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News release

Democracy in crisis: Africa's long-standing democracies under pressure, Afrobarometer CEO warns

As the winds of democratic decline make headway in Africa, some of the continent's long-standing democracies appear to be under pressure, Afrobarometer CEO Joseph Asunka said Wednesday in Berlin at the German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA) Speaker Series on African Affairs.

Asunka joined Matthias Basedau, director of GIGA's Institute for African Affairs, and institute research fellows Lisa Hoffmann and Julia Köbrich to discuss the state of democracy in Africa.

Sharing insights from Afrobarometer surveys conducted in 28 countries in 2021/2022, Asunka noted that fewer than half (46%) of Africans say their country is a full democracy or a democracy with minor problems, and even fewer (38%) say they are satisfied with the way democracy works in their country. Both ratings have declined since 2014/2015: The perceived extent of democracy is down by 4 percentage, while satisfaction has dropped by 7 points.

"The supply side of democratic governance – the failure of governments to deliver – is the main challenge of Africa's democratic governance," Asunka said.

He noted that these worrying democratic trends are evident even in Botswana, Namibia, South Africa, and Ghana – once considered Africa's "long-standing democracies."

"Popular ratings of the extent of democracy, satisfaction with democracy, levels of corruption, and citizens' perception of the general direction of the countries are all trending in the wrong direction in these countries," he said.

In Ghana, only 12% of citizens say the country is going in the right direction, and only about half (51%) are satisfied with how democracy works, the lowest level recorded since 2012. The proportion of citizens who perceive all or most officials at the Presidency as corrupt has risen to 55%, its highest level in two decades of surveys.

In Botswana, satisfaction with democracy (30%), perceived integrity in the office of the president (35%), and the perception that the country is heading in the right direction (23%) have all declined dramatically over the past decade. Namibia has recorded an 18-point loss of confidence in the integrity of the Presidency since 2012, along with a stunning 49-point decline in the perception that the country is going in the right direction (22%). And in South Africa, all four indicators have dropped by 20 to 32 points, with support for democracy now at just 40% – one of the lowest levels Afrobarometer has recorded across Africa.

Another threat to Africa's democracies, Asunka said, is increasing tolerance for the role of the military in politics, a view particularly strong among young adults aged 18-35.

“While a strong majority still reject military rule, the extent of opposition has declined significantly over the last decade, to the extent that a slim majority is willing to countenance military intervention if elected officials abuse their power,” Asunka said.

He noted, however, that Africans' support for democratic norms remains steadfast, in spite of widespread disappointment with the extent and quality of democratic governance.

The GIGA Speaker Series provides a platform for African researchers to discuss political and socio-economic developments in sub-Saharan Africa and for Germany to strengthen its collaborations with its African partners.

About Afrobarometer

Afrobarometer (AB) is a trusted source of high-quality data and analysis on what Africans are thinking. With an unmatched track record of 350,000+ interviews in 39 countries, representing the views of 80% of the African population, AB is leading the charge to bridge the continent's data gap. AB data inform many global indices, such as the Ibrahim Index of African Governance, Transparency International's Global Corruption Barometer, and the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators. The data are also used for country risk analyses and by credit rating and forecasting agencies such as the Economist Intelligence Unit. All AB data sets are publicly available on the website and may be analysed free of charge using AB's online data analysis tool.

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