

The background of the cover is a dark blue gradient. It features a large, glowing blue silhouette of a human head in profile, facing right. Inside the head, there is a complex network of white and yellow circuitry lines. To the left of the head, there is a cluster of circular icons, each containing a different national flag. A large, stylized flag of Botswana is positioned above the head, partially overlapping the circuitry.

Report of the Regional Roundtable, Artificial Intelligence in Electoral Processes: **Threats and Opportunities** for Election Management Bodies

27th Annual General Conference
of the Electoral Commissions Forum
of SADC Countries

2 December 2025

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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

AGC	Annual General Conference
AI	Artificial intelligence
CEO	Chief Executive OR Elections Officer
EBC	Elections and Boundary Commission, Eswatini
ECF-SADC	Electoral Commissions Forum of SADC Countries
EISA	Electoral Institute of Sustainable Democracy and Integrity in Africa
EMB	Electoral management body
IEBC	Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission, Kenya
IEC	Electoral Commission of South Africa
IFES	International Foundation for Electoral Systems
SADC	Southern African Development Community
YIAGA	Youth Initiative for Advocacy, Growth and Advancement

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 27th Annual General Conference (AGC) of the Electoral Commissions Forum of SADC Countries (ECF-SADC) took place in Eswatini on 1–5 December 2025 with support from International IDEA and the European Union. The AGC brought together regional electoral management bodies (EMBs) from the SADC countries—Angola, Botswana, Comoros, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eswatini, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, United Republic of Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe, as well as partners and observers to deliberate on the theme: Artificial Intelligence in Elections: Threats and Opportunities. The AGC program contained a full-day thematic roundtable discussion on this theme on 2 December 2025. The meeting highlighted the transformative potential of artificial intelligence (AI) to enhance electoral efficiency, inclusivity, and accuracy but also acknowledged the escalating risks AI poses to democratic integrity across the SADC region.

The key findings from the discourse were that AI offers transformative opportunities for more efficient, secure, and inclusive electoral management through automation, enhanced data accuracy, predictive planning, targeted voter education, better accessibility tools for vulnerable populations, and improved cybersecurity. However, it also poses major risks linked to disinformation, cyberattacks, algorithmic bias, privacy violations, digital exclusion, and reliance on external vendors that threaten electoral integrity. These dynamics reinforce the central role of independent, trusted, and well-resourced EMBs, and highlight the value of regional solidarity in strengthening resilience.

Member states were urged to develop AI governance laws for elections, ensure transparency and data protection, and invest in staff capacity, digital literacy, and secure technological infrastructure. Furthermore, EMBs should use AI responsibly for voter education, countering disinformation, and promoting inclusion, while securing sustainable financing and strengthening ECF-SADC support. Regional harmonization, shared best practices, and continued observation efforts will be essential, along with ethical and human rights-based oversight to ensure that AI ultimately strengthens democracy.

The AGC reaffirmed the central role of EMBs as custodians of democracy and stressed the importance of regional solidarity, peer learning, and sustainable investments to safeguard electoral systems. Delegates called for strengthened policies, new legal frameworks, and coordinated regional strategies to ensure that AI becomes a tool that protects rather than undermines democratic processes in the SADC region.

1. OBJECTIVES OF THE MEETING

The roundtable discussion was convened with the following objectives:

Examine the role of AI in modern electoral processes: The discussion explored how artificial intelligence (AI) can enhance efficiency, accuracy, and inclusion in election administration, from voter registration to data processing, boundary delimitation, resource allocation, and citizen engagement.

Assess the risks to democratic integrity posed by AI: The roundtable analyzed emerging threats such as disinformation, deepfakes, cyberattacks, algorithmic biases, privacy violations, and the potential for manipulation of electoral processes.

Strengthen the capacity of electoral management bodies (EMBs) to navigate AI adoption responsibly: The discussion also focused on ways to promote responsible use of AI anchored in transparency, accountability, human oversight, and respect for fundamental rights.

Reinforce regional collaboration and peer learning: The roundtable aimed to build collective resilience by sharing experience, lessons learned, and best practices from election observation missions, policy development, and capacity-building efforts.

Promote governance reforms and sustainable financing: The meeting discussed the need for robust legal frameworks, institutional strengthening, and adequate financial resources to support digital transformation in electoral management.

2. PARTICIPANTS

The Roundtable discussion and the Annual General Conference (AGC) brought together a broad and diverse set of stakeholders.

- a. **ECF-SADC Member Commissions** were represented by Chairpersons, Commissioners, Chief Elections Officers (CEOs), and senior technical staff.
- b. **ECF-SADC partner organizations** such as the African Union Commission Department of Political Affairs, Peace and Security, the Centre for Human Rights at the University of Pretoria, the European Centre for Electoral Support (ECES), Electoral Institute of Sustainable Democracy (EISA), the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ), International IDEA, the International Foundation of Electoral Systems (IFES), the Institute for Security Studies (ISS), and Yiaga Africa. Each provided insights on AI, governance, and electoral integrity.
- c. **Independent experts**, such as researchers, policy experts, and international development partners contributed to the discussions on technology, democracy, and human rights.
- d. **Media representatives** extended the discussions beyond the room to the airwaves of Eswatini and beyond.
- e. **Members of the international/diplomatic community** from the African Union, the European Union and SADC.

Collectively, the participants demonstrated a unified commitment to strengthening electoral democracy through informed, ethical, and regionally aligned approaches to emerging technologies such as AI.

3. THE THEMATIC ROUNDTABLE EVENT

The thematic roundtable was preceded by an official opening event at which the representative of His Majesty, King Mswati III, His Royal Highness Prince Lonkhkhokhela, delivered a keynote address. Speaking on behalf of His Majesty the King, the Prince welcomed delegates to the Kingdom of Eswatini and expressed appreciation for the opportunity to host the 27th Annual General Conference (AGC). He highlighted Eswatini's rich cultural heritage, as well as the country's peace and stability. Appreciation was extended to member EMBs, partners, observers, and media representatives. The keynote address was followed by remarks from regional electoral leaders and government representatives, who emphasized the importance of regional cooperation, democratic governance, and strengthening electoral processes across the SADC region. Bishop Reverend Sipho C. Tembe, Deputy Chairperson of the Elections and Boundary Commission (EBC) of Eswatini, welcomed delegates and highlighted the Forum's longstanding role in strengthening electoral institutions through peer learning and collaboration, while cautioning against emerging threats such as misinformation and technological disruption. Manuel Pereira da Silva, President of the National Electoral Commission (Comissão Nacional Eleitoral, CNE) of Angola, speaking in his capacity as Chair of the ECF-SADC, emphasized the importance of the AI theme, noting the forum's contributions to capacity building, election observation, and sharing best practices across member states. Mosotho Moepya, Chairperson of the Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC), speaking in his capacity as ECF-SADC Executive Committee Chairperson, described AI as a "double-edged sword." He raised critical governance questions around its use in voter registration, data management, and ensuring electoral integrity, while stressing the need for institutional independence and regional cooperation.

Also speaking at the opening ceremony, Hon. Pholile Shakantu, Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Dorcas Dlamini, Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Justice, reiterated the urgency of adapting to AI's growing influence on elections. Both speakers noted that while AI presents opportunities to improve efficiency, voter engagement, and administrative accuracy, it also introduces risks such as cyber threats, deepfakes, bias, and erosion of public trust. Across all the speakers, the key messages were the need for a balanced and responsible approach to AI, strong digital and legal safeguards, investment in infrastructure and capacity building, and sustained collaboration among EMBs and partners. Collectively, the remarks framed AI as both transformative and a potentially disruptive force, underscoring the responsibility of EMBs as custodians of democracy to ensure that technology enhances rather than undermines free, fair, and credible elections in the SADC region.

The official opening was followed by the thematic roundtable, which commenced with welcoming remarks from Prince Mhabulangane Dlamini, the EBC Chairperson, and Mosotho Moepya.

Delegates at the Roundtable also received goodwill messages from international partners. Gram Matenga, Regional Head of Programs at International IDEA's Africa and West Asia Regional Office, emphasized that while AI and emerging technologies are rapidly transforming citizen participation and electoral processes, EMBs must collaboratively ensure that these tools are deployed within human rights-based, democratic frameworks that enhance transparency, inclusion, and electoral integrity rather than deepen inequalities or undermine democracy. The goodwill message from Karsten Mecklenburg, the Ambassador of the European Union to the Kingdom of Eswatini, expressed the EU's pleasure in supporting regional learning initiatives to entrench democratic governance in the SADC region and Africa.

The roundtable featured a keynote address by Professor Guy Berger, which set the tone for the discussions. Sy Mamabolo, CEO of IEC South Africa, responding to the keynote presentation, shared the South African experience and highlighted the value of AI in the IEC's work.

The first panel, Contemporary AI Use in Electoral Processes in Africa: Use Cases, Recent Applications and Examples, featured Samson Itodo, Executive Director of YIAGA Africa, who shed light on regional frameworks and developments in regulatory frameworks in Africa. Matt Bailey, IFES Global Advisor for Cyber and Information Integrity, discussed emerging threats to and opportunities for electoral processes. Stanislaus Chisoni Mtingwi, Director of Information and Communication Technology at the Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC), took a practical approach to technology and AI linked to Malawi's electoral experience in 2025.

The final panel of the roundtable focused on the future of electoral processes in the context of AI. Brown Kasaro, CEO of the Electoral Commission of Zambia, and Marjan Marjan, CEO of the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC), Kenya, discussed rethinking key electoral procedures in the context of AI, from public outreach to logistics, campaign regulation, and systems optimization.

The seminar closed with brief remarks from the EBC who thanked the ECF-SADC for hosting a timely conversation that will shape the effectiveness of EMBs in delivering their mandates in the future.

4. KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1. AI as the Central Theme: Relevance, Timeliness, and Urgency

All the speakers highlighted the timeliness and critical relevance of the theme **Artificial Intelligence in Elections: Threats and Opportunities**. The speakers noted that:

AI is fundamentally transforming how members of societies access information, communicate, govern, and participate in public life, with profound implications for politics, democratic processes, and trust in institutions. These global shifts are already evident in the SADC region, where AI is increasingly embedded across sectors such as agriculture, healthcare, banking, communication, public administration, and now electoral management. As AI tools shape narratives, influence public opinion, and redefine service delivery, it becomes essential for governments, regulators, and particularly EMBs to proactively understand, anticipate, and responsibly leverage these technologies to enhance integrity, inclusion, transparency, and resilience within democratic systems. In sum:

- AI is reshaping access to information, and influencing political campaigns, voter behavior, and public trust in institutions.
- The SADC region is not isolated from these global shifts.
- AI already plays a role in sectors such as agriculture, healthcare, banking, and communication—and increasingly in electoral administration.
- The need for EMBs to proactively adapt, understand, and strategically deploy AI tools responsibly was repeatedly underscored.

4.2. Opportunities for AI in Electoral Management

The speakers recognized various opportunities for AI to strengthen democracy and improve EMB efficiency.

AI offers substantial opportunities to modernize and strengthen electoral administration throughout the region by streamlining core processes such as voter registration, data management, verification, and boundary reviews using advanced analytics and emerging tools like facial recognition. It can enhance accessibility and inclusion by tailoring voter information through chatbots and digital tools that better serve youth, older persons, and persons with disabilities, while at the same time bolstering cybersecurity through AI-driven monitoring, anomaly detection, and the protection of electoral systems and databases. AI could also improve the efficiency of nominations, vote counting, logistics, and resource allocation through

predictive modeling, and expand the reach and impact of voter education by producing dynamic, multilingual, and multimedia content targeted at diverse communities. Key highlights are listed below:

- **Automation of administrative processes** such as voter registration, and data processing and verification.
- **Enhanced accuracy** of voter rolls and boundary reviews through use of data analytics and facial recognition technologies.
- **Improved accessibility and inclusion** as AI-powered chatbots provide election information for youth, the elderly, and persons with disabilities.
- **Strengthened cybersecurity** through AI-enabled anomaly detection, and better protection of results transmission systems and safeguarding of voter databases.
- **Increased efficiency** in candidate nominations, vote counting, and resource allocation through use of machine learning and predictive tools.
- **Expanded voter education** targeted at diverse communities using AI-generated multimedia content.

4.3. Threats, Risks, and Ethical Challenges of AI in Elections

Speakers were united in acknowledging the serious risks that AI poses to democratic processes.

AI introduces significant risks that could undermine electoral integrity and democratic stability, particularly through the amplification of misinformation, disinformation, mal-information, and deepfakes that distort public perception, erode trust, and could even incite violence. Cyberattacks targeted at voter registers, databases, and results transmission systems pose serious security threats, while algorithmic bias, surveillance, privacy violations, and unchecked data collection create ethical and legal concerns. These risks are compounded by the digital divide, which could deepen inequalities in political participation, and by over-reliance on external technology vendors, which can weaken institutional autonomy and expose capacity gaps in EMBs. Key highlights are listed below:

- **Disinformation, misinformation, and mal-information** could be amplified by generative AI, posing threats to electoral integrity and reducing public trust.
- **Deepfakes** are capable of inciting post-election violence, delegitimizing institutions, and manipulating voter perceptions.
- **Cyberattacks and hacking** could be targeted at results transmission systems and voter registers.

- **Algorithmic bias** can unfairly advantage or disadvantage candidates or demographic groups if not properly regulated.
- **Surveillance risks**, such as privacy violations, and unchecked data collection.
- **The digital divide** between countries and within societies could widen inequalities in political participation.
- **Over-reliance on external vendors** might cause capacity gaps and undermine the independence of EMBs.

A strong call was made for responsible, transparent, and accountable AI use, grounded in human oversight.

4.4. EMB Responsibilities and Collective Mandates

A recurring theme was the centrality of EMBs as custodians of democracy tasked with protecting electoral integrity amid rapidly evolving technology.

Speakers emphasized that as elections increasingly intersect with advanced technologies, the foundational values of EMBs—*independence, transparency, professionalism, and integrity*—remain paramount. EMBs must insulate their operations from political, commercial, and external technological influence, ensuring that electoral processes are guided solely by the law, policy, and public interest. Participants underscored that transparency in decision-making, procurement, the deployment of election technologies, and post-election audits is critical to safeguarding institutional credibility. Strengthening internal governance frameworks, adhering to ethical standards, and maintaining impartiality were highlighted as essential pillars to protect EMB legitimacy in the AI era. Key obligations were highlighted:

Elections are the “lifeblood of democracy” and the EMBs are the “midwives of democratic elections”
— His Majesty the King

- Uphold independence, transparency, professionalism, and integrity.
- Ensure timely and accurate voter education to counter AI-driven manipulation.
- Build internal technical capacity to manage AI systems securely and independently.
- Maintain public trust as elections become increasingly digital and more vulnerable.
- Safeguard the sovereignty, unity, stability, and credibility of SADC democracies.

4.5. Peer Learning, Observation, and Regional Solidarity

Speakers applauded the collaborative ethos of the ECF-SADC.

The conference acknowledged with appreciation the continued implementation of regular election observation missions across the region, such as in Malawi, Seychelles, Tanzania and Zanzibar. These missions were commended for reinforcing mutual accountability among member states by facilitating peer review, promoting adherence to regional electoral standards, and providing objective assessments of electoral processes. Participants observed that observation missions not only enhance credibility and transparency, but also contribute to institutional learning and democratic consolidation within SADC. In sum:

- Regular election observation missions were commended for strengthening mutual accountability.
- EMBs were urged not to judge, but to learn from each other's challenges and successes.
- Roundtables, policy briefs, such as the youth and digitalization report from Seychelles, and capacity-building initiatives are improving the region's collective electoral competence.
- A shared vision was reaffirmed for standardizing electoral policies, enhancing professional practice, and implementing SADC's democratic principles.

4.6. Calls for Policy Reform, Governance Strengthening, and Sustainable Funding

Several speakers stressed various areas that require institutional, policy, legal, and human resource reforms:

Strengthening Legal Frameworks and Sustainable Financing for Responsible AI Governance

The meeting highlighted the critical importance of strengthening legal frameworks for responsibly regulating artificial intelligence in electoral processes. Delegates emphasized that clear, robust laws and policies are essential to guide the ethical use of AI while protecting voter privacy, ensuring data security, and safeguarding fundamental human rights. Member states were urged to develop legislation that addresses emerging AI-related challenges, such as algorithmic bias, disinformation, and cyber vulnerabilities. Such frameworks will create a foundation of transparency and accountability, enabling EMBs to deploy AI technologies confidently, and to maintain public trust in electoral integrity.

Ensuring Sustainable Financing for EMBs and the ECF-SADC

Equally, the conference acknowledged that sustainable financing is indispensable for supporting the operational independence and capacity-building efforts of EMBs, as well as the ECF-SADC itself. Reliable funding streams empower EMBs to invest in upgrading digital infrastructure, acquiring advanced AI tools, and training personnel in digital literacy and cybersecurity. Participants stressed that sustainable finances enable EMBs to effectively manage the technological demands of modern elections and respond proactively to AI-driven risks, thereby reinforcing the credibility of electoral processes throughout the region.

Enhancing Technological Infrastructure and Capacity Building

Significant emphasis was placed on enhancing the technological backbone and digital infrastructure of EMBs as a way to build resilience and operational excellence. Delegates recognized that investment in secure, scalable ICT systems coupled with the development of skilled human resources is vital for managing AI applications independently and securely. Capacity-building initiatives, such as training workshops and knowledge-sharing forums, were highlighted as crucial avenues for equipping election administrators with the expertise needed to navigate the complexities of AI integration while mitigating associated risks.

Aligning with the SADC Vision 2050 for Democratic Governance

The conference reaffirmed the alignment of these efforts with the SADC Vision 2050 mandate, which champions peace, regional cooperation, and democratic governance as key pillars of sustainable development. Strengthening electoral systems through responsible deployment of AI is seen as a direct contribution to this vision, and to fostering inclusive and credible democratic processes. Delegates underscored the need for practical frameworks that balance technological innovation with safeguarding democratic principles and fundamental rights, ensuring that AI remains a tool that enhances rather than undermines electoral integrity.

Collaborative and Balanced AI Deployment for the Future

Finally, the conference highlighted the importance of continued regional collaboration, knowledge exchange, and policy harmonization to develop AI governance models that are both innovative and rights-based. This collaborative approach will foster mutual learning, enhance institutional resilience, and position the SADC region to effectively address the evolving challenges of digital elections. By prioritizing legal clarity, financial sustainability, and technological readiness, SADC EMBs will be well placed to uphold democratic integrity and public confidence in elections, and secure a future where AI serves democracy with transparency and responsibility.

4.7. Vision for the Future of Elections in SADC

Throughout the discussion, looking ahead, a collective message emerged of hope, responsibility, and strategic foresight. This is summarized under the themes below.

Affirming AI as a Support Mechanism, not a Driver of Electoral Processes

Discussions underscored that artificial intelligence must be a tool that supports and strengthens electoral processes, rather than a force that dictates or overrides them. Participants emphasized that technology must operate firmly within constitutional, legal, and institutional boundaries. AI should enhance efficiency, safeguard integrity, improve service delivery, and facilitate informed participation, but ultimate authority and decision-making must remain with independent human institutions entrusted with managing elections.

Embracing a Multi-Layered, Values-Based Framework for AI Adoption

Delegates agreed that EMBs must approach AI adoption through a carefully designed, multi-layered, and value-driven framework. This will require aligning AI deployment with core democratic values such as transparency, fairness, accountability, inclusivity, and respect for human rights. Participants stressed the importance of establishing ethical standards, governance controls, and risk-management structures. Such a principled approach will ensure that AI solutions do not merely introduce technological sophistication, but meaningfully reinforce legitimacy, credibility, and public confidence.

Strengthening Regional Cooperation in the Face of Technological Disruption

The meeting reaffirmed that no member state can address AI-related electoral risks in isolation. Regional cooperation, knowledge exchange, harmonized standards, and coordinated responses were identified as critical to safeguarding democracy in a rapidly evolving technological environment. Participants called for deeper collaboration among EMBs, policy institutions, development partners, and regulators to collectively manage threats such as disinformation, cybersecurity vulnerabilities, and unequal technological capacity across the region.

Using AGC Insights to Shape Future Policy and Operational Direction

Speakers emphasized that the deliberations, reflections, and insights emerging from this AGC must not remain theoretical. Instead, they should inform future electoral policies, operational strategies, institutional frameworks, and regional commitments. Participants encouraged EMBs to translate the discussions into actionable reforms, capacity-building initiatives, regulatory enhancements, and structured regional engagement to ensure sustained progress.

Ensuring AI Protects Rather Than Threatens Democracy

Ultimately, participants reiterated that AI must serve as a guardian of democratic governance, not a threat to it. Its deployment must reinforce electoral credibility, strengthen institutional resilience, protect voter rights, and uphold public trust. The region affirmed its determination to harness AI in a responsible, ethical, and sovereignty-conscious manner to ensure that democracy remains secure, credible, and reflective of the will of the people.

5. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

a. AI presents major opportunities for electoral efficiency and innovation

Speakers highlighted the potential for AI to:

- Automate administrative tasks such as voter registration and verification.
- Improve the accuracy and reliability of voter rolls through data analytics.
- Strengthen cybersecurity using AI-based threat detection systems.
- Support inclusive participation through AI-powered voter education and accessibility tools.
- Enhance decision-making and logistical planning through predictive modeling.

These innovations could significantly improve service delivery, responsiveness and professionalism in EMB operations.

b. AI introduces serious risks to electoral integrity

Despite its benefits, AI also poses substantial threats:

- Disinformation and deepfakes can mislead voters, incite unrest, and delegitimize institutions.
- Cyberattacks can compromise voter databases, results transmission systems, and EMB infrastructure.
- Algorithmic bias can distort electoral decisions if AI systems are not transparent or well-regulated.
- Privacy concerns arise from intrusive data collection and inadequate oversight.
- Digital inequalities risk marginalizing communities with limited access to technology.
- Dependence on external vendors could undermine EMB autonomy and sovereignty.

These risks demand urgent regulatory, technical, and governance interventions.

c. EMBs remain central to protecting democracy in the digital era

Delegates reaffirmed the critical mandate of EMBs to:

- Uphold independence, integrity, and transparency.
- Provide accurate and timely voter education.
- Build internal capacity to manage AI systems securely.
- Maintain public trust amid rapid technological change.

d. Regional solidarity strengthens resilience

SADC's collaborative mechanisms—its election observation missions, roundtables, research, and policy briefs—are improving collective preparedness. Countries were encouraged to learn from each other's experiences rather than criticize, thereby fostering an environment of mutual support and shared responsibility.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Key recommendations specifically for EMBs arose from the discussion. These are summarized below.

a. Strengthen legal and policy frameworks

- Each member state should develop comprehensive AI governance laws tailored to its electoral context.
- Institutionalize guidelines on transparency, algorithmic accountability, and data protection.

b. Invest in capacity building and digital literacy

- Train EMB staff on AI systems, data management, and cybersecurity.
- Establish partnerships to build technical expertise across the region.

c. Enhance digital and technological infrastructure

- Modernize electoral systems to withstand cyber threats.
- Ensure secure, resilient, and independent technology procurement processes.

d. Promote proactive and inclusive voter education

- Use AI responsibly to disseminate accurate information.
- Develop targeted outreach for youth, elderly persons, and people with disabilities.
- Counter disinformation through coordinated digital campaigns.

e. Secure sustainable financing

- Advocate for predictable national funding for EMB operations.
- Strengthen the financial sustainability of the ECF-SADC Forum to support long-term programs.

f. Foster regional harmonization and peer learning

- Standardize AI use, best practices, and electoral processes across SADC.
- Continue election observation missions and publish regional knowledge products.

g. Ensure AI serves democracy

- Embed ethical principles, human rights safeguards, and human oversight to ensure that AI strengthens electoral integrity rather than weakening it.

7. CONCLUSION

The 27th Annual General Conference of the Electoral Commissions Forum of SADC Countries highlighted the immense opportunities and the significant risks that artificial intelligence presents to electoral processes in the region. Delegates reaffirmed the vital role of EMBs as guardians of democracy, charged with leveraging AI to improve the efficiency, inclusivity, and security of elections while mitigating threats such as disinformation, cyberattacks, and bias. The conference underscored the urgent need for member states to establish comprehensive legal and policy frameworks that promote transparency, data protection, and ethical AI use, alongside sustained investments in technical capacity, digital literacy, and resilient infrastructure within EMBs.

As SADC navigates the complexities of digital transformation, regional cooperation and the harmonization of electoral standards will be crucial to preserving public trust, sovereignty, and democratic integrity. The shared commitment to independence, professionalism, and ethical oversight will ensure that AI serves as a tool for strengthening and not for undermining democracy. The outcomes of this AGC provide a clear roadmap for future policies and collaborative efforts that will enable the region to confront technological disruption with confidence and safeguard free, fair, and credible elections for generations to come.

ANNEX 1. SUMMARY OF ACTION POINTS

Key actions matrix

Key Area	Actions
Strengthen regional collaboration	• Routine joint meetings, peer learning, and cross-border information exchange. • Coordinate on AI risks with shared early-warning systems; standardize regional AI election guidelines with ethical safeguards. • Active participation in observation missions and sharing of findings.
AI governance and electoral integrity	• Develop national AI policies aligned with SADC principles. • Establish AI risk assessment frameworks. • Implement strict data protection protocols. • Ensure that AI systems promote fairness, inclusivity, and impartiality.
Cybersecurity and digital resilience	• Strengthen cybersecurity for voter registration, results transmission, and databases. • Conduct regular security audits and vulnerability assessments. • Develop incident response plans. • Enhance digital security training for EMB staff.
Capacity-building and institutional strengthening	• Invest in AI literacy for EMB leaders and ICT teams. • Build internal technical capacity to reduce vendor dependency. • Support necessary infrastructure upgrades. • Mobilize national and regional resources for AI and cyber risk mitigation.
Ethical and responsible use of AI	• Maintain human oversight in AI-supported processes. • Prevent AI misuse that discriminates or manipulates. • Promote transparency, proportionality, data minimization,¹ and privacy. • Develop public transparency on AI deployment.

¹ Data minimization is a fundamental data protection and privacy principle that requires organizations to collect, process, use, and retain only the personal data that is adequate, relevant, and necessary for a specific, explicit, and legitimate purpose.

Key Area	Actions
Enhance voter education and public trust	• Use AI tools to improve voter access to information, focusing on youth, people with disabilities, and the elderly. • Run disinformation awareness campaigns. • Promote transparency to rebuild public trust. • Engage with civil society organizations and media to co-create education messages.
Manage digital disinformation and deepfakes	• Establish EMB monitoring units for AI-driven disinformation. • Partner with tech companies on rapid content flagging. • Create regional threat intelligence hubs. • Advocate for harmonized policies on deepfake misuse and manipulation.
Ensure inclusive, transparent, and credible elections	• Ensure that AI promotes the inclusion of rural populations, women, youth, and minorities. • Support less-resourced EMBs through training and shared services. • Maintain transparency in AI processes. • Regularly update legal frameworks to match emerging tech and risks.
Strengthen the ECF-SADC Forum	• Secure sustainable funding for policy, training, and joint missions. • Align forum strategy on AI, cyber governance, and data protection. • Build partnerships with universities and international bodies. • Promote SADC unity, stability, and democratic values. • Foster cross-border collaboration to confront AI threats. • Use AGC insights to develop practical AI governance and policy frameworks.

ANNEX 2. CONCEPT NOTE, AGENDA, AND LIST OF ORGANIZATIONS REPRESENTED AT THE AGC

Concept Note

Background

Over the last 26 years, the Electoral Commissions Forum of SADC Countries (ECF-SADC) has steadily held seminars alongside its Annual General Conferences (AGCs) on specific themes on elections and democracy in the SADC region. This year, the 27th Annual General Conference will have discussions on “Artificial Intelligence and Elections: Threats & Opportunities” as one of the emerging issues that confront electoral management bodies (EMBs) in the SADC region and on the continent.

The accelerating integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into democratic processes poses profound implications for electoral management across the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region. With AI’s potential to both enhance electoral integrity and simultaneously undermine democratic norms through disinformation, surveillance, and algorithmic bias, it is essential to engage regional stakeholders—particularly EMBs, civil society, and policymakers—in a proactive dialogue and strategic planning process.

The SADC region, characterized by diverse electoral systems and varying levels of technological infrastructure, is at a critical juncture. As emerging technologies like generative AI, biometric verification systems, and predictive analytics increasingly permeate election environments globally, EMBs now have to grapple with these novel trends and challenges in the delivery of their mandates and equally partake in the contemporary debate on AI in elections, which continues to evolve on the continent.

While there are conversations on AI’s risks to the electoral process from disinformation and deepfakes, algorithmic bias and voter suppression, vulnerability of digitized electoral systems to surveillance, and infringement of civil liberties, there is also compelling evidence of the centrality of AI systems to a future of improved election management. Emerging AI technologies hold great prospects for electoral efficiency and credibility via administrative efficiency (polling station allocation, election budgeting, and personnel scheduling), voter registration and identity verification (cleaning voter rolls, detecting duplicates, and supporting biometric authentication), and election monitoring and incident detection (machine learning models that detect real-time reports of electoral violence, technical failures, or voter suppression via social media or hotline

data). This mixed bag of threats and opportunities has necessitated action from EMBs toward understanding and exploring the use of AI in addition to the existing technologies aimed at making electoral processes accessible and effective.

As AI continues to dominate the electoral and governance space and remains a subject of major consequence, it becomes chiefly important for EMBs to explore its growing impact on election management. To explore the threats, opportunities, and prospects presented by AI in electoral contexts, the ECF-SADC shall collaborate with esteemed election practitioners, international and regional organizations, tech companies, and key platforms to facilitate discussions on the risks and opportunities of AI adoption in critical aspects of election administration. This will generate actionable recommendations and contribute to building resilient EMBs and electoral systems.

In other spheres, AI is seen to present transformative potential to strengthen democratic institutions by improving election management, enhancing civic engagement, and enabling data-driven policymaking. Consequently, SADC countries must now evaluate and develop regional frameworks that align innovation with democratic resilience, inclusion, and trust.

Objectives

- To provide a platform of engagement for EMBs and experts to discuss the dynamics of the use of AI and electoral integrity.
- To offer actionable insights and framework for EMBs and other stakeholders on leveraging AI to enhance electoral credibility.

Methodology and Target Audience

The half-day dialogue on 2 December 2025 will feature a detailed discussion paper centered on AI in electoral contexts and selected experts as discussants to provide a broad framework for the discussions on the nexus between AI and election integrity, including the opportunities and risks of AI-powered electoral processes in the SADC region and on the continent.

Participants: at least 100 participants with the main target audience being EMBs in the SADC region and selected local participants invited by the host commission—the Elections and Boundaries Commission. The facilitation sector will comprise election practitioners, tech companies, policymakers, academia, and regional and international institutions.

Agenda

Tuesday 2 December 2025		
Time	Item	Notes/Remarks
09:00–11:00	Official Opening of the 27th Annual General Conference	Separate program agenda set by ECF-SADC and EBC Eswatini
11:00–11:30	Tea break and group photo	
Roundtable on Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Elections—Threats and Opportunities		
11:30–11:50	Welcome and Opening Remarks • EBC Chairperson • ECF-SADC Executive Committee Chairperson • Partner organizations	Facilitator: Olufunto Akindoro, International IDEA
11:50–12:30	Setting the tone: Discussion Paper— Alberto Gibaja, International IDEA Discussant/respondent—IEC South Africa	Moderator: Patience Chiradza, African Union Commission
12:30–13:30	Lunch break	
13:30–14:45	Panel 1 Contemporary AI use in electoral processes in Africa: Use cases, recent applications and examples, case studies. Lessons learned from the SADC region—Malawi Electoral Commission	Moderator: Speaker 1: Regional frameworks and developments in regulatory frameworks in Africa—Samson Itodo Speaker 2: Emerging threats and opportunities—Matt Bailey, IFES
14:45–15:00	Tea break	

15:00–16:15	Panel 2	Moderator: EISA
	Future of electoral processes within context of AI	Speaker 1: Exploring strategic partners with providers–Microsoft/Google Speaker 2: Rethinking key electoral procedures in the context of AI (public outreach, logistics and campaign regulation, systems optimization etc.)–Electoral Commission of Zambia Speaker 3: IEBC Kenya
16:15–16:30	Summary of seminar discussion and reflection on action points	Rapporteur Centre for Human Rights–University of Pretoria
16:30–16:45	Closing remarks	

List of Organizations

27th ANNUAL GENERAL CONFERENCE—LIST OF ELECTORAL MANAGEMENT BODIES

Comissão Nacional Eleitoral (CNE)—Angola

Independent Electoral Commission (IEC)—Botswana

“Commission Electorale Nationale Independante (CENI)—DRC”

Elections and Boundaries Commission (EBC)—Eswatini

Independent Electoral Commission (IEC)—Lesotho

Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC)—Malawi

Electoral Commissioner’s Office—Mauritius

Comissão Nacional de Eleições (CNE)—Mozambique

Electoral Commission of Namibia (ECN)—Namibia

Electoral Commission of Seychelles (ECS)—Seychelles

Independent Electoral Commission (IEC)—South Africa

Independent National Electoral Commission of Tanzania (INEC)—Tanzania

Electoral Commission of Zambia (ECZ)—Zambia

Zanzibar Electoral Commission (ZEC)—Zambia

Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC)—Zimbabwe

ECF-SADC SECRETARIAT

27th AGC LIST OF INTERNATIONAL & REGIONAL ORGANISATIONS

International IDEA

Yiaga Africa

Centre for Human Rights, University of Pretoria

SADC Secretariat

Electoral Institute of Sustainable Democracy in Africa (EISA)

European Centre for Electoral Assistance (ECES)

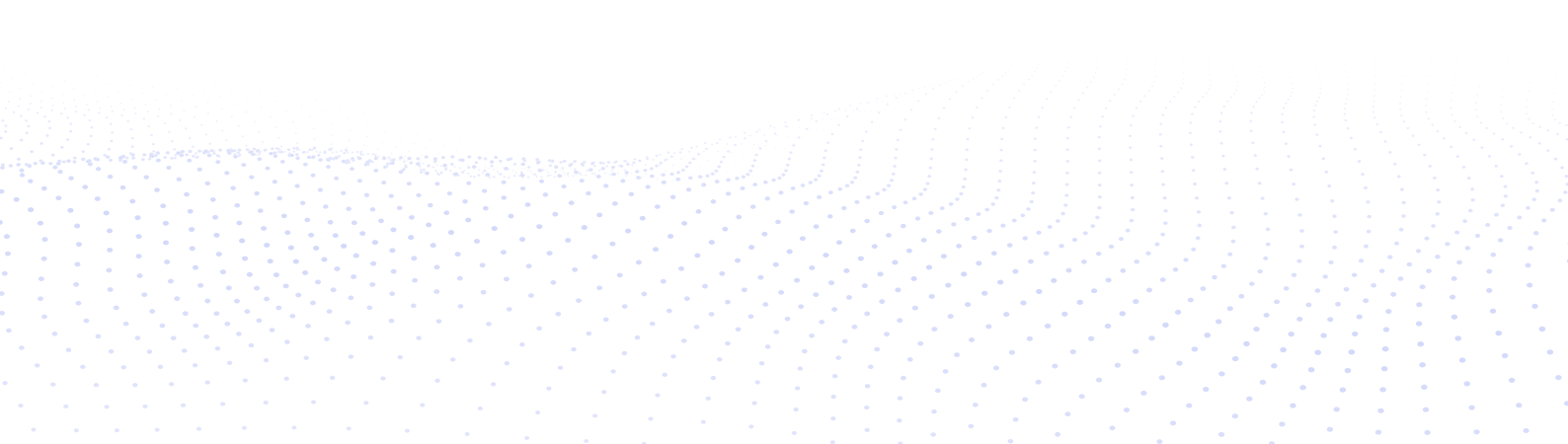
International Federation of Electoral Systems (IFES)

European Union (EU)

Research ICT Africa

African Union (AU)

German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ)



The 27th Annual General Conference of the Electoral Commissions Forum of SADC Countries, held in the Kingdom of Eswatini on 1–5 December 2025, brought together electoral management bodies (EMBs), policymakers, experts, development partners, and other stakeholders to deliberate on the increasing saliency of artificial intelligence (AI) in electoral processes. Around the theme, Artificial Intelligence in Elections: Threats and Opportunities, the discussions created an opportunity for regional dialogue on the opportunities, risks, and broad governance implications of AI for democratic processes.

This report examines how AI can be leveraged to enhance electoral management through enhanced efficiency, inclusivity, voter engagement, and cybersecurity, while also addressing challenges such as disinformation, algorithmic bias, cyber threats, and digital exclusion. The report provides practical recommendations for EMBs, policymakers, election practitioners, researchers, civil society actors, and development partners on governance frameworks, ethical oversight, regional cooperation, and institutional preparedness to ensure that AI supports credible, transparent, and inclusive elections across the SADC region.