How can we hold the powerful to account in Africa

when the ruling party acts with impunity and disregards the will of the voters?

Africa Citizen Watch is an innovative digital tool to monitor government promises and measure them against actual government delivery.

A panel discussion at the Living Rights Festival called on citizens to recognise moments of change and 'translate them into something that's democracy- deepening and democracy- consolidating.'

At war: Mozambique street protests during the elections.
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Many countries call themselves democracies simply because they hold regular elections. At a panel discussion in October 2024 as part of IFAA's Living Rights Festival, participants were reminded that elections are a necessary but not sufficient requirement for democracy. A key question that surfaced in the debate, titled "Holding the Powerful to Account in Africa," was what actions could promote accountability in a so-called "democracy" in which the ruling party is able to act with impunity and disregard the will of the voters?

The discussion was held days after Mozambique's corrupt and mismanaged general election (see Hanlon, 2024), which was accompanied by attacks on the opposition by government agencies and violent protests across the country. These continued into 2025 after the Frelimo candidate, Daniel Chapo, was inaugurated as the new president.

Panelist Dr Edson Cortez, Director of the Public Integrity Centre (CIP), a civil society organisation based in Maputo, asked: "how can we force the government to be accountable to us if our votes mean nothing to them, when they don't need the citizens to remain in power?"

Cortez showed graphic videos of police violence against protesters who rose up against the corruption of the Frelimo government and their denial of constitutional rights to public assembly. He was subsequently warned that his name was on a list of police targets because of the work he has done in monitoring and exposing electoral fraud.

The CIP deployed a team of approximately 2,000 election observers at polling stations in all parts of the country. The photos they took of election results displayed outside counting stations after the counting differed radically from the final published poll. The election was shamelessly and transparently rigged to favour candidates from Frelimo, the long-ruling party.

What is accountability?

Speaking from the chair, Emeritus Professor Fred Hendricks, former Dean of Humanities at Rhodes, described the results as fraudulent, saying Frelimo had "brazenly stolen the election". He asked: "How do you hold leaders to account under conditions of extreme repression?"

Directly addressing the question put to the panel on how to instill a culture of accountability in governments struggling with challenges to the rule of law, he said what is urgently needed is "not a philosophical reflection [on] what accountability might be, although engaging the theoretical concept of accountability is extraordinarily important. It's also not an attempt to extend the rhetorical flourishes around accountability."

Ablaze: Citizens of Mozambique took to the streets to denounce the ruling party in the run-up to the election.
Source: Free Malaysia Times Creative Commons licence

In his view accountability comprises three interlinked components. The first is 'answerability'; those in power must be able and willing to justify all decisions and actions they undertake to the people on whose behalf they are acting or making those decisions. The second is 'responsiveness'. The political leadership "has to respond to the needs and interests of the vast majority of citizens," he said. Finally, accountability must be 'enforceable'. This he described as "the mantra of a mandate" and said it assumes that the first two conditions are met.

The notions of answerability and responsiveness imply discussion and agreement between the people and those who serve them as their elected representatives. "Mandates need to be engaged with, they need to be discussed and people need to agree to (them)." Leaders who fail to meet these mandates should be disciplined, and those over whom they hold power should be able to enforce the agreements that have been reached. Panellist Dr Tendai Murisa, Executive Director of the SIVIO Institute based in Harare, described the current state of democracy in many parts of Africa as "authoritarianism through election," where citizens exit the public domain after voting, leaving whatever has to be done to the politicians. He said most politicians in these countries are "electoral dynasties" representing families that had previously played prominent roles in the liberation movements and that continued to hold onto power for generations.

"Politics has become privatised. It has become an avenue for private accumulation for the elites, and the common trend across all countries (in Africa) is growing wealth inequality and poverty. Our assumptions about liberal democracy and the concept of the separation of power is flawed because we're expecting the legislative branch to hold the executive branch accountable, but they all come from the same political base."

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'Accountability movement'

Africa has engaged in many struggle movements, he said -- the liberation movement, the feminist movement, the debt justice movement, the land occupation movement – all of which have been successful to some extent. But what is needed now is an "accountability movement," in which leaders are held responsible for their actions and expected to deliver a certain standard of performance.
Allegations of a coup attempt in Zimbabwe in 2017, and the much contested elections that followed, was the catalyst for establishing Africa Citizen Watch - an independent digital tool to track "the performance and effectiveness of African governments based on the pledges made in their manifestos and other important policy pronouncements". Murisa had counted more than 200 promises made by those in power in Zimbabwe in the brief period leading up to the presidential inauguration and with the backing of the research organisation, SIVIO Institute, which provided the technical backing for this innovative online tracking tool, his organisation began to monitor actual government delivery on its promises.

The model is simple but effective. Using party manifestos and publicly available documentation, Africa Citizen Watch measures political performance against a list of electoral promises.

"We are not looking for things that governments have said or signed at the UN, African Union or SADC level," said Murisa. African Citizen Watch reports on what governments have actually done, measuring their performance and effectiveness against the pledges made in their manifestos and other public policy pronouncements. "To us, these are binding contracts."

In addition, the organisation conducts or commissions independent surveys of citizen opinion, what Murisa called a "twin track process," to measure the degree of alignment between the promises made by political elites and citizens' satisfaction with government delivery and service.

"We check what governments are doing based on what they are saying, but we also separately track citizen satisfaction with the performance of governments. Citizens vote based on what they've been promised and expect government to implement their promises. [We track] the extent to which government is making progress [and] if government is actually fulfilling the promises that politicians made. We need citizenship, active citizenship."

Zim Citizens Watch has been going since 2018, much to the dismay of the Zanu-PF authorities. Their immediate response on the release of the most recent report, according to Murisa, was to ask: "Who's funding

you?" But it has also irritated government opponents by recording instances of successful delivery and examples of the promises kept, a testament to its own independence and integrity.

The organisation has applied its tracking tool in Malawi and Zambia. On its website African Citizens Watch reports that since the last presidential inauguration, the Malawian government has implemented only 15 of its 204 promises, with another 149 in progress, 49 not yet started and 11 already broken. That is according to the platform's continuously ticking online clock, an ominous indication that at this rate it looks unlikely that the current government will pass muster as its term of office is running out.

Since its most recent presidential inauguration, Zambia had delivered on seven of 248 recorded electoral pledges. Another 160 promises were recorded as being in progress, 77 had not commenced, and three had been broken.

This should keep the South African Government of National Unity (GNU) on its toes. African Citizens Watch is currently tracking 39 promises made by President Cyril Ramaphosa in his July 2024 inauguration speech and in other key policy pronouncements. None have yet been implemented, but then neither have any been broken.

> '... opportunities seem to open up [but ...] we as activists are unable to translate them into something that's democracy-deepening and democracy-consolidating?'

Civil society agency

Nontando Ngamlana is the Executive Director of Afesis, a developmental NGO based in East London which aims to strengthen local democracy. As the panel's discussant, she closed the debate by challenging the audience to consider how they have reacted to the citizens' protests in Zimbabwe and Mozambique at that time, and to South Africa's July 2021 riots and the ongoing waves of social delivery protests.

These are examples of citizens exercising their own agency, she said, but "in isolated, less coordinated ways. When we talk about strengthening democracy we [must ask ourselves] what does connecting energy look like? What does solidarity look like? What would solidarity with the people of Mozambique right now look like?"

Ngamlana suggested these could be potential "moments of change" when people who had been oppressed for generations finally rise up. "We have seen it so many times, but it never seems to translate into any sustained energy for social change.

"We need to ask why we're not able to capitalise on these moments, when opportunities seem to open up [but] that we as activists are unable to read and act on. We need to ask why we're not able to sustain them and translate them into something that's democracy-deepening and democracy-consolidating?"
The formation of South Africa's GNU is a case in point, she said: at last here was a liberation movement in Africa that was not going to rule "until Jesus comes". But the country has missed what could have been a unique opportunity for change, because "the political culture has not changed. The dominant political culture that the ANC had established has not changed in any significant way."

Ngamlana highlighted the huge amount of work still needed – from creative and engaged institutions of civil society – to make something constructive out of the energy within frustrated communities that are intent on a better way of life.

"What would it take to shift a culture into something different? It is one thing to change the party in power and the people in power. But it is another thing to confront the culture, the ways of being and doing, and the systems -- formal and informal -- that are dominant and that are leading us deeper into the funk that we are in."

REFERENCE

Hanlon, J. 2024. 25 years of electoral fraud, protected by secrecy. Centro de Integridade Pública (CIP), Maputo. Available at https://bit.ly/Moz-El-Fraud. See the detailed weekly reports at https://www5.open.ac.uk/technology/mozambique/national-elections-2024-eleições-gerais, also see https://bit.ly/Moz-Elections