exclusion, and state fragility. Noting that these issues persist despite the adoption of democratic frameworks, the high-level dialogue affirmed that the crisis faced by many democracies in the Global South is a crisis of substance rather than form. Speakers collectively emphasised that democracy, in its current form, often fails to deliver on its promise of development, equality, and social justice, particularly for the most marginalised groups.

Reimagining Democracy: A Decolonial, People-Centred Vision

The high-level dialogue emphasised the need to reimagine democracy through a decolonial and people-centred lens. Conscious of the enduring legacies of colonialism and imperialism, participants affirmed that Africa's democratic project must be grounded in the continent's histories, cultures, and struggles for justice. Participants underscored that externally imposed models should not dictate Africa's democratic vision but must reflect African societies' aspirations, values, and social realities. In this regard, the high-level dialogue commended the efforts of social movements and organisations across the continent that have worked to reclaim democracy as a tool for social justice and empowerment.

The high-level dialogue recollects that democracy must be anchored in the lived experiences of ordinary citizens, particularly marginalised groups such as the youth, women, people living with disabilities, and rural communities. Participants appreciated that the voices and leadership of these groups must be central to any reimagining of African democratic practice. We urge that their active participation and leadership be prioritised, not merely as tokens of inclusion but as vital contributors to the transformation of governance systems. This requires a paradigm shift from elite bargains and top-down governance models to participatory, transparent, and accountable systems that reflect the aspirations of the broader population.

The Crisis of Democratic Substance: A Call for Transformation

The high-level dialogue highlighted the persistence of poverty, exclusion, and inequality in many democratic systems, emphasising that while formal democratic institutions like elections and political parties are essential, they are insufficient to ensure citizens' well-being or societal development. Noting the failure of many governments in the Global South to fulfil promises of equitable growth and social justice, participants affirmed that the crisis in democratic governance stems not from procedural failures but from a lack of democratic substance. The dialogue warned against complacency in focusing solely on formal democratic processes, stressing the need to address deeper economic justice issues, social equity, and human dignity. Participants emphasised that true democracy must fulfil procedural and substantive rights, including access to quality public services, dignity, and participation in decision-making. The participants recommended redefining democratic governance in the Global South to prioritise electoral mechanics and the tangible outcomes democracy should deliver, particularly for historically excluded groups.

The Role of Participatory and Inclusive Governance

Acknowledging the current global political developments, the high-level dialogue participants expressed concern over the rising tide of authoritarianism and the growing erosion of democratic norms across the Global South, highlighting the increasing threats to political freedoms, civil liberties, and institutional integrity. Raising concern about the growing trend of populism, elite capture, and the abuse of power under the guise of democracy, participants emphasised the need for an inclusive, participatory governance model. It was noted that democracy must be about more than just elections—it must be about ensuring that the voices of all citizens, particularly the most marginalised, are central to the decision-making processes.

The high-level dialogue encouraged promoting participatory governance systems that enable citizens, particularly those from historically excluded groups, to have a voice in shaping the policies that affect them. In this regard, the high-level dialogue highlighted the importance of fostering inclusive democratic practices rooted in local realities. This includes ensuring that democratic processes are about formal participation in elections and active, continuous engagement in governance at all levels. The high-level dialogue emphasised that participatory governance must be institutionalised as a right, not as a favour, and that it must reflect the needs and aspirations of ordinary people.

The Need for Stronger Regional Mechanisms and Multilateralism

Drawing on comparative experiences from Sudan, South Africa, and other Global South contexts, the high-level dialogue emphasised the importance of strengthening regional and continental mechanisms to safeguard democracy and constitutional order. Noting the growing challenges to democratic governance within the region, including military coups, authoritarian regimes, and the suppression of civil society, participants urged greater political will from regional organisations, particularly the African Union (AU), to uphold democratic principles and safeguard civic space.

The high-level dialogue participants commended the AU for its efforts to promote democratic governance across the continent. Still, they raised concerns about the gaps in implementing its norms and standards, particularly in relation to unconstitutional government changes and the protection of human rights. In this context, the high-level dialogue recommended that the AU and other regional bodies strengthen their roles in fostering democratic consolidation and supporting member states facing democratic backsliding. This includes ensuring that regional organisations are adequately resourced and politically empowered to respond to emerging democratic challenges.

Reclaiming the Social Contract for Democratic Renewal

The high-level dialogue noted the critical need to reclaim and strengthen the social contract, emphasising that democracy must be understood as a continuous, participatory practice and acknowledging the central role of youth, women, and people with disabilities in driving democratic renewal; the participants expressed concern over their marginalisation in post-conflict political structures, which undermines efforts towards genuine democratic transformation. The high-level dialogue recognised that the collapse of the social contract in many African nations resulted from the promise's betrayal. The participants urged a fundamental shift in political power dynamics to prioritise economic democracy and social justice.

Appreciating the importance of global solidarity, the participants emphasised that solidarity must go beyond rhetoric, with practical exchanges of strategies and resources to support movements fighting for accountability, civic space, and justice. Encouraging the expansion of civic participation at all levels, the participants reminded governments to ensure the inclusion of marginalised voices in decision-making processes, ensuring that the social contract reflects the needs and aspirations of all citizens. The participants recommended reclaiming democracy as a daily practice, urging all actors to remain committed to justice, equity, and accountable governance to benefit all citizens.

Strengthening Electoral Democracy

The high-level dialogue highlighted the essential role of elections in maintaining democratic integrity while acknowledging the challenges faced by electoral systems in an evolving world. Emphasising that elections alone do not guarantee democracy, participants raised concerns about the need for continuous adaptation to political, technological, and environmental changes to safeguard electoral integrity and public trust. The high-level dialogue emphasised that electoral systems must be continually revised to remain resilient and responsive. The importance of citizen engagement was stressed, focusing on ensuring that marginalised groups have an active role in electoral processes.

Furthermore, the high-level dialogue also highlighted the need for responsible technology use to maintain transparency and the critical role of the judiciary in ensuring electoral justice. Addressing concerns over political finance, the high-level dialogue urged a rethink of systems to enable broader participation, particularly for youth and women. Participants acknowledged the need for continuous reform, post-election evaluations, and enhanced civic education was acknowledged to ensure informed citizen participation. The participants called for ongoing electoral reform, robust citizen engagement, responsible technology use, and strong electoral justice systems. Participants urged all stakeholders to work together to create inclusive electoral systems that strengthen democracy and foster public trust across the Global South.

Democratic Transitions in the Global South

The high-level dialogue on democratic transitions in the Global South emphasised that these transitions are complex and ongoing, requiring continuous negotiation, societal inclusion, and the pursuit of political and socio-economic freedoms. Participants recognised that South Africa's transition resulted from prolonged negotiations, highlighting the role of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in fostering dialogue. Reflecting on South America, the dialogue stressed that democratisation is a continuous struggle, particularly for marginalised groups like women and indigenous communities, and raised concerns about the escalation of far-right movements. In Bangladesh, independent journalism was acknowledged, with warnings about the risks of social media spreading disinformation. While political freedoms have progressed in Africa, concerns about economic inequality and social injustice were raised, emphasising the need for inclusive transitions. The dialogue reaffirmed that successful transitions require ongoing collaboration, institutional reforms, and a comprehensive approach to measuring democracy, focusing on economic, social, and cultural rights. The dialogue concluded by urging future transitions to focus on marginalised groups, ensuring transformative change and encouraging the exchange of best practices.

Addressing the Impact of Emerging Global Challenges

The dialogue highlighted the critical intersection of democracy, governance, climate justice, and technological impacts on democratic systems, particularly in Africa and the Global South. Participants emphasised the need for inclusive and equitable democratic frameworks that address evolving challenges, including integrating marginalised voices in decision-making, particularly regarding climate justice. Raising concern over disproportionate climate financing burdens on African nations despite their minimal contribution to global emissions, the dialogue applauded initiatives empowering youth to advocate for climate justice. Noting the growing role of digital technologies, especially AI, in electoral processes, participants raised concern about biases that may disenfranchise voters, urging the development of robust regulatory frameworks and local capacity-building. The dialogue also acknowledged Africa's critical role in the global energy transition and urged stronger democratic governance in managing mineral resources. Emphasising the importance of South-South solidarity and regional cooperation, participants recommended an integrated approach to governance that balances technological innovation with social and environmental justice. We called for sustained efforts to ensure future generations are empowered to shape their political and socio-economic futures inclusively and sustainably.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the high-level dialogue emphasised that the reimagination of democracy in Africa and the Global South must be rooted in inclusivity, social justice, and participatory governance. The participants commended the efforts of various regional bodies, civil society organisations, and grassroots movements in advancing democratic principles but warned that the fragility of democracy remains a pressing challenge. To ensure that democracy delivers on its promises, the high-level dialogue urged all stakeholders—governments, international organisations, and civil society—to collaborate in creating more resilient, inclusive, and accountable democratic systems.

The high-level dialogue reaffirmed that democracy is not a borrowed project but a universal aspiration that must be shaped by the people's agency. We called for a renewed commitment to democratic practices that prioritise the needs and aspirations of all citizens, particularly those who have been historically excluded. This vision of democracy, grounded in the realities of the Global South, will require bold political leadership, a commitment to deep reforms, and the active participation of all citizens in shaping the future of their societies.

**For More Information,
Please Contact:**



Contact Us :



Murkthar Suleiman
m.suleiman@idea.int

