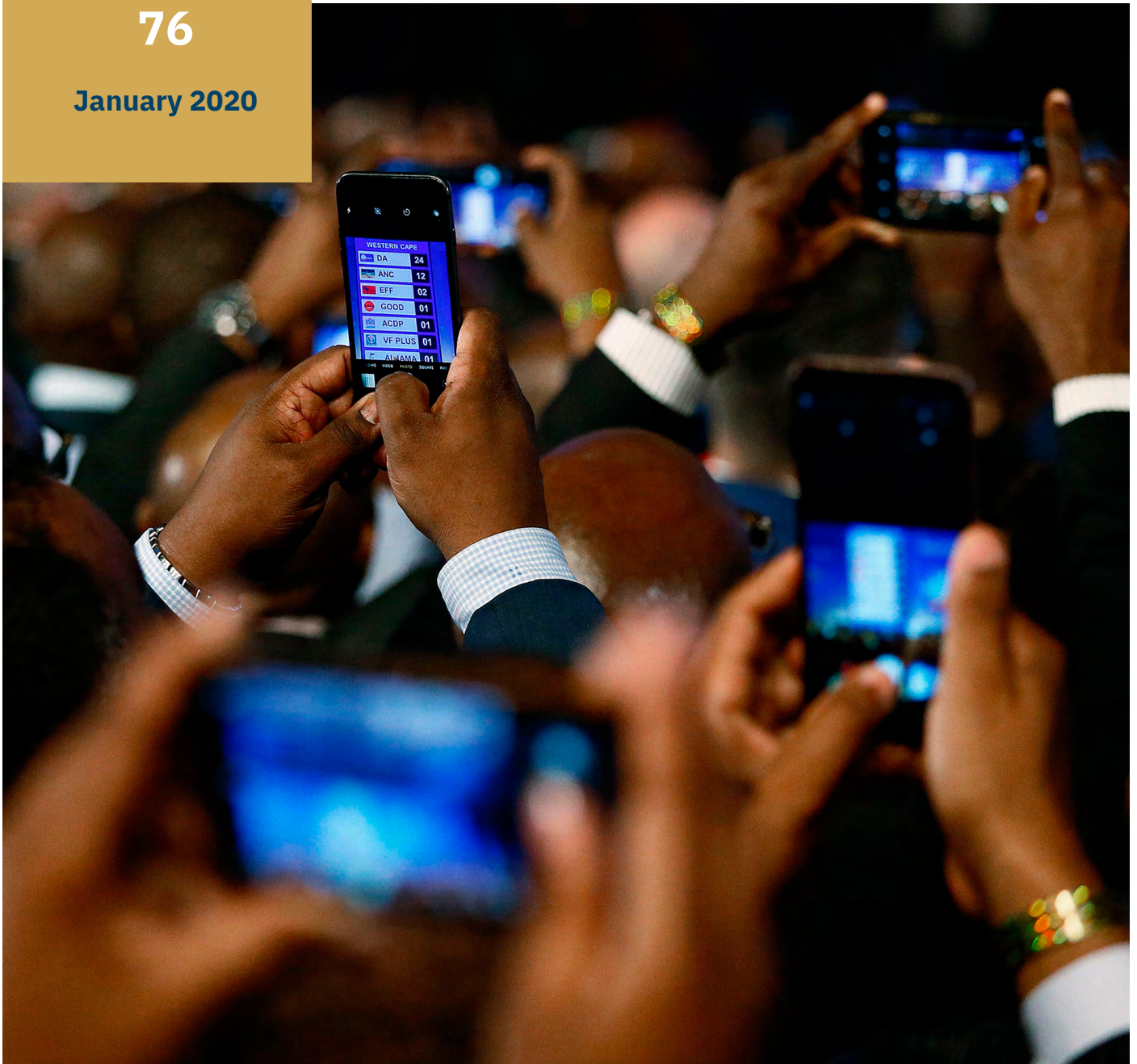


Policy Insights

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Digitalising Democracy in SADC: Insights from 2019 Elections

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African perspectives
Global insights

Executive summary

This policy insight explores the worldwide phenomenon of the digitalisation of democracy, in the context of recently conducted elections in four SADC member countries – South Africa, Malawi, Botswana and Mozambique. This is done through a critical analysis of the role of social media in determining the course and outcomes of these elections, as well as an assessment of the impact of the outcomes of these elections on the SADC region and its mandate. While the digitalisation of democracy is still in its incipient stages in the region, if the 2019 elections in South Africa, Malawi, Mozambique and Botswana are anything to go by the interface between this phenomenon and traditional forms of politics and governance in the region holds grim prospects. On the one hand, social media and other Internet-based technologies are opening up the political space for enhanced deliberative democracy, including giving voice to the youthful segment of the electorate. On the other hand, a lingering culture of business as usual in the way politics is conducted in the region, characterised mainly by a tendency to prioritise the interests of a small elite over those of the rest of the population, means that the dominant approach to these new media has been to co-opt them into traditional systems and processes, rather than adjust the latter to the democratic possibilities offered by these technologies. The analysis concludes with the observation that urgent measures are needed to reform the region’s political culture and systems and align them to ongoing technological changes, in order to avert an Arab Spring-like revolt.

Introduction

In 2008 Barack Obama won the race for the US presidency, partly thanks – it is believed – to his ability to connect with, and garner the vote of, the American youth through social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook.¹ A decade later the British public relations firm Cambridge Analytica gained global notoriety for harvesting the private data of Facebook users without their consent and using it for political advertising.² These contrasting events have become paradigmatic of the potential and pitfalls that new Internet-based technologies hold for electoral processes, and the democratic enterprise generally. The so-called ‘digitalisation of democracy’ – defined here as the increasing use of digital technologies in, as well as their effects on, democratic processes – is changing the way elections are administered globally (for example in the increasing adoption of e-voting). Within a short space of time it has also transformed other aspects of the election process, such as how candidates canvass for votes, thus becoming a significant determinant of electoral outcomes. Perhaps more importantly, the proliferation and increased adoption of

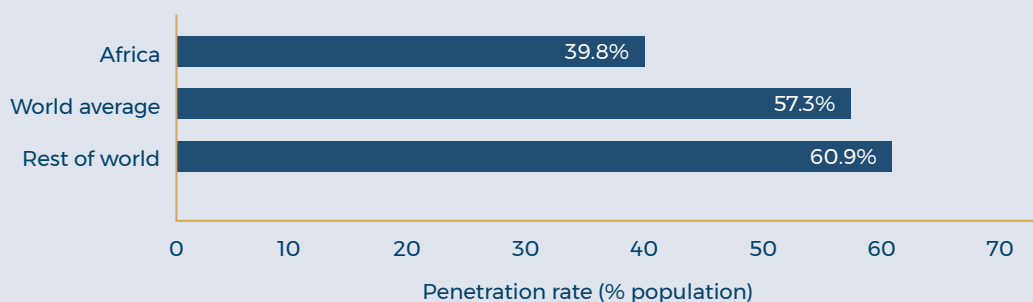
1 Yamiemily Hernandez, ‘The Technology Gap Across Generations: How Social Media Affects the Youth Vote’, *Political Analysis* 20 (2019): 5.

2 Nicholas Confessore, ‘Cambridge Analytica and Facebook: The Scandal and the Fallout So Far’, *New York Times*, 4 April 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/04/us/politics/cambridge-analytica-scandal-fallout.html>.

digital technologies worldwide is gradually changing the political landscape within which elections are conducted, with major implications for the very notion of democracy. This is seen in, for example, a more vocal youth voice in political debates on online platforms, although this is often not translated into actual engagement. Despite lagging behind in Internet penetration (see Figure 1),³ sub-Saharan Africa is no exception to ongoing transformations in democratic discourse and practice in the digital age. If anything, the deficit in information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure, coupled with the huge digital divide in Africa, means that many of the pitfalls associated with this phenomenon, such as disinformation and the polarisation and distortion of political discourses, have seen concrete manifestation on the continent.

The proliferation and increased adoption of digital technologies worldwide is gradually changing the political landscape within which elections are conducted. Despite lagging behind in Internet penetration sub-Saharan Africa is no exception to ongoing transformations in democratic discourse and practice in the digital age

Figure 1 Internet penetration in Africa, 30 June 2019



Note: The estimated number of Internet users in Africa was 525,148,631 on 30 June 2019, with 4,422,292,622 Internet users globally

Source: Internet World Stats, 'Internet penetration in Africa, June 30 2019', www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm

3 Mobile phone usage and penetration in Africa, buttressed by improved network coverage and the roll-out of cheaper devices, has grown rapidly over the past years, giving salience to the disruptive potential of mobile phone-enabled platforms in this context, even against the backdrop of low Internet penetration. See GSM Association, 'The Mobile Economy: Sub-Saharan Africa 2019', <https://www.gsma.com/r/mobileeconomy/sub-saharan-africa/>.

The aims of this policy insight are threefold. Firstly, it explores the concept of the digitalisation of democracy in the context of recently conducted elections in four SADC countries – South Africa, Malawi, Botswana and Mozambique – with an emphasis on the role of social media as a determinant of election outcomes. Secondly, it assesses the impact of the outcomes or anticipated outcomes of these elections on the SADC region and the mandate of the regional organisation. Thirdly, it develops a set of policy recommendations on how SADC member states, individually and collectively, can harness the democratic potential of this phenomenon while mitigating its negative effects.

The reflection begins with a brief discussion of the concept and phenomenon of the digitalisation of democracy, before presenting an overview of its manifestation in the 2019 elections in the region. The third part of the policy insight teases out the implications of these elections for politics and regional integration in the SADC region. The reflection concludes with policy recommendations on harnessing the democratic potential of Internet-based technologies and mitigating their adverse effects in the region.

Elections and democracy in a digital age: Trends, prospects and pitfalls

The emergence of digital technologies, such as smartphone applications and social media, is having a major impact on electoral processes and democracy globally. This is happening at a time of worldwide dissatisfaction with democratic politics, particularly among the youth, many of whom increasingly consider traditional institutions and processes to be unresponsive to their needs and aspirations.⁴ While the future of democracy in the digital age remains uncertain, there is broad consensus that these technologies are bound to disrupt and revolutionise democratic processes with positive or negative outcomes, depending on the response of policymakers and a broad range of stakeholders. In the first instance, new digital technologies have provided citizens across the world with comparatively cheaper and more efficient tools to engage directly in political discourses that affect their lives, with a promise to revitalise the deliberative and participatory functions of democracy that have hitherto been compromised by the rigidity

The emergence of digital technologies, such as smartphone applications and social media, is having a major impact on electoral processes and democracy globally

⁴ Bart Cammaerts *et al.*, 'The Myth of Youth Apathy: Young Europeans' Critical Attitudes toward Democratic Life', *American Behavioral Scientist* 58, no. 5 (2014): 645–64.

and inaccessibility of traditional governmental institutions and processes. For example, in many countries legislative processes are today accompanied by robust online debates on the issues under consideration, although, as Ruud Wouters argues in the case of Belgium and Canada, there are still challenges in translating this virtual deliberation into effective legislative participation.⁵ Moreover, smartphone applications and social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, have brought greater transparency and accountability to electoral processes by allowing for real-time monitoring of the critical phases of voting, counting and tabulating results, while also contributing to breaking the monopoly of incumbent governments over access to media channels for political messaging and vote canvassing during election periods. This has the potential to level the electoral playing field and enrich the interaction between politicians and the electorate, leading to more informed voting choices.⁶ Digital technologies are also transforming the internal organisation and operation of political parties – and in some instances have given rise to so-called digital or platform parties – with the promise to enhance intra-party communication, mobilisation and participation.⁷

Smartphone applications and social media platforms have brought greater transparency and accountability to electoral processes by allowing for real-time monitoring of the critical phases of voting, counting and tabulating results

However, the use of digital technologies to enhance the quality of democracy is only as good as the political context in which these technologies are deployed. For democracy to thrive in the digital age, there has to be a conscious commitment to align the rules and norms of the political game to the fundamental ideals of transparency, accountability, social justice and human dignity.⁸ As revealed in the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings, without a corresponding transformation of political spaces, the growing digitalisation of democracy only contributes to creating new and potentially destabilising avenues for expressing dissent and mobilising against the failings of governments. Added to this are the challenges that come with the high susceptibility of digital technologies to abuse for ends that may actually undermine the democratic project. As reflected in the discussion that follows, the rising phenomenon of fake news and the tendency of some actors to misuse these largely

5 Ruud Wouters, 'E-democracy in Belgium and Canada: A Virtual Mirage? On Enhancing Citizen Participation through Information and Communication Technologies', University of Antwerp, September 2008, <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/27f3/5dccb340251943a7eda49e8fe89d329f5a1f.pdf>.

6 Declan O'Brien, 'Elections and Democracy in a Digital Age – Risks and Opportunities', Kofi Anan Foundation (blog), 23 April 2018, <https://www.kofiannanfoundation.org/blog/elections-and-democracy-in-a-digital-age-risks-and-opportunities>.

7 See Paolo Gerbaudo, 'Digital Parties on the Rise: A Mass Politics for the Era of Platforms', Open Democracy, 13 December 2018, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/digital-liberties/digital-parties-on-rise-mass-politics-for-era-of-platforms/>.

8 O'Brien, 'Elections and Democracy'.

unregulated social media platforms to manipulate the electorate or spread hate speech and propaganda pose a major threat to the consolidation of democracy, particularly in societies characterised by polarised politics as well as corrupt and weak institutions.⁹

For democracy to thrive in the digital age, there has to be a conscious commitment to align the rules and norms of the political game to the fundamental ideals of transparency, accountability, social justice and human dignity

Social media and the 2019 elections in the SADC region

Consistent with global trends, social media is fast becoming a key feature in electoral politics in Southern Africa, and the 2019 polls in the region were no exception. For the purpose of this analysis, the role of social media in four recently held elections in the region will be examined. South Africa and Malawi both held general elections in May 2019, while the electorate in Botswana and Mozambique went to the polls in October.

South Africa

In South Africa, the 8 May 2019 elections that returned the ruling African National Congress (ANC) to power, albeit with a reduced majority, played out partly on social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. With an eye particularly on the millennial vote, political parties and their candidates complemented traditional forms of electioneering with a strong social media presence, which was used to engage with the electorate. South Africa's three biggest political parties – the ANC, the Democratic Alliance (DA) and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) – were the trendsetters in this regard. For example, as part of the ruling party's last-ditch attempt to garner the youth vote, President Cyril Ramaphosa held a live Instagram chat on voting day with local celebrities.¹⁰ Social media was also used by South Africa's Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) to promote its Xsê campaign, encouraging the youth to make their voice heard through their vote.

9 Lisa Kaplan, 'How Campaigns can Protect Themselves from Deep Fakes, Disinformation, and Social Media Manipulation', The Brookings Institution, 10 January 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/techtank/2019/01/10/how-campaigns-can-protect-themselves-from-deepfakes-disinformation-and-social-media-manipulation>.

10 Cebelihle Bhengu, 'Bonang, AKA & DJ Zinhle Talk Elections and Voting with Cyril Ramaphosa via Instagram Live', *TimesLive*, 9 May 2019, <https://www.timeslive.co.za/tshisa-live/tshisa-live/2019-05-09-watch-bonang-aka-dj-zinhle-talk-elections-and-voting-with-cyril-ramaphosa-via-instagram-live/>.

This was against the backdrop of strong voter apathy among the youth, symbolised by the hashtag '#IWantToVoteBut', which was trending in the days before the election.¹¹

If Twitter was a country the EFF would have beaten the ANC in the elections

Despite the evident digitalisation of the 2019 elections, the dynamics and outcomes of the 2019 polls suggest that social media activism is yet to have a tectonic influence on electoral politics in South Africa. A major observation that became apparent in these elections was the gap between a strong social media following and the actual votes political parties got. This prompted some commentators to suggest that the 'EFF's support is ... hugely exaggerated on social media', and that 'if Twitter was a country the EFF would have beaten the ANC in the elections'.¹² In fact, one of the smaller parties, the Freedom Front Plus, considered to be the biggest winner of the 2019 national elections after doubling the votes it received in 2014, had a relatively insignificant presence on social media ahead of the polls.¹³ Moreover, some observers have cautioned against an undue focus on the role of social media in electoral politics in South Africa by pointing to the fact that, with only 21 million Facebook users (28% of the population), for example,¹⁴ social media is not the primary source of political information or news for a large part of the country's population. Social media sentiments do not necessarily reflect the national mood. A combination of factors such as low literacy levels, inadequate access to Internet-based devices, and high data costs means that for many South Africans traditional media, notably radio and television, remain the most used and trusted sources of political information and news.¹⁵ A recent survey by the Broadcast Research Council of South Africa sheds further light on this trend by identifying individuals in the middle income bracket as the highest consumers of digital information, and thus the most susceptible to digital misinformation and manipulation.¹⁶

In recent years South Africa has experienced its fair share of disinformation through social media platforms, including in the lead-up to the 2016 local government elections when

11 Unathi Nkanjeni, '#IWantToVoteBut: South Africans Talk Election Day', *TimesLive*, 7 May 2019, <https://www.timeslive.co.za/politics/2019-05-07-iwanttovotebut-south-africans-talk-election-day/>.

12 James de Villiers, 'If Twitter Was a Country, the EFF Would Have Beaten the ANC in the Elections', *Business Insider*, 13 May 2019, <https://www.businessinsider.co.za/twitter-facebook-elections-results-2019-social-media-following-eff-anc-da-2019-5>.

13 Athandiwe Saba and Lester Keiwit, 'Election's Biggest Little Winners - FF+', *Mail & Guardian*, 10 May 2019, <https://mg.co.za/article/2019-05-10-elections-biggest-little-winners-ff>.

14 Arthur Goldstuck, 'SA Has Taken to Social Media like Never Before', *The Citizen*, 31 October 2018, <https://citizen.co.za/lifestyle/science/2030220/sa-has-taken-to-social-media-like-never-before/>.

15 Elnari Potgieter, 'Trust, Media and the Upcoming Elections', Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, 25 April 2019, <https://www.ijr.org.za/2019/04/25/trust-media-and-the-upcoming-elections/>.

16 Broadcast Research Council of South Africa, 'The Establishment Survey: September 2019 Release', <https://brcsa.org.za/establishment-survey-full-year-release-sep-oct-2019/>.

political parties such as the ANC and DA were accused of using social media to manipulate voters and discredit other parties.¹⁷ However, it seems the 2019 general elections were largely free of any major attempts at digital disinformation.¹⁸ This could be attributed to the absence during the elections of ‘a binary issue that could have easily been adopted by a particular group’,¹⁹ but also to a heightened sense of alertness to the fake news phenomenon in South Africa in recent years, as well as the strong societal backlash that accompanied previous incidents of social media misinformation and manipulation. In partnership with Media Monitor Africa, South Africa’s IEC hosted an online fake news monitor platform, dubbed the Real411, which allowed the public to report instances of disinformation. According to the IEC, none of the complaints investigated was found to represent a deliberate attempt at misinformation to influence unduly the electoral process.²⁰

The 2019 general elections were largely free of any major attempts at digital disinformation

Malawi

While in South Africa social media did not seem to have engendered greater youth involvement in the elections, in Malawi these new technologies appear to have contributed to a strong showing by young people, who made up more than half of registered voters in the 2019 electoral process.²¹ As observed by the Electoral Commissions Forum of SADC countries, ‘youth were visible as voters, polling staff and party agents’.²² However, this strong showing could also be explained by the country’s predominantly youthful population. Moreover, in a country where the public media is viewed as biased towards the ruling party, social media serves as an alternative source of information for many, while enhancing the ability of opposition parties and candidates to reach the electorate. For example, according to *Reuters*, the opposition United Transformation Movement and its leader, Saulos Chilima,

17 George Ogola, ‘How New Media Platforms Have Become Powerful Across Africa’, *The Conversation*, 10 December 2018, <https://www.thesouthafrican.com/news/new-media-platforms-africa/>.

18 A notable exception here was an allegation by *Daily Maverick*, a South African daily online newspaper, that it had uncovered a plot by Russia to run a disinformation campaign to engineer an ANC victory at the polls. See Ferial Haffajee, ‘Exclusive: Did Putin’s “Chef” Attempt to Interfere in South African Election?’, *Daily Maverick*, 7 May 2019, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2019-05-07-exclusive-did-putins-chef-attempt-to-interfere-in-south-african-election/>.

19 Tessa Knight, ‘Politics in the Twittersphere – How Much Misinformation Did We Get?’, *Daily Maverick*, 14 May 2019, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2019-05-14-politics-in-the-twittersphere-how-much-misinformation-did-we-get/>.

20 Simnikiwe Mzekandaba, ‘SA Political Parties Square Up on Social Media’, *ITWeb*, 6 May 2019, https://www.itweb.co.za/content/LPw_Q57lyw8xMNgkj.

21 African Union, *Preliminary Statement of the Election Observation Mission to the 2019 Tripartite Elections in the Republic of Malawi* (Blantyre: AU, 2019), 4.

22 Electoral Commission Forum of SADC, *Preliminary Statement of the Electoral Commissions Forum of SADC Countries (ECF-SADC) on the Tripartite Elections of the Republic of Malawi* (Blantyre: ECF-SADC, 2019).

'targeted young voters with a vibrant social media campaign featuring hip-hop videos'.²³ However, given its greater access to resources, as well the fact that its target audience was mostly the electorate in areas of high social media connectivity, the ruling Democratic Progressive Party appears to have dominated the social media space in Malawi's 2019 elections. Social media was also leveraged to extend the reach and impact of the three live presidential election debates organised by a consortium of civil society and media organisations ahead of the polls. In particular, the use of social media allowed Malawians in the diaspora to engage actively in these debates.²⁴ Tellingly, although the ruling party did not participate in the debates, it went on to win the presidential election. It should be underscored, however, that similar to South Africa, Internet penetration, at 14%, remains very low in Malawi, with only 6% of the country's population using social media on a daily basis.²⁵

In a country where the public media is viewed as biased towards the ruling party, social media serves as an alternative source of information for many

These positive contributions notwithstanding, Malawi's 21 May 2019 elections also exposed the potential threat that social media poses to the development of electoral politics in the SADC region. The use of social media platforms to spread false information was widespread in the period leading up to the elections. For example, just a week before voting, social media was awash with rumours of the death of the incumbent president, Peter Mutharika, who would go on to secure re-election in a tight race.²⁶ Likewise, a few days before the vote a fake letter was circulated on social media purportedly sent by the opposition party, the United Transformation Movement, to the Malawian Electoral Commission, in which the former asked that the polls be postponed upon discovering a plot by the ruling party to rig the elections. Interestingly, some traditional media outlets, such as the radio station belonging to the Malawi Institute of Journalism, also shared the false letter on their social media platforms.²⁷ So pervasive was the social media fake news phenomenon during Malawi's 2019 elections that a former BBC World Service editor commented that, '[t]hough false news stories meant to deceive the electorate can be common around elections, especially around the electoral process and candidates, the excessive rate at which it

23 Frank Phiri and Mabvuto Banda, 'Malawians Vote in Tough Election for President Mutharika', *Reuters*, 21 May 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-malawi-election/malawians-vote-in-tough-election-for-president-mutharika-idUSKCN1SR018>.

24 Josh Hills, 'NDI Malawi Team Provides Support to Historic Presidential Debates', *Democracy Works*, 30 April 2019, <https://www.demworks.org/ndi-malawi-team-provides-support-historic-presidential-debates>.

25 Rabson Kondowe, 'Despite a Low Internet Penetration, Malawi is Worried about Fake News in its Election Run-Up', *Quartz Africa*, 14 May 2019, <https://qz.com/africa/1616511/malawi-election-has-a-fake-news-problem-on-whatsapp-facebook/>.

26 Chakuchanya Harawa, 'Malawi Election: Albino Killings, the President's Fake Death and Five More Things', *BBC*, 20 May 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-48307872>.

27 Tendai Dube, 'The UTM Has not Asked to Postpone Malawi's May 21 Elections', *AFP South Africa*, 20 May 2019, <https://factcheck.afp.com/utm-has-not-asked-postpone-malawis-may-21-elections>.

was spreading in Malawi caught us all by surprise'.²⁸ As was the case in South Africa, the Institute for War and Peace Reporting and the Media Institute of Southern Africa ran a fact-checker campaign during the elections to combat fake news on social media.²⁹

Malawi's 21 May 2019 elections also exposed the potential threat that social media poses to the development of electoral politics in the SADC region

Besides challenges associated with low Internet penetration and the fake news phenomenon, social media as an enabler of democratic politics in Malawi also has to contend with the rising tide of arbitrary government censorship of the Internet in Africa. Malawi was subjected to a six-hour Internet blackout soon after polls closed on 21 May 2019. Critics of the government argue that the Internet disruption, which affected the broadcast signals of two TV channels perceived to be sympathetic to the opposition, was calculated to impede the free flow of information about the vote-counting process, including on social media.³⁰

Mozambique

At 6.6%, Mozambique has the lowest Internet penetration rate in Southern Africa. Mobile phone penetration is equally low at 46%.³¹ Even so, Mozambique has witnessed some of the most innovative uses of Internet-based technologies to promote democratic politics in the region, against the backdrop of concerns about the curtailing of political freedoms. In previous elections in 2014 and 2018, mobile phones and digital platforms such as Citizen's Eye and Txeka-lá, as well as the Votar Mozambique web platform and its mobile app, were essential tools for election observation. Citizen observers in different parts of the country used their mobile phones and various digital platforms to share photos and videos of the voting process, thus contributing to its transparency.³² In the 2019 presidential, legislative and provincial elections, which were won decisively by the governing Frelimo party, several civil society organisations made use of digital technologies and platforms to observe the polls. These included the Centre for Democracy and Development, Citizen's Eye, the Centre for Public Integrity, and the Centre of Support on Information and

28 Andres Ilves, 'On the Ground, Breaking New Ground: NDI and IWPR Fight Fake News in Malawi', *Democracy Works* (blog), 23 July 2019, <https://www.demworks.org/ground-breaking-new-ground-ndi-and-iwpr-fight-fake-news-malawi>.

29 USAID, 'Lessons from Malawi's 2019 Elections', June 27, 2019, <https://www.usaid.gov/malawi/news/lessons-malawis-2019-elections>.

30 Abdi Latif Dahir, 'An Internet Cut-off During Malawi's Vote Count Affected its Electoral Commission's Backup Network', *Quartz Africa*, 22 May 2019, <https://qz.com/africa/1625291/malawi-internet-cut-off-after-polls-close-on-election-day/>.

31 Dercio Tsandzana, 'Mozambique Pushes for SIM Card Registration, Raising Privacy and Election Monitoring Concerns', *Global Voices*, 20 August 2019, <https://globalvoices.org/2019/08/20/mozambique-pushes-for-sim-card-registration-raising-privacy-and-election-monitoring-concerns/>.

32 Tsandzana, 'Mozambique Pushes'.

Community Communication. Some of these initiatives allowed citizens to send alerts about the elections in the form of SMSs, videos, photos and voice messages to election situation rooms operated by civil society groups. For example, the Centre of Support on Information and Community Communication, a civil society organisation based in Maputo, launched an Android mobile phone-enabled platform that let 'its users ... share and receive real-time information related to the ... elections, including the voting process and the results'.³³

Mozambique has witnessed some of the most innovative uses of Internet-based technologies to promote democratic politics in the region, against the backdrop of concerns about the curtailing of political freedoms

However, as suggested by the election observer missions of the Commonwealth, the EU and the Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa, these initiatives were hamstrung by the refusal of Mozambican election officials to accredit some digitally-armed citizen observers with the potential to provide real-time reporting on the voting process or carry out parallel vote tabulation of results.³⁴ Moreover, in the lead-up to the polls there were concerns that these initiatives would be scuttled by a 10-day ultimatum issued by the Mozambican Communications Authority in June 2019, requiring all prepaid SIM cards to be registered. In the context of the October 2019 elections, this directive was interpreted as an attempt to spy on citizens and interfere with election monitoring efforts. A similar ministerial decree was issued in 2010, calling for mobile phone users to register their SIM cards within a month. This was in the context of violent demonstrations in Maputo over the rising cost of living, which were coordinated mainly through the use of mobile phones and social media networks.³⁵ Critics argued that the June 2019 directive could undermine the integrity of the electoral process, mainly by limiting the participation of citizens who were not able to register their SIM cards and therefore had them blocked. There were also concerns that those who complied with the regulation would be deterred from freely participating and expressing their views about the elections knowing that government authorities may be carrying out surveillance on them.

Botswana

Botswana's democracy, long considered to be one of the most consolidated on the continent, arguably faced its greatest test yet when the electorate went to the polls on

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ See, for example, European Union, *Election Observation Mission Malawi Tripartite Elections – 21 May 2019: Preliminary Statement* (Blantyre: EU, 2019).

³⁵ Tsandzana, 'Mozambique Pushes'.

23 October 2019 to elect a new Parliament and local government leaders. The elections took place against the backdrop of severe disquiet within the ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) and a bitter spat between the former president, Ian Khama, and his successor and former protégé, the incumbent president, Mokgweetsi Masisi. Khama has since left the BDP, which has ruled Botswana since it gained independence from Britain in 1966. He was seeking to unseat Masisi in the elections through the Botswana Patriotic Front, a splinter group from the BDP believed to be the brainchild of Khama, who ruled Botswana from 2008 to 2018.³⁶ However, Masisi and the BDP retained their hold on power after winning 38 of the 57 parliamentary seats.

Botswana's democracy arguably faced its greatest test yet when the electorate went to the polls on 23 October 2019 to elect a new Parliament and local government leaders

In the lead-up to this high-stakes election, which had the potential to undo decades of stability in this largely homogenous and conservative society, the political discourse became increasingly polarised, with social media serving as a vehicle in this regard. Social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, were replete with instances of politicians and election candidates hurling insults at one another. This prompted civil society groups such as the Organisation for Youth and Elections in Botswana and the Botswana Council of NGOs to caution against the use of hate speech and undignified language as part of electioneering. Be that as it may, the advent and growing use of social media in the political landscape in Botswana has mostly been welcomed, not least because it is seen to have contributed to democratising media access and levelling the electoral playing field in a country where the airwaves and other traditional media have been monopolised by the government. In both the 2014 and 2019 elections, Facebook and Twitter were widely used by political parties and candidates as a relatively cheap campaign tool.³⁷ It is worth underscoring that political parties in Botswana do not receive funding from the state.

As was the case in South Africa, the Botswana experience highlighted the tendency for social media sentiments and activism to distort and misrepresent the actual political mood and dynamics in a country. Thanks partly to its strong social media presence and appeal ahead of the polls, the opposition Umbrella for Democratic Change coalition was widely expected to make a dent in the ruling party's support base. These predictions were in contrast to the findings of an Afrobarometer survey, which projected that the ruling BDP

36 Brian Benza, 'Botswana to Hold National and Local Elections on October 23', *Reuters*, 31 August 2019, <https://af.reuters.com/article/idAFKCN1VN0V9-OZATP>.

37 Jotia Agreement, 'The Role of Social Media in Freeing Botswana from State Control of the Media', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 36, no. 2 (2018): 264-78.

would retain its majority.³⁸ As it turned out, the BDP did not only increase its majority in Parliament but also won all seven seats in the capital Gaborone and its environs, which are considered to be the heartland of Botswana's Internet and social media connectivity.³⁹

The Botswana experience highlighted the tendency for social media sentiments and activism to distort and misrepresent the actual political mood and dynamics in a country

Electoral politics in a digital age: Implications for SADC

While the issues and emerging dynamics discussed so far are of much more significance at the national level of individual SADC member states, this section of the analysis examines their implications for the future of the region as a whole, consistent with the regional outlook and focus of SAIIA's Regional Observatory Programme, to which this policy insight seeks to contribute. It can be inferred from the preceding overview that social media, and the new Internet-based technologies generally, is increasingly becoming an important feature of democratic politics in the SADC region, with major implications for the bloc's objectives of entrenching democratic governance, promoting regional integration, and building a security community. However, despite recognising and seeking to harness the potential of these new media in its revised communication and promotional strategy, the role of social media still appears to be a blind spot in the efforts of SADC to promote electoral democracy. Despite reservations in some quarters, SADC's revised *Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections* (2015) acknowledges and encourages the fair use of new technologies such as electronic voting machines and biometric voter

Social media, and the new Internet-based technologies generally, is increasingly becoming an important feature of democratic politics in the SADC region

38 Afrobarometer, 'Botswana Ruling Party Enjoys Strong Lead in Pre-Election Survey', Press Release, 10 October 2019, <http://afrobarometer.org/press/botswanas-ruling-party-enjoys-strong-lead-pre-election-survey>.

39 Peter Fabricius, 'Botswana's Ruling BDP Defies the Pundits', *ISS Today*, 28 October 2019, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2019-10-28-botswanas-ruling-bdp-defies-the-pundits/>.

registration. Even so, the principles and guidelines are silent on the growing salience of social media in electoral politics in the region.⁴⁰ What is more, the conduct of election observation, which is central to the organisation's democracy promotion agenda, hardly pays attention to this phenomenon. This was the case with the reviewed elections where the preliminary statements released by the SADC Electoral Observation Mission in all four countries made no mention of how this new technology interfaced with the electoral process.

The role of social media still appears to be a blind spot in the efforts of SADC to promote electoral democracy

Generally, SADC's role in these elections has been consistent with its standard *modus operandi*, characterised by an approach to election observation that is non-intrusive and generally defers to the sovereignty of the host government and the judgment of the national election management body.⁴¹ This low-intensity form of democracy promotion has in the past been criticised for legitimising unpopular governments and engendering instability in countries such as Zimbabwe and the Democratic Republic of Congo, thus undermining SADC's drive towards greater regional integration underpinned by a culture of democratic governance and an emerging security community.⁴²

The outcomes of the elections in South Africa, Malawi, Mozambique and Botswana point to business as usual insofar as the correlation between electoral politics and substantive democracy is concerned

Put in their proper context, the outcomes of the elections in South Africa, Malawi, Mozambique and Botswana point to business as usual insofar as the correlation between electoral politics and substantive democracy is concerned. In all four cases, the elections returned the incumbents to office. This sense of continuity, however, belies

40 Southern African Development Community, *SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections* (Pretoria: SADC, 2015).

41 Fritz Nganje and Kgalalelo Nganje, 'Liberal Internationalism Meets Third Worldism: The Politics of International Election Observation in the DRC's Post-War Elections', *Third World Quarterly* 40, no. 3 (2019): 521-41.

42 Ringisai Chikohomero, 'Elections and Instability in SADC: The Case of Zimbabwe' (Policy Brief 128, Institute for Security Studies, Pretoria, 2018).

domestic discontent in all four countries that speaks to the growing unresponsiveness of elected governments to the plight of the electorate once votes have been counted and apportioned. In South Africa, for example, expectations that the presidency of Ramaphosa represents a break from the politics of patronage, corruption and malfeasance that has accompanied successive ANC victories at the polls are increasingly turning out to be an illusion. Deep-seated factionalism and infighting within the ANC are hamstringing any efforts at reforms, while recent revelations suggest that the president himself has not been immune to the rot that has rendered the ruling party incapable of delivering on its electoral promises in the post-apartheid dispensation.⁴³

Similarly, while Frelimo and President Filipe Nyusi emerged victorious from Mozambique's October 2019 elections with a landslide margin, albeit amid allegations of electoral fraud, this is against the backdrop of growing corruption and divisions within the ruling party, as well as mounting discontent with Frelimo among the country's disillusioned youth.⁴⁴

The case of Botswana is even more precarious. With the spat between Khama and Masisi having lifted the lid on simmering divisions, corruption and discontent in the Botswana polity, the BDP's victory in the just-ended polls will in all likelihood be accompanied by an era of unstable politics in Botswana. It remains to be seen how far Masisi will go with his anti-corruption campaign, given the fierce pushback that awaits him on this front, as evinced by Khama's unrestrained attempts to unseat him at the polls. Elite corruption in Botswana is believed to have flourished during the reign of Ian Khama, entrenched through a network of alliances between ruling party politicians, businesspeople and high-ranking military leaders, and with the Khama family as one of its main beneficiaries.⁴⁵

It may be only a matter of time before the region experiences its own 'Arab Spring' should elections continue to be a ritual with no significant democratic dividends, particularly for the growing youthful population

The implications of these developments for SADC are threefold. Firstly, by returning the incumbents to office, the elections will leave SADC on the same trajectory, in which the form and pace of its regional integration and development agenda are dictated by the narrow national interest considerations of its member states. Secondly, there are strong

43 Raymond Suttner, '#CR17 Campaign Funding and the Changes in our Politics', *Daily Maverick*, 22 August 2019, <https://www.daily-maverick.co.za/article/2019-08-22-cr17-campaign-funding-and-the-changes-in-our-politics/>.

44 Joaquim Nhamirre, 'Mozambique Ruling Party Grapples with State Debt Scandal', *Mail & Guardian*, 17 January 2019, <https://mg.co.za/article/2019-01-17-mozambique-ruling-party-grapples-with-state-debt-scandal>.

45 See Monageng Mogalakwe and Francis Nyamnjoh, 'Botswana at 50: Democratic Deficit, Elite Corruption and Poverty in the Midst of Plenty', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 35, no. 1 (2017): 1-14.

prospects that, given the strained political conditions under which these elections were held in most of these countries, the newly elected governments will adopt an inward-looking approach; spending more time on putting out political fires and consolidating their rule rather than committing or providing leadership to the regional project. Thirdly, if one takes seriously the many ways in which social media and other new technologies are rolling back the boundaries of democratic politics and discourses, it may be only a matter of time before the region experiences its own 'Arab Spring' should elections continue to be a ritual with no significant democratic dividends, particularly for the growing youthful population.

Concluding remarks and policy recommendations

The worldwide move towards the digitalisation of democracy is still at an incipient stage in the SADC region, but if the 2019 elections in South Africa, Malawi, Mozambique and Botswana are anything to go by, its interface with traditional forms of politics and governance in the region holds grim prospects. On the one hand, social media and other Internet-based technologies have opened up the political space for enhanced deliberative democracy, including giving voice to the youthful segment of the electorate. On the other hand, a lingering culture of largely unresponsive and unaccountable politics in the region means that the dominant approach to these new media has been to co-opt them into traditional systems and processes, rather than adjust the latter to the democratic possibilities offered by these technologies. It is from this perspective that the digitalisation of democracy in the SADC region, with all its disruptive potential, can be said to be on a collision course with traditional forms of politics and governance that have rendered particularly the techno-savvy youth disillusioned. Further research is needed to flesh out and gain a better understanding of some of the issues and trends teased out in this policy insight, including their significance for future social and political dynamics in the region. For example, it would be enlightening to obtain more disaggregated data on social media use in various countries in the region and analyse this vis-à-vis observed voting patterns. It would also be useful to interrogate in a more systematic manner the conditions under which the reactive democracy of the youth through social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook could translate into meaningful involvement in the democratic politics of their respective countries. This is in addition to inquiring into the impact of digital technologies on the organisation and operations of political parties in the region. In the meantime, the following measures could help the region harness the democratic potential of Internet-based technologies and prevent a tipping point from occurring.

- There is an urgent need for the ruling class in SADC member states to rethink its interests and align its politics with the socio-economic needs and democratic aspirations of their populations. In the context of the disruptive potential of new media technologies, failure to do so risks giving rise to social and political upheaval from disenchanting but technologically empowered youth.

The dominant approach to these new media has been to co-opt them into traditional systems and processes, rather than adjust the latter to the democratic possibilities offered by these technologies

- SADC member states should consider adopting legislation that empowers their respective election management bodies, media regulatory agencies, and other relevant authorities to enforce fair and responsible use of social media during and outside of elections. The SADC Secretariat could, through regular dialogues and the facilitation of training and peer-to-peer knowledge exchange, assist in ensuring that the oversight role of these domestic institutions does not impinge unnecessarily on the rights and privacy of individuals.
- Governments and other relevant stakeholders such as the private sector should invest in ICT infrastructure, particularly in rural areas, and cheap Internet-enabled devices with a view to bridging the digital divide in these societies and encouraging greater access to social media platforms.
- Likewise, it is imperative for SADC to update its *Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections* to recognise the growing role of social media in electoral processes, and encourage fair access to and use of social media during elections.
- Civil society organisations, election management bodies and other stakeholders involved in civil and voter education activities should prioritise digital literacy in their campaigns with a view to encouraging the fair and responsible use of social media during and outside of elections. Digital literacy campaigns should also be targeted at politicians and journalists working in the traditional media sector to encourage fair and responsible use of social media for political messaging and news reporting respectively.
- Finally, there is a need for SADC member states to review the relevant provisions of their electoral laws to catch up with and regulate the growing practice whereby politicians use social media platforms to canvass votes outside of the legally prescribed campaign period.

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Cover image

People take pictures with mobile phones during the formal announcement of the National and Provincial Election Results at the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) Results Operations Centre on 11 May 2019 in Pretoria, South Africa (Phill Magakoe/AFP via Getty Images)

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