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The Strategic Review for Southern Africa is an accredited on-access journal listed in the IBSS index. It has since 1978 been a platform for strategic and political analyses of themes and socio-political developments that impact on or provide lessons for Southern Africa. As a multi-disciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary journal, the Strategic Review facilitates vigorous and enlightened debate among scholars, policy makers, practitioners, students and activists in order to contribute to the wider global discourse on changing strategic and political dynamics within and beyond nation states.

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Editorial

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This edition of the Strategic Review for Southern Africa (SRSA) arrives with both scholarly contributions and profound loss. We begin by acknowledging the sudden passing of Professor Maxi Schoeman. She played a decisive role in transforming this journal and served as an active, distinguished member of our International Advisory Board, both of which formed part of her unwavering commitment to building a new South Africa. As a scholar whose influence extended far beyond the pages of this journal, she was honoured and recognised on the occasion of her 65th birthday with a Festschrift.[1] On that occasion, Ambassador Kingsley Makhubela observed: 'There are many of us who have crossed Maxi's path, in various ways over the years, who have been influenced in one way or another by her person, warmth, intellect and political insights'. In what was to be her final contribution to the SRSA, Professor Schoeman edited a special issue on the Ocean Regions Programme earlier this year. Her scholarly legacy, characterised by intellectual rigour, analytical depth and an unwavering dedication to asking uncomfortable questions, shaped the academic discourse on African security, foreign policy and international relations. Her absence is palpable as you will see in the eulogy that was delivered by her last doctoral student, Daniela Marggraff, at her memorial service in September 2025.

Professor Schoeman's influence endures in the questions this journal continues to ask about Africa's place in a complex and evolving world order. The contributions assembled in this volume continue to reflect these foundations and probe the strategic challenges that confront the African continent and its engagement within a period of unique global dynamics. At a moment of significant political transitions, institutional pressures and evolving security threats, the articles featured in this issue offer critical analyses of democratic processes, foreign policy trajectories, conflict dynamics and the role institutions play in shaping peace, stability and governance across Southern Africa and beyond.

Arrigo Pallotti, for instance, provides a comprehensive examination of South Africa's post-apartheid foreign policy, tracing continuities and discontinuities across the administrations of Mandela, Mbeki, Zuma and Ramaphosa. His analysis situates South African diplomacy within evolving global power dynamics, regional integration efforts and domestic imperatives, revealing tensions between economic pragmatism, solidarity with the Global South and the pursuit of African Renaissance ideals. The article examines how South Africa's international positioning reflects both enduring strategic objectives and the constraints imposed by shifting geopolitical alignments.

Stephen Buchanan-Clarke's article explores the complex role of religious institutions in conflict prevention and community security within Mozambique and Tanzania. The study demonstrates how formal and informal religious structures can either mitigate or exacerbate conditions conducive to violent extremism. His comparative analysis underscores the importance of understanding local religious dynamics and institutional resilience in designing effective counter-terrorism strategies that respect rights and promote social cohesion rather than relying solely on militarised responses.

Gallous Atabongwoung and Mosa Nkoko examine the declining French influence in Francophone Africa, focusing on Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. Their analysis reveals how anti-French sentiment, catalysed by France's failure to address jihadist insurgencies and compounded by corruption scandals and economic dependencies, contributed to the recent wave of military coups in the Sahel. The study highlights how the decline of French influence has created room for alternative security partnerships, notably with Russia's Wagner Group, fundamentally reshaping regional security dynamics and challenging traditional post-colonial power arrangements in Africa.

In their report, Geoff Harris and Mosa Nkoko offer a sobering assessment of armed conflicts across Africa between 2000 and 2025, evaluating their cost-effectiveness through a systematic analysis of human, economic and social costs. Their findings reveal that military approaches have consistently delivered extraordinarily high costs with minimal effectiveness, which should prompt an urgent rethink of alternative peacebuilding strategies and institutional mechanisms, including potential ministries of peacebuilding, that might achieve security objectives through non-violent means.

The issue also covers the quirks of democratic transitions and political representation, especially for liberation parties that have sustained their dominance. Octavious Masunda, for example, provides a comparative analysis of electoral realignments following the decline of liberation movements in Southern Africa, examining the ANC, ZANU-PF, SWAPO and FRELIMO. The research identifies two divergent pathways: democratic renewal in South Africa and Namibia, where electoral decline has fostered greater pluralism and coalition politics, versus authoritarian resilience in Zimbabwe and Mozambique, where ruling parties have maintained power through coercion and institutional manipulation. Masunda argues that the erosion of "liberation legitimacy" stems from corruption, socio-economic crises and

generational shifts, with younger "born-free" voters prioritising contemporary governance issues over historical liberation narratives. The study demonstrates that the implications for democratic consolidation are shaped by institutional strength and opposition coherence. Andrea Francke and Nicola de Jager continue this exploration by tracing South Africa's African National Congress's trajectory from liberation movement to governing party. They analyse how the party's historical mission of transformation has encountered the structural constraints and internal contradictions that accompany prolonged political dominance. Their article contributes to ongoing debates about the sustainability of dominant-party systems and the conditions under which transformative political projects either consolidate democratic governance or contribute to institutional decay and public disillusionment.

Picking up from this analysis, Dennis Uatuuapi Zaire and Filippus Edwardu's report examines Namibia's 2024 elections through the lens of media coverage. They highlight how newspapers addressed, or failed to address, the concerns of marginalised constituencies including the youth, women and persons with disabilities. And their analysis reveals how media narratives privilege dominant political parties and elite actors while sidelining the voices of those whose material conditions and political agency are central to democratic legitimacy. Like Francke and de Jager's article, this report raises fundamental questions about inclusive representation in electoral processes.

Finally, Thabiso Jeremiah Musendame and Emmanuel Matambo challenge dominant neoliberal paradigms in land reform policy by proposing a humanistic framework grounded in Sam Moyo's political thought and African epistemologies such as Ubuntu. Drawing on a qualitative analysis of Zimbabwean stakeholders, their study reveals critical tensions between policy intentions and lived experiences in Zimbabwe's Fast Track Land Reform Programme, exposing elite capture, gender and youth marginalisation, disconnection from spiritual and cultural dimensions of land and inadequate institutional support. Their framework reconceptualises land as intrinsically linked to human dignity, justice and communal identity offering a normative roadmap for reimagining land reform that addresses both material redistribution and the restoration of humanity severed by colonial dispossession.

These articles delve into several interconnected themes that define Africa's contemporary strategic environment. These analyses resonate with the scholarly commitments that Professor Schoeman championed throughout her career: rigorous engagement with empirical realities, critical examination of power dynamics, attention to African agency in global politics and the recognition that scholarship carries an obligation to contribute to a more just, peaceful and democratic future. As Southern Africa confronts an uncertain political landscape marked by economic constraints, governance challenges and shifting international alignments, the work of understanding these dynamics with clarity, nuance and intellectual honesty becomes ever more essential.

We invite readers to engage critically with these contributions, to consider their implications for policy and practice, and to recognise that the pursuit of strategic understanding is inseparable from the broader project of building more equitable and sustainable political orders across the continent. In this spirit, and in memory of Professor Schoeman's dedication to engaged scholarship, we present Volume 47, Issue 2.

Henning Melber and Heather Thuynsma

Managing Editors

[1] *The undiscovered country. Essays in honour of Maxi Schoeman*. Edited by Vasu Reddy and Heather Thuynsma. Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies 2019.

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Eulogy for Prof Maxi Schoeman

Daniela Marggraff

"For many of us, Prof. was immortal... a piece of her lives on in all of us"

Remembering Maxi Schoeman

A memorial event for Professor Maxi Schoeman (29/11/1954-14/09/2025) was held at the University of Pretoria on 30 September 2025. The following is a eulogy that was delivered by Dr Daniela Marggraff.

I had the privilege of working very closely alongside Professor Schoeman for the last few years at the Ocean Regions Programme (ORP). I also had the honour of being supervised by her for my Honours, Masters and PhD, and had just started a post-doc under her supervision a few weeks ago.

On behalf of the ORP, which, in hindsight, was her final academic project, I would like to share a few words. The following is a joint contribution by Dr Yu-Shan Wu, Ms Tshegofatso Ramachela and Dr Samuel Oyewole.

In the spirit of Prof. Schoeman, I will keep it as short as possible, since I can quite literally hear her whispering to me to stop making such a fuss and rather focus on writing some journal articles.

At the ORP, we are focused on the centrality of the ocean to global politics from an African perspective. We see the ocean as this great connector. And in many ways, that is exactly what Prof. was. She embodied the ocean as being this great bridge-builder, unifier and enabler. She had this amazing ability to meet people from around the world, and bring us together, such that we at the ORP have really formed an extended family worldwide.

And at the fore of this was always including us, younger students and helping us build our networks and careers. I can remember countless times when she "shouted" at me when I forgot my business card at home, knowing full well that she had also forgotten hers. But that sums up Prof. She always wanted to empower us students to build our future, because as she often said to me, and I suppose now, tragically so, "Ms Marggraff, I don't know how much longer I'll be around" and then she would proceed to smoke her cigarette and roll her eyes.

For many of us, Prof. was immortal. We all know how many times Prof. said that she was retiring—in fact when I started my Honours with her, she said she was retiring and then after I finished my PhD, she said this time she was *really* retiring. Those of us who were supervised by her also know that each one of us were supposed to be the last student she accepted, and yet, a month ago, she was already making plans to take on her last, last, last student.

After much reflection these last few weeks, I have come to the realisation that in a way, Prof. remains immortal. And I don't mean that in the typical sense, where we remember the writings of someone great and their ideas live on. I mean, without doubt, Prof. was a profound scholar and her contribution to literature will forever remain with us. But I mean that Prof. left behind a living structure, because she didn't only have an impact on many of us, she truly guided us, inspired us, challenged us and made us better humans, such that a piece of her lives on in all of us.

While Prof. took academia and our studies immensely seriously, she also taught us about retaining perspective. As Tshegofatso recalls, whenever she was facing doubt, whenever imposter syndrome crept in and writing felt impossible, Prof. would firmly say, "Just get the damn thing on paper. *Jy moet net skryf*, we deal with the rest later". It was her way of reminding us to get over ourselves, put our thoughts down and then work through them together. Our studies were important, but they were not everything—Prof. wanted us to be well-rounded, not only students, but human-beings and I think that is what truly matters in life.

As Yu-Shan explains, Prof. Schoeman had a no-nonsense approach to work, but did this in the kindest way possible. She was so accomplished, yet could relate to the most human of experiences (that is mothering). Prof. Schoeman was truly rare in that she could carry so many truths at once.

Finally, as Samuel explains, Prof. Schoeman had this rare and special way of listening—not just to the words, but the ideas behind them. She inspired us to explore new terrains, to think beyond boundaries, to ask bigger questions, and to pursue the difficult, but necessary work of understanding complex global dynamics. Working with Prof. was more than just a professional collaboration; it was a continuous learning experience guided by her generosity, wisdom and unwavering belief in the potential of others.

And so, in concluding, I thought it would be apt to recount a phrase another colleague so beautifully articulated last week: "A great tree has fallen. But from this the seeds then sprout and grow." And so although we at the ORP are devastated by this monumental loss, we are equally humbled by the fact that Prof. chose to share her passion, knowledge and skills with so many of us, such that her legacy really can continue.

Prof. Schoeman, from the bottom of our hearts, we thank you for everything. Rest easy.

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South Africa's Foreign Policy since the End of Apartheid: Continuities and Discontinuities

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1. Introduction

> *Foreign affairs are determined by the relations*
> *between you and that particular country in the past and the present.*
> *And you look at it from your interest,*
> *the interest of your own country (Nelson Mandela) (Williams 2021: 557).*

Three decades after the end of the apartheid regime, South Africa's international standing has radically changed. Democratic South Africa has consolidated its ties with the countries of the North and today plays a key role in cooperation among Global South nations. Pretoria has also strengthened its ties with African nations, especially in Southern Africa.

This article examines the evolution of South Africa's foreign policy since the end of apartheid, aiming to highlight both the continuities and changes in the country's international relations across different presidential administrations over the past thirty years. This essay shows that the changes in South Africa's foreign policy over three decades have resulted less from sudden shifts and more from a gradual evolution involving all successive presidents. Each president has historically impacted the others in their efforts to advance South Africa's political and economic interests within an international context that has both imposed restrictions on Pretoria's actions and presented opportunities that the government has sought to capitalise on.

Today, there is a broad scholarly consensus that after the presidencies of Nelson Mandela (1994–1999) and Thabo Mbeki (1999–2008), both of whom focused on advancing human rights, strengthening multilateralism and promoting peace and development in Africa (Habib 2009; Landsberg 2010), a significant shift occurred in South Africa's foreign policy during Jacob Zuma's presidency (2009–2018).

Soulé-Kohndou (2013: 5) noted that under Zuma, South Africa's foreign policy showed 'fewer signs of activism' when compared to that of Mandela and Mbeki. Hendricks (2022) pointed out that during the administrations of Mandela and Mbeki, South Africa repositioned itself as a 'good global citizen [and] a key continental actor'. However, during Zuma's presidency, 'South Africa's influence, credibility, and capacity for peace and security engagements on the continent declined'. Additionally, 'South Africa's attention shifted to [China and Russia] and from peace diplomacy towards economic diplomacy' (Hendricks 2022: 222–223). Landsberg and Van Heerden (2020: 27) wrote that Zuma's foreign policy marked 'a clear shift in the approach [compared to Mbeki's] to a more utilitarian, economic, interest-driven posture'. The political crisis that ultimately led to Zuma's downfall negatively impacted the country's external projection, as it weakened 'the government's capacity to engage effectively in foreign policy',1 undermining both its identity and effectiveness (Nagar 2022: 68). Despite the hopes for renewal in South African politics that accompanied Cyril Ramaphosa's rise to the presidency in 2018 (Graham 2022: 48), the 'rupture' marked by the Zuma presidency in the country's foreign policy was not repaired.2

This consensus may produce a misleading narrative of a "golden age" of post-apartheid South Africa's foreign policy, followed by decline. As Zondi (2019: 17) pointed out, there is a risk of mistakenly interpreting "changes in style, practice, and emphasis [as] substantive changes in the ideological orientation of [post-apartheid South Africa's] foreign policy". More recently, Alden and Schoeman (2025: 79) have noted that the shift in South Africa's foreign policy under Zuma and Ramaphosa has primarily involved "declarative diplomacy" rather than the actual substance of its international political and economic relations. This article offers a historical analysis of the continuities and changes in South Africa's foreign policy implemented by the presidents who have succeeded one another since the end of apartheid. It examines South Africa's efforts to strengthen relationships with countries in the Global South, while also enhancing ties with nations in the Global North. Additionally, the article analyses South Africa's initiatives to promote peace and development across the African continent, with a particular focus on Southern Africa.

1 The Unwinding of South Africa's Foreign Policy, in *Strategic Comments*, 23(8), 2017, i–ii.

2 The State of Non-Alignment in South Africa's Foreign Policy, in *Strategic Comments*, 29(5), 2023, v–vii.

2. Principles and contradictions: Mandela's foreign policy

Much of the analysis regarding South Africa's foreign policy after apartheid assumes that the country was substantially isolated when power was transferred into the hands of the African National Congress (ANC) in 1994. However, the reality is quite different. The lifting of the ban on the ANC and other political parties, along with Mandela's release from prison in early 1990, prompted many African and non-African governments to establish relations with the De Klerk regime. Their aim was to promote exports to South Africa and attract South African investments to their own countries (Graham 2012).

Western governments, by lifting economic sanctions, provided an incentive for De Klerk to continue his reforms. At the same time, they pressured the ANC to abandon the armed struggle and enter negotiations with the white regime (Landsberg 2004). The ANC was also urged to undergo an economic "conversion" by renouncing nationalisation and embracing market-oriented policies. In December 1991, US President George H.W. Bush conveyed to Mandela that if the ANC wanted to attract international investments to enhance the South African economy, it needed to take two important steps. First, the ANC should support lifting sanctions to demonstrate its commitment to preventing further damage to the national economy. Second, it should refrain from mentioning nationalisation as part of the economic measures it planned to implement once in government (The White House 1991).

When the political transition in South Africa began, the country had diplomatic relations with 27 nations (Telegram 14310/1994). By October 1994, this number had increased to 142. This significant change illustrates how the shift to democracy transformed South Africa's formal bilateral relations and enabled the country to join or rejoin numerous international organisations.

In his first speech to the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in October 1994, Mandela (1994) outlined the foreign policy priorities of the new government, committing South Africa 'to ensure that democracy, peace, and prosperity prevail everywhere'. To achieve this goal, South Africa would work to strengthen the UN by promoting respect for human rights, 'the non-proliferation and destruction of weapons of mass destruction, and sustainable development' (Mandela 1994). Finally free from apartheid, South Africa aimed to actively promote economic development and security across Africa, particularly in Southern Africa (Mandela 1994).

During Mandela's presidency, South Africa strengthened its relationships with the countries of the North, although some tensions arose. At the same time, the government also worked to enhance its ties with the Global South. Historical factors and economic needs significantly influenced South Africa's foreign policy.

In the case of the United States (US), despite the establishment of a Binational Commission in 1995 and the strengthening of economic relations, with South Africa's beneficiary status under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) since 2000 and a rise in US Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) flows in the country from US$289 million in 1995 to US$1.1 billion in 1999 (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development [UNCTAD] 2025), some disagreements developed between the two governments. South Africa opted not to participate in the African Crisis Response Initiative that the US launched in 1996. Furthermore, Pretoria's relationships with countries such as Libya and Cuba and its association with the Palestine Liberation Organisation, a legacy of the ANC's diplomacy during the liberation struggle, created tensions between South Africa and the US. The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's (NATO) military intervention in Serbia in 1999 also contributed to these frictions (Stremlau 1999).

Despite past disagreements over sanctions between the ANC and the British government (National Archives of the United Kingdom 1993), Great Britain was a significant economic partner for South Africa during the second half of the 1990s. However, tensions remained, as exemplified by the case of Nigeria. In 1995, the British government declined Mandela's request for economic sanctions against the Sani Abacha regime (see below). Nevertheless, these differences did not prevent Mandela from making a triumphant state visit to Britain in 1996 (Telegram 8772/1996).

One of the most significant developments in South Africa's foreign policy during Mandela's presidency was the strengthening of relations with the Global South. A key decision in this process was the choice to sever diplomatic ties with Taiwan and establish formal relations with China. The decision was made two years after Mandela's election. The South African president hesitated to cut diplomatic ties with Taiwan, a relationship inherited from the previous white government. This hesitation was due not only to the historically strained relations between the ANC and China during the liberation struggle, but also to the economic ties between Taiwan and South Africa (Alden 1997; Williams and Hurst 2018). Complicating matters further was the US$10 million donation from Taiwan to the ANC for financing its 1994 election campaign (Van der Westhuizen 1998). After initially trying to maintain relations with both Beijing and Taipei, by the end of 1996 Mandela faced significant political pressure from China. With most leaders of the ANC supporting the recognition of Beijing due to strategic and economic factors, Mandela ultimately decided to formalise diplomatic relations with China at the expense of Taiwan (Williams and Hurst 2018).

The decision to establish diplomatic relations with China contradicts scholarly analyses that suggest Mandela's foreign policy was primarily focused on promoting and defending human rights on an international scale (Adebajo 2018; Landsberg 2000). As noted by Williams and Hurst (2018), the issue of human rights promotion was notably absent from discussions within the South African government and the ANC prior to their recognition of Beijing diplomatically, with economic considerations taking precedence.

Mandela also made efforts to strengthen relations with African countries. However, Pretoria encountered difficulties in turning its foreign policy principles into effective strategies and actions on the continent. This challenge arose not only from the ANC's delays in defining its foreign policy priorities (Graham 2012), but also from conflicting visions within the South African government between idealistic and pragmatic approaches. Additionally, some African and international actors resisted Mandela's activism on the continent.

South Africa's efforts to promote democracy in Africa faced significant challenges right from the start. The most notable case was Nigeria. After several months of 'quiet diplomacy' aimed at persuading General Sani Abacha's government not to carry out the death sentences of some arrested political and military leaders (Landsberg 2010: 105), Mandela publicly condemned Abacha in November 1995 following the execution of writer and political activist Ken Saro-Wiwa (Mandela 1995). During the Commonwealth Heads of State Meeting in Auckland, Mandela advocated for Nigeria's expulsion from the organisation. However, it was decided to suspend Nigeria from the Commonwealth instead, 'pending the return to compliance with the principles of the Harare Declaration' (Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting 1995: 10). Despite Mandela's call for economic sanctions against the Abacha regime, Western governments, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) did not support this initiative. South Africa found itself politically isolated on the African and international stage, and Abacha sarcastically commented that 'Mandela did not understand properly the complexities of modern diplomacy since he had been out of touch in prison for 27 years' (Telegram 12868/1995). Not only had Mandela hastily abandoned the pragmatic policy of 'constructive engagement' towards Nigeria conducted up to that point by Deputy-President Mbeki, but he had also failed to build a multilateral consensus around his stance, resulting in South Africa's political isolation (Van Aardt 1996: 113). This failure represented a pivotal moment for the foreign policy of post-apartheid South Africa, which would thereafter generally refrain from taking steps to support democracy in any African country without the backing of African diplomacy.

During Mandela's presidency, the South African government not only tried to support democracy, it also attempted to promote peace agreements in various African countries experiencing armed conflicts. These efforts, however, were largely unsuccessful. The solutions proposed by Pretoria, influenced by South Africa's own transition experience, centred on the establishment of power-sharing governments. Unfortunately, these solutions did not adequately consider the imbalances in power relations between the conflicting parties, their political goals, and the international support they received. (Shillinger 2009). Therefore, while in Mozambique, on the eve of the 1994 elections, the Frente de libertação de Moçambique (FRELIMO), confident of its electoral strength, flatly rejected the idea of forming a government of national unity with the Resistência Nacional Moçambicana (RENAMO) (Telegram 10565/1994), in Angola, Mandela's insistence on including Jonas Savimbi in the government clashed with the determination of the government of the Movimento popular de libertação de Angola (MPLA) to militarily eliminate the União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola (UNITA), and heightened political tensions between the two countries (Telegram 711/1995).

The challenges faced by South Africa in its conflict resolution efforts in Africa were particularly evident during the armed conflict in Zaire. Mandela's efforts between April and May 1997 to broker an agreement between Mobutu and Laurent Kabila ultimately fell apart due to both the military circumstances on the ground and the determination of neighbouring governments to remove Mobutu, who 'for years ... had blocked democracy and development in Zaire' (Telegram 84374/1997). Meanwhile, the US, which had officially supported South Africa's mediation efforts, privately assured Kabila of their willingness to establish friendly relations with the new government (Telegram 83420/1997), ultimately accepting Kabila's military takeover (Telegram 7471/1997).

The challenges faced by South African diplomacy in Africa pushed the ANC and the government to clarify the nation's foreign policy objectives and strategies. The aim was to enhance the government's effectiveness in international affairs and to prevent the dilution of its efforts, which could threaten its credibility. This process led to the development of a more pragmatic approach to South Africa's foreign policy, which committed the government to supporting democracy without harming South African trade interests and to promoting security in Africa through multilateral diplomacy (Republic of South Africa 1996). Since then, the South African government has consistently emphasised the importance of economic diplomacy and military security.

During the second half of the 1990s, although Pretoria faced several challenges in achieving its diplomatic objectives, South African companies significantly benefited from the normalisation of diplomatic relations with various countries across the continent. As a result,

trade increased and South African investments in Africa grew rapidly. The value of South African exports to other Sub-Saharan African countries rose from US$2.3 billion in 1994 to US$3.6 billion in 1999. Meanwhile, South African imports from Sub-Saharan Africa grew modestly, increasing from US$0.5 billion in 1994 to US$0.6 billion in 1999 (World Bank 2025).

The strengthening of economic relations was particularly evident between South Africa and its Southern African neighbours. South Africa became a member of the SADC in August 1994. Although South Africa and the other SADC member states expressed their intention to pursue a model of regional integration based on the principles of equity, mutual benefit and balanced development, they were unable to reach an agreement on an industrialisation strategy for the SADC and resolved to establish a free trade area (Pallotti 2004). To this end, in 1996, the SADC countries adopted a Protocol on Trade; however, negotiations for its implementation progressed slowly. Within this context, between 1994 and 1999, the value of South Africa's exports to the non-Southern African Customs Union (SACU) SADC countries increased from US$1.9 billion to US$2.8 billion. In contrast, South Africa's imports from these countries decreased from US$0.5 billion in 1994 to US$0.4 billion in 1999. This decline in imports was largely due to a significant drop in Zimbabwe's exports to South Africa (World Bank 2025).

These trends deepened economic polarisation and fuelled political tensions among SADC member states. While South Africa's pursuit of national economic interests in Southern Africa was relatively successful, normalising political relations with the region's countries proved to be more difficult.

The conflict between South Africa and Zimbabwe arose from a disagreement over the structure and authority of the new regional security mechanism established by SADC in 1996 after extensive discussions (Southern African Development Community 1994; Southern African Development Community 1996). President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe advocated for a mechanism with broad powers of intervention under his leadership. In contrast, Mandela declined to make any commitments until the powers and decision-making processes of the new regional security mechanism were clearly defined (Southern African Development Community 1995). Thus, the Organ on Politics, Defence and Security (OPDS) established by the SADC in June 1996, remained inactive until 2001.

Political tensions among SADC member states escalated dramatically with the outbreak of the "second rebellion" in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) during the summer of 1998. While South Africa sought to promote a peaceful resolution to the conflict, the governments of Angola, Namibia and Zimbabwe deployed their armies to support the government of Kabila. This intervention marked the beginning of a war that officially lasted until 2002.

In September 1998, the deployment of armies from South Africa and Botswana to restore order in Lesotho added complexity to the regional political and military landscape. Although this military intervention was carried out at the request of the Lesotho government, it highlighted significant improvisation (Williams 2019) and led to accusations against South Africa of intervening militarily when its economic interests were perceived to be threatened (Likoti 2007). South Africa should have waited for the Mbeki presidency to see a partial resolution of the interstate tensions experienced in Southern Africa during the second half of the 1990s.

3. Africa and the world: Mbeki's foreign policy

Once he became president, Mbeki strengthened some of the trends he inherited from Mandela's foreign policy. He particularly focused on expanding ties with countries in the Global South and enhancing South Africa's presence in Africa, while maintaining friendly relations with governments in the North. Although there were some differences between Mandela's and Mbeki's foreign policy, these differences did not affect the overall objectives (Olivier 2012); instead, they primarily involved changes in the strategies used to achieve these goals. Mbeki's strategies were often more pragmatic and in some instances, more effective than those of his predecessor. This effectiveness can be attributed to the president's direct involvement in decision-making and the management of foreign policy. Mbeki also reorganised the cabinet system, worked to clarify the vision for foreign policy and made efforts to build a consensus within multilateral institutions regarding South Africa's foreign policy objectives, as evident in the process that led to the establishment of the African Union (AU) (Van Nieuwkerk 2006). The similarities between Mandela's and Mbeki's foreign policies are not surprising, as Mandela had entrusted Mbeki, along with Foreign Minister Alfred Nzo, to manage foreign policy during his presidency. Mandela typically intervened only when it was necessary to make strategic decisions (Williams 2021).

Interest in strengthening relations with the Global South did not come at the expense of those with the Global North. During Mbeki's presidency, the South African government maintained friendly ties with both the US and Great Britain. However, there were some political disagreements with these countries, particularly concerning the 2003 Iraq War and the Zimbabwe crisis, which will be discussed further

below.

South Africa positioned itself as a bridge between Africa and the Global North (Landsberg 2012). The dialogue initiated by Mbeki with the G7 governments regarding the African debt led to the approval by the OAU in October 2001 of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), of which Mbeki was the main architect. NEPAD committed African governments to promoting democracy, implementing market reforms, and taking greater responsibility for security management in Africa, all in exchange for increased international aid. The limited financial support from the G7 countries and political resistance within the AU hindered the effectiveness of NEPAD in both political and economic terms.

Following in Mandela's footsteps, Mbeki strengthened South Africa's ties with China. In April 2000, Mbeki and Chinese President Jiang Zemin signed the Pretoria Declaration on the Partnership between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of South Africa. This declaration committed both governments to work together to 'create a new international political and economic order' and to enhance trade and investment between their countries by establishing a Bi-National Commission (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Peoples Republic of China [MFAPRC] 2002). Despite the ambitious political goals of this partnership, which was declared 'strategic' in 2004 (Department of International Relations and Cooperation [DIRCO] 2004), South Africa's interest in its relationship with China remained primarily focused on economic aspects (Telegram 8915/1996; Department of Foreign Affairs [DFA] 2005).

Trade and investment flows between South Africa and China increased rapidly; however, several critical issues also arose. From 1997 to 2008, the stock of Chinese FDI in South Africa rose from US$9.6 million to US$2.9 billion. During the same period, South African FDI in China grew from US$51 million to US$3.1 billion (UNCTAD 2025). Trade between the two countries was notably unbalanced. Between 1999 and 2008, South Africa's exports to China grew significantly, increasing from US$271 million to US$4.3 billion. During the same period, imports from China rose sharply, from US$820 million to US$9.9 billion. As a result, China maintained a substantial trade surplus with South Africa. Moreover, while most South African exports to China consisted of raw materials, the bulk of Chinese exports to South Africa were manufactured goods, which had a negative impact on certain sectors of the South African economy (World Bank 2025).

Mbeki expressed concerns about the economic imbalances with China. He warned that 'the relationship between Africa and China risks becoming an unequal relationship, similar to that which developed between African countries and colonial powers'. Mbeki added that 'China cannot just come here to extract raw materials and sell us manufactured goods' (Mail and Guardian 2006). This imbalance in economic relations between South Africa and China would continue to be a source of concern for subsequent South African presidents.

Regarding South-South cooperation, after the unsuccessful attempt to establish a "G8 of the South", Mbeki advocated for closer collaboration between Brazil, India and South Africa. This initiative took shape in June 2003 with the adoption of the Brasilia Declaration. The formation of IBSA (India, Brazil and South Africa) led to a fragile coordination of the three countries' positions within multilateral institutions. In 2004, the IBSA Facility for Poverty and Hunger Alleviation was established, albeit with a very limited budget (Alden and Le Pere, 2024). Despite initial expectations, by the end of the decade, IBSA began to experience a decline. This downturn was largely due to the contradictions in its ideological vision and the growing appeal of a forum involving China and Russia for both India and Brazil. This dynamic ultimately led to the formation of BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China) in 2009, with South Africa joining the group in 2011.

Like Mandela, Mbeki deemed it essential for South Africa to pursue an active policy in Africa. The adoption of NEPAD was just one aspect of Mbeki's ambitious African agenda. His ideological emphasis on the African Renaissance, coupled with his belief that promoting security in Africa was crucial for South Africa's own economic development (Van Nieuwkerk 2012), motivated Mbeki to take a leading role in the establishment of the AU, which was officially inaugurated in Durban in 2002.

In October 1998, the South African government adopted the White Paper on Participation in International Peace Missions (South African Government 1998), after which Pretoria began actively engaging in various peacekeeping missions across Africa. Alongside deploying troops, South Africa also took part in diplomatic efforts aimed at finding negotiated solutions to various armed conflicts on the continent. These efforts yielded mixed results; they were successful in the DRC, but less effective in the case of the Ivory Coast (Akindés 2009).

Mbeki's African policy not only built on Mandela's objectives, but his approach to economic integration in Southern Africa also aligned with Mandela's presidency. It was not until the signing of the Trade and Development Cooperation Agreement (TDCA) with the European Union (EU) in 1999 that the South African government intensified negotiations to establish the SADC Free Trade Area (FTA). The trade liberalisation process with the EU, outlined in the TDCA, had several implications for South Africa. One significant consequence was the loss of tax revenue, which impacted the SACU, whose member countries were not involved in the negotiations with

the EU (McCarthy 2003). This factor contributed to the adoption of a new formula for distributing tax revenue among SACU countries, benefiting the BLNS (Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia and Eswatini) countries, as part of the revised SACU agreement of 2004. Secondly, during the negotiations for the SADC FTA, Pretoria sought to protect its industries, especially in textiles and clothing (Qobo 2005). South Africa offered to open its market to exports from non-SACU SADC countries before those countries liberalised access to South African exports. However, the South African government also insisted on implementing rules of origin that would favour its own manufactured goods in regional trade (Telegram 94921/2000; Lee 2003; Hentz 2008). As a result, trade imbalances between South Africa and other Southern African countries persisted, while SADC proved unable to promote the diversification of the region's productive structures. Between 2000 and 2008, South Africa's exports to the non-SACU SADC countries grew significantly, increasing from US$3.1 billion to US$8.9 billion. At the same time, imports from these countries also rose sharply, climbing from US$0.3 billion to US$4.4 billion. Despite this growth in imports from the non-SACU SADC countries, South Africa maintained a favourable trade balance of US$4.5 billion. Moreover, more than half of the exports from the non-SACU SADC countries to South Africa came from Angola and primarily consisted of oil (World Bank 2025). The stock of South African FDI in the SADC countries rose from US$1.1 billion in 1999 to US$7.1 billion in 2008 (UNCTAD 2025).

From a political perspective, tensions among the countries of Southern Africa decreased during Mbeki's presidency. A turning point occurred with the political and economic crisis that engulfed Zimbabwe since 2000. On the one hand, Mugabe, increasingly isolated internationally and lacking financial resources, was compelled to seek support through regional diplomacy, particularly by engaging with South Africa. On the other hand, Mbeki viewed the opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change, as too weak to govern (Telegram 94921/2000). As a result, Mbeki adopted a policy of "quiet diplomacy", refraining from publicly criticising the Zimbabwean regime. He aimed to mediate between Mugabe and Western governments, with the support of the SADC, seeking to restore democracy and promote the implementation of a peaceful land reform in Zimbabwe in exchange for the resumption of development aid to the country. However, he was not successful (Pallotti 2013). The US and the EU imposed economic sanctions on the Zimbabwean regime, further isolating it internationally and prompting Mugabe to strengthen ties with China (Youde 2007).

In 2007, the SADC appointed Mbeki to facilitate dialogue between the South African government and the opposition in Zimbabwe. However, after the 2008 elections, which were marred by violence and ultimately won by Mugabe, the South African president proposed the establishment of a power-sharing government. In September 2008, a Global Political Agreement was signed, and a Government of National Unity was formed in 2009. Mbeki's decision to favour a compromise solution instead of advocating for new elections had significant consequences, not only in Zimbabwe, where the South African government 'allowed intransigent authoritarians to cling to power after losing elections, while the true victors scrambled for what little remained at the state's table' (Moore 2010: 753), but also at both the continental and regional levels, as it signalled South Africa's commitment to prioritising stability over democracy. It is no coincidence that both the Strategic Plan 2000–2005, adopted by the Department of Foreign Affairs in 2001, and the Strategic Plan 2005–2008, adopted in 2005, only marginally addressed the promotion of democracy and respect for human rights in Africa (DFA 2001, 2005).

Overall, Mbeki adopted a more structured foreign policy than Mandela did. Mbeki's foreign policy was guided by an ambitious vision of South Africa as a leader for reform among African nations and as a bridge between Africa and the North. Mbeki also emphasised South-South cooperation and strengthened South Africa's ties with China. Mbeki took a pragmatic approach to supporting democracy on the international stage, often influenced by political and economic factors. In the following paragraph, we will explore how Zuma further embraced this pragmatic approach.

4. Continuity or discontinuity? Zuma's foreign policy

Some scholars have argued that there was a significant shift in South Africa's foreign policy during Jacob Zuma's presidency, which followed Kgalema Motlanthe's brief term from September 2008 to May 2009. They have emphasised that under Zuma, South Africa strengthened its relationships with countries in the Global South and officially joined BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa). The government shifted its focus away from ambitious plans for reforming African multilateral institutions and prioritised its national economic interests above all else, with negative repercussions for South Africa's external image and influence (Hendricks and Majozi 2021).

By emphasising his intention to use foreign policy to strengthen South Africa's economic development (Landsberg 2010), Zuma remained consistent with the ideological framework that had guided the foreign policies of Mandela and Mbeki. This approach would later be adopted by Cyril Ramaphosa as well. More broadly, Zuma's foreign policy closely aligned with Mbeki's, as evidenced by the government's official documents.

DIRCO's (2009) Strategic Plan for 2009–2012 reaffirmed the importance of the African continent in South Africa's foreign policy. It also expressed the government's commitment to accelerating the implementation of NEPAD. Like the official documents from the previous administration, the plan emphasised that relations with countries of both the North and the South 'will continue to be utilised to identify opportunities for strengthening the cooperation for the socio-economic development of South Africa' (DIRCO 2009: 16).

The notion that 'foreign policy (…) is an important component in South Africa's strategy for development' was also central to the white paper titled "Building a Better World: The Diplomacy of Ubuntu", which was adopted by the government in 2011 (Government of South Africa 2011b: 10). The white paper committed the government to strengthening partnerships with countries of the South and North 'to reform the global architecture' and 'to position [South Africa] to take advantage of high growth economies' (Government of South Africa 2011b: 18, 24). The underlying idea was that economic growth in South Africa would not only reduce poverty within the country, but also generate positive political and economic effects throughout Africa as a whole (Government of South Africa 2011b). Although the White Paper aimed to offer clear guidance for South Africa's foreign policy, it was somewhat vague about the priorities that the government would pursue internationally. Furthermore, it failed to explain how economic growth could help reduce poverty in South Africa and benefit the broader African continent (Le Pere 2017).

Similarly, the Strategic Plan for 2011–2014 reaffirmed South Africa's commitment to enhancing the security and development of the African continent. It highlighted the need for international governance institutions to be more responsive to the needs of developing countries. The plan also committed the government to enhancing relationships with countries in both the North and the South to further South Africa's development needs and priorities (DIRCO 2011).

The economic relations with Western countries showed continuity with the foreign policy of the Mbeki administration. Political relations, which had begun on a cordial note, were negatively impacted by the conflict in Libya. Despite Zuma's state visit to London in March 2010 and the establishment of the South Africa–US Strategic Dialogue the following month, the outbreak of the conflict in Libya in February 2011 strained relations between South Africa and Western countries.

Under pressure from Washington and possibly confident in the support of Western nations for the AU's initiative aimed at restoring peace in Libya (De Waal 2013; Landsberg and Van Heerden 2020), South Africa voted in favour of Resolution 1973, which was approved by the United Nations Security Council on 17 March 2011 (US Department of State 2011a).

The military attack on the Gaddafi regime, which began immediately after the adoption of Resolution 1973 by France, Great Britain and the US, and was later supported by NATO, took Zuma by surprise. This situation highlighted the 'naivety of the South African president in assessing the aims of the Western powers in Libya' (Marchal 2018: 366). While political divisions within the AU hampered and weakened the effectiveness of African diplomatic efforts in Libya (US Department of State 2011b; Kasaija 2013), the governments of the US, Great Britain and France did not extend even 'symbolic support for the AU's efforts' (De Waal 2013: 372). In the weeks following the military intervention against Gaddafi, Zuma accused London, Washington, and Paris of 'abusing' the Security Council resolution to pursue 'regime change through political assassinations and foreign military occupation' (UNSC n.d.).

Afterwards, relations between South Africa and the US improved. During his visit to South Africa, American President Barack Obama remarked that 'the United States views South Africa as a critical partner' in both commercial and political-strategic contexts (The White House 2013). In contrast, relations with Great Britain faced another setback when London announced the termination of its development aid programme for South Africa (Large 2018).

Zuma also strengthened ties with emerging powers. Notably, South Africa's entry into BRICS in December 2010 was a significant diplomatic achievement for Zuma. The move not only reinforced South Africa's status as the 'leader of the African continent' on the international stage (Alden and Schoeman 2013: 115), it also positioned the country to advance its 'normative and economic objectives' globally (Alden and Schoeman 2025: 75).

On one hand, being included in BRICS would enable South Africa to help 'transform global governance in the interest of the South' (DIRCO 2011: 15). On the other hand, Zuma emphasised the economic significance of BRICS, stating that 'South Africa and the future prosperity of the African continent are increasingly linked to the economies of BRICS, and this forum can play a crucial role in addressing our development challenges' (South African Government 2011a). While acknowledging 'the developed North's continued dominance' in international economic relations, Zuma highlighted 'the rising importance of the emerging powers of the South and their value for a developing economy like ours' (South African Government 2011a). DIRCO's Strategic Plan for 2015–2020 also emphasised that 'the growth of the South African and the African economy is increasingly linked to emerging economic powers' (DIRCO 2015: 19).

However, concerns were raised about Pretoria's ability to influence the actions of the BRICS, given the significant disparities in economic, political and military strength between South Africa and the other BRICS countries (Kornegay 2012). There is also a persistent misunderstanding regarding the development model that South Africa intends to promote in Africa, as it positions itself as a self-proclaimed "gateway" for BRICS on the continent. During Zuma's presidency, the South African government actively pursued a policy of commercial expansion throughout Africa while encouraging investment from its companies. The value of South African exports to other Sub-Saharan African countries increased from US$10 billion in 2009 to US$24.4 billion in 2018. During the same period, South African imports from Sub-Saharan Africa rose from US$4.75 billion in 2009 to US$11 billion in 2018. Thus, South Africa's trade surplus increased from US$5.3 billion in 2009 to US$14.4 billion in 2018, while the bulk of Sub-Saharan African exports to the South African market continued to consist of raw materials (World Bank 2025).

Some scholars highlighted the risk that increasing trade with the BRICS could worsen the structural imbalances in African economies. As Besada et al. (2013: 8) noted, 'increased market access for the BRIC nations to Africa could have detrimental consequences for the rest of the region, which has yet to develop its industrial base. It risks entrenching asymmetrical patterns of trade, thereby keeping the economies in the region dependent on commodity exports'. Despite official commitments by the BRICS nations themselves (China-Africa Business Council 2024), the economic growth experienced by most African countries over the past twenty-five years has largely been driven by international demand for raw materials (UNCTAD 2022). In the case of China, the value of its exports to Sub-Saharan Africa rose from US$35.3 billion in 2010 to US$56.3 billion in 2018, and further to US$76.8 billion in 2022. Meanwhile, the exports of Sub-Saharan African countries to China increased from US$45 billion in 2010 to US$54.3 billion in 2018, and then to US$58.4 billion in 2022. As a result, the trade surplus that Sub-Saharan Africa previously enjoyed shifted in favour of China. Additionally, three-quarters of African exports to the Chinese market continue to consist of raw materials (World Bank 2025). Furthermore, the BRICS countries have exhibited significant political divisions among themselves and have been largely ineffective in advocating for reforms in multilateral institutions that better address the needs of developing countries (Bond 2015).

During Zuma's presidency, as was the case under Mandela and Mbeki, relations between South Africa and China faced some challenges. While the two countries elevated their relationship to a 'comprehensive strategic partnership' in 2010 and increased military cooperation, the South African president expressed concerns about trade imbalances with China (Financial Times 2012). Additionally, Chinese investments in South Africa primarily targeted the mining sector (Alden and Wu 2014). As Rob Davies, South Africa's Minister of Trade and Industry from 2009–2019, wrote, despite attempts 'to address the structural deficit in our bilateral trade [and] to promote more value-added sales [of South African products] to China, as well as [Chinese] investments in value-added production' in South Africa, these efforts achieved 'limited results' (Davies 2021: 124). Despite these challenges, South Africa successfully leveraged its relationship with China to enhance its image as a bridge between Africa and emerging powers. For instance, it hosted the Forum for China-Africa Cooperation in 2015. However, bilateral political dialogue with China failed to extend beyond the collective positions expressed by BRICS, with a significant emphasis remaining on economic cooperation (South African Government 2015).

Some scholars have argued that the 'loyalty to the BRICS grouping' has had a negative impact on the foreign policy of South Africa (Jordaan 2024: 192), particularly regarding the government's support for democracy and human rights on the international stage. In fact, the actions of both the Mbeki administration (2006–2007) and the Zuma government (2010–2011) within the UN Security Council were marked by 'inconsistency' and 'contradictions' (Graham 2015: 89). South Africa's hesitance to embrace strict multilateral frameworks that enforce respect for democracy and human rights can be partly understood as a reaction against selective military interventions by Western nations. This reluctance culminated in 2016 when South Africa withdrew from the International Criminal Court, a decision that was later overturned by the South African Supreme Court of Appeal. Additionally, the South African government has tended to prioritise political compromises to restore stability in crisis-affected countries such as Zimbabwe and Madagascar, as well as in conflict zones like Sudan.

Although strengthening relations with African countries was a priority for Zuma, some factors undermined South Africa's prestige and influence on the continent. These included recurring waves of xenophobic violence within South Africa and the political controversies surrounding the election of former Foreign Minister Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma as Chairperson of the AU Commission in July 2012 (Alden and Schoeman 2013; Le Pere 2017; Nagar 2022; Vandome 2022).

This should not lead to a neglect of the continuities in the policies towards Africa between the Mbeki and Zuma administrations. Although Zuma did not put forward ambitious plans or projects to reform African multilateral institutions, South Africa remained politically engaged within the AU. In addition, the South African military participated in peacekeeping operations across the continent, including missions in the DRC and Sudan.

Just as had occurred with Mandela and Mbeki, some of Zuma's diplomatic and military initiatives in Africa turned out to be failures. In addition to the debacle in Libya, the decision to send additional troops to the Central African Republic in January 2013 to support President François Bozizé's regime was a setback for the South African government. This effort ended in failure, as the government had to withdraw its military contingent following the deaths of some South African soldiers and the fleeing of Bozizé from the country.

Concerns have been raised from various sources suggesting that the military intervention in the Central African Republic was aimed at advancing the economic interests of certain groups and individuals associated with Zuma (Mail and Guardian 2013a; Vandome 2022), further illustrating the decline of South Africa's foreign policy. It is, however, important to note that even during Mbeki's presidency, some of South Africa's diplomatic and military initiatives were partially linked to economic objectives (Qobo 2010). Mbeki's policy in the DRC was motivated, in part, by a desire to open the Congolese market to South African goods and businesses (Khadiagala 2009). In Sudan, the focus was also on the country's oil fields (Nathan 2009). Additionally, some analysts interpreted Mbeki's policy of 'quiet diplomacy' toward Zimbabwe as being driven, at least in part, by commercial interests (Sachikonye 2018: 167).

The military intervention in the Central African Republic and the diplomatic failure in Libya both underscored two significant issues. Firstly, they revealed 'the inability of South African diplomacy to fully understand a crisis with its complex regional politics' (Marchal 2018: 368). Secondly, they highlighted Zuma's tendency toward decision-making improvisation and the centralisation of strategic decisions related to South African foreign policy in his hands and a small group of advisors (Van Nieuwkerk 2012). This centralisation of power is a trait Zuma shared with both Mandela and Mbeki (Landsberg and Van Heerden 2020).

Even at the regional level, Zuma's presidency mirrored the policies of previous administrations. In the name of "national interest", South Africa opposed the proposal to deepen economic integration among SADC countries through the establishment of a customs union after the creation of the SADC FTA. This opposition stemmed from the fact that such a proposal 'would have required the decommissioning of a policy tool important for industrial development - tariffs' (Davies 2021: 108). In 2015, South Africa supported the adoption of a regional development cooperation agenda by SADC that prioritised industrialisation. This agenda marked a clear shift away from the trade-driven integration approach that the SADC had pursued over the previous two decades, aligning more closely with the vision of economic transformation advocated by the Zuma administration (Southern African Development Community 2015; Davies 2021). During Zuma's presidency, the structural trade imbalances between South Africa and non-SACU SADC countries worsened. The value of South African exports to non-SACU SADC countries increased notably, rising from US$7.2 billion in 2009 to US$11.1 billion in 2018. In contrast, the value of exports from non-SACU SADC countries to South Africa increased modestly, rising from US$2.3 billion in 2009 to US$2.9 billion in 2018. During this period, Angola accounted for over 40 per cent of non-SACU SADC countries' exports to South Africa, primarily consisting of raw materials (World Bank 2025). The stock of South African foreign direct investment in SADC countries reached a record US$30.3 billion in 2018 (UNCTAD 2025).

Politically, Zuma focused on normalising relations between South Africa and other Southern African countries, particularly addressing the tensions that had existed with the Angolan government during the presidencies of Mandela and Mbeki. In August 2009, Zuma made his first official trip as president to Luanda, Angola. During this visit, Zuma emphasised the historical bonds of solidarity between the ANC and the MPLA, which were established during the struggles against colonial and racist regimes. Zuma called for the strengthening of economic ties between South Africa and Angola and signed a series of bilateral cooperation agreements (South African Government 2009). In the subsequent years, both investment and trade between the two nations increased significantly, although a large portion of Angolan exports to South Africa consisted of oil (Sachikonye 2018; World Bank 2025).

Like Mbeki, Zuma also prioritised political stability in Zimbabwe over the restoration of democracy. As a result, he refrained from applying pressure 'to move [Mugabe and] ZANU-PF into a co-operative mode' (Moore 2010: 753), hoping that the agreement signed in 2008 would be fully implemented. However, this approach disadvantaged the opposition, allowing Mugabe and ZANU-PF to easily win the July 2013 elections (Rupiya 2020). Despite evidence presented by various parties of irregularities committed before and during the elections, both South Africa and the SADC endorsed the results (Mail and Guardian 2013b; Aeby 2017). Furthermore, South Africa did not impose sanctions in response to the 2017 coup that ousted Mugabe and brought Emmerson Mnangagwa to power, nor did it respond to the violence and irregularities that marred the 2023 elections (Moore 2022).

The political crisis that intensified during the Zuma administration in South Africa, as confirmed by the Zondo Commission's findings, likely shaped the perspectives of many scholars and observers on the country's foreign policy. In fact, several trends from the foreign policy of previous administrations were further strengthened. These included a strong emphasis on economic diplomacy, particularly in Africa and Southern Africa; an effort to strengthen South Africa's role in South-South cooperation and its ties with China, while also

maintaining friendly relations with Western countries; and a preference for promoting political stability over encouraging respect for democratic practices in Africa. In contrast to Mbeki, Zuma did not put forward a clear vision for improving and reforming cooperation among African nations. His foreign policy in Africa was hindered by his failure to recognise the seriousness of domestic crises and the complex regional and international implications they carried.

5. A new dawn? Ramaphosa's foreign policy

High hopes for political renewal both domestically and internationally followed Zuma's resignation in February 2018 and Ramaphosa's election as president.3

Ramaphosa quickly embraced many of the priorities that had shaped the foreign policy of previous administrations. In his first State of the Nation address, delivered shortly after his election, Ramaphosa stressed his government's commitment to promoting free trade across Africa. He highlighted the importance of implementing both the Tripartite Free Trade Area (TFTA) and the Continental Free Trade Agreement to 'open market access opportunities for South African export products and contribute to job creation and the growth of South Africa's industrial sector' (South African Government 2018a). Regarding collaboration with BRICS, the new government would focus primarily on an economic agenda, giving 'priority to the promotion of value-added trade and intra-BRICS investment into productive sectors' (South African Government 2018a). As a result, the Strategic Plan 2020–2025 committed DIRCO to 'ensure that South Africa prospers by becoming a catalyst and operating as a networking agenda for South Africa Incorporated' (DIRCO 2020: 18). In its bilateral relations with the countries of both the North and the South, the focus would be on the economic benefits that South Africa could gain (DIRCO 2020).

In 2023, the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) addressed the criticisms that had been directed at the government in previous years regarding the excessive fragmentation of its international objectives and the lack of coherence between South Africa's foreign policy and the national priorities of economic growth and job creation (Qobo 2010). To address these challenges, DIRCO adopted the Framework Document on South Africa's National Interest, which aimed to enhance coherence in South Africa's foreign policy, aligning it with the country's economic development goals. The document stated that 'a key objective of South Africa's foreign policy will be the promotion of economic diplomacy through mutually beneficial trade and investment relations' (DIRCO 2023: 8). Pretoria would also promote peace in Africa, 'an indispensable requirement for the security and stability of South Africa' (DIRCO 2023: 14), and democracy, but 'in a spirit of cooperation, as opposed to imposition, paternalism or dominance' (DIRCO 2023: 15). Within an international context characterised by the rise of new powers that did not seem able 'to challenge normative and institutional arrangements that have characterised the world order since after the Second World War', the South African government would also try to establish 'balanced partnerships with countries of both the North and the South in order to pursue its interests' (DIRCO 2023: 25). These priorities aligned with those of Ramaphosa's predecessors.

In the early years of Ramaphosa's presidency, South Africa maintained cordial relations with Western countries. However, tensions arose following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and South Africa's decision to abstain from voting on a UN General Assembly resolution passed on 2 March 2022, which condemned Russia's military aggression and called for the immediate withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukrainian territory.

Ramaphosa's stance on the issue, similar to the position taken by Zuma in 2014 regarding the annexation of Crimea, not only took into account the historical ties between the ANC and the Soviet Union and the internal dynamics within the ANC, but also reflected both his belief that 'the war could have been avoided if NATO had listened to the warnings from its own leaders and officials over the years, which indicated that its eastward expansion would lead to greater, not less, instability in the region' (South African Government 2022), and his ambition to strengthen South Africa's position among the BRICS and non-aligned countries (Van Nieuwkerk 2024: 110). Additionally, Ramaphosa believed that maintaining neutrality between the parties was essential for South Africa to promote 'a peaceful solution through dialogue' (South African Government 2023b). Hence, the clash between the position expressed by South African Foreign Minister Naledi Pandor, who at the outbreak of the conflict was quick to call for the immediate withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukrainian territory, and the emphasis placed by Ramaphosa on the need to immediately start negotiations between the belligerents (Sunday Times 2022).

The South African president adopted a cautious approach, using language that 'displayed tacit support for Russia but not for the invasion as such' (Brosig 2024: 760). This stance aligned with the publicly expressed positions of the BRICS nations. Additionally, in June

[3] South Africa's Foreign Policy under Ramaphosa, in *Strategic Comments*, *27*(2), vii–ix. IISS.

2023, Ramaphosa participated in an AU peacekeeping mission, which proposed a 10-point plan to resolve the conflict. However, this plan was rejected by both the Ukrainian and Russian governments. South Africa faced significant international criticism and was even accused by the US ambassador in Pretoria of supplying weapons to Russia. In general, Ramaphosa's efforts to maintain a 'policy of non-alignment' regarding Russian aggression against Ukraine were contradictory and ineffective (South African Government 2024b). This was primarily because Ramaphosa's stance was caught between advocating for the 'principle of respect for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of all states and peoples' and failing to explicitly demand the withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukrainian territory (South African Government 2023a).

In December 2023, South Africa accused Israel of committing genocide against the population of Gaza before the International Court of Justice. This accusation drew strong criticism from some Western governments, but also garnered broader international support for South Africa compared to its stance on Russian aggression against Ukraine. Historical and political factors played a crucial role in motivating South Africa to advocate for the rights of the Palestinians in Gaza. On the one hand, as previously mentioned, the ANC established relations with the Palestinian leadership during its struggle for national liberation. Since 1994, South African presidents have consistently supported the Palestinian cause in international fora (Jeenah 2015). On the other hand, the South African government viewed, with some irritation, Israel's diplomatic and economic activism in Africa over the past decade, which aimed, among other things, to diminish African support for Palestinian political demands (Gidron 2020).

Despite these tensions, Ramaphosa has endeavoured to maintain friendly relations with Western countries, which, in 2023, held 86 per cent of South Africa's FDI stock, amounting to US$96 billion (UNCTAD 2025). However, Trump's return to the White House in 2025 has significantly impacted relations between the US and South Africa. The approval by the South African parliament of the Expropriation Act 13 at the end of 2024 was followed by controversy triggered by Elon Musk, which led to Trump signing an Executive Order on 7 February 2025. The order accused the South African government of attempting to 'seize agricultural property from ethnic minority Afrikaners without compensation' (The White House 2025). Additionally, it claimed that South Africa was undermining US foreign policy by attacking Israel at the International Court of Justice and trading with Iran. As a result, the Executive Order suspended all American aid to South Africa (The White House 2025). Despite Ramaphosa's efforts to ease tensions with Washington (Eligon 2025), the situation escalated in March 2025 when the US expelled South African Ambassador Ebrahim Rasool. Furthermore, the imposition of a 30 per cent tariff on South African exports to the US market in August effectively nullified the AGOA agreement. These actions not only strained US-South African relations, it also prompted Ramaphosa to advocate for closer integration with countries in the Global South (South African Government 2025).

Although the BRICS global governance reform agenda has seen limited effectiveness, Ramaphosa has emphasised that South Africa's main benefit from collaborating with BRICS is the opportunity 'to have a strategic relationship with China' (South African Government 2023a). In September 2024, the partnership between the two governments was elevated to an 'all-round strategic cooperative partnership' (South African Government 2024a).

Despite recognising that 'We export to China what we extract from the earth; China exports to us what it produces in its factories', Ramaphosa rejected accusations of 'new colonialism' regarding the Chinese presence in Africa, reaffirming the policy of collaboration with Beijing established by his predecessors (South African Government 2018b). Ramaphosa viewed trade with China as a growth opportunity for Africa and urged Beijing, through its investments, to support the industrialisation of both Africa and South Africa (South African Government 2018b). However, economic relations between China and Africa continue to face significant contradictions, including trade imbalances and issues related to debt sustainability (Carmody et al. 2020; Carmody et al. 2021). This is also true for the economic relationship between China and South Africa (Shoba and Mlambo 2024).

At the African level, Ramaphosa has continued the efforts of his predecessors. While the South African military has remained engaged in peacekeeping missions, Ramaphosa actively coordinated the fight against COVID-19 among African governments during his tenure as Chairman of the AU from 2020–2021. However, Ramaphosa chose not to take decisive action to support democracy within the AU, accepting the outcomes of contentious elections in countries like Tanzania and Ivory Coast instead.

Like his predecessors, Ramaphosa also supported trade liberalisation in Southern Africa through the establishment of TFTA, which includes the SADC, the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa and the East African Community. Trade imbalances in Southern Africa have continued to deepen. In 2022, South Africa's trade surplus with non-SADC countries reached a record US$13 billion (World Bank 2025). Politically, Ramaphosa favoured pursuing compromise solutions in crisis situations, aiming to restore stability, even when it meant compromising democratic principles, as seen in the recent case of Mozambique (Fabricius 2024; DIRCO 2025).

Regarding military involvement, Ramaphosa has actively endorsed the deployment of the SADC Mission to Mozambique (SAMIM), which was withdrawn in 2024, and the SADC Mission in the DRC (SAMIDRC), which was deployed in 2023 and is currently in the process of withdrawal. However, this has drawn criticism, with some accusing him of acting primarily out of economic interests (Bond 2023). Furthermore, although these interventions indicate progress in military cooperation among SADC member countries, they have not achieved their intended objectives.

Several factors contributed to this outcome. Both missions were launched at a time when the political crises in Mozambique and the DRC had already reached a critical point. Second, the offensive approach taken by both SADC missions hindered the search for inclusive solutions to the conflicts (Verelst and Minde 2025). Third, the political divisions among African governments weakened the effectiveness of military action. In Mozambique, there was a lack of coordination between SADC troops and the Rwandan military contingent. In the DRC, SADC member countries and Rwanda found themselves on opposing sides, with SADC forces fighting against the M23 rebel movement, which was supported by Rwanda. Lastly, the number of troops and equipment provided to SADC missions was insufficient, given the severity of the ongoing conflicts (Dzinesa 2023).

Ramaphosa's foreign policy has largely aligned with that of previous South African presidents. He has focused on strengthening ties with emerging countries, particularly within the BRICS group, to promote South Africa's economic and political interests. Additionally, Ramaphosa has worked to consolidate relationships with Western countries, which are crucial sources of investment and trade for South Africa. However, it remains to be seen whether recent tensions with the Trump administration will ease or lead the South African government to further strengthen its political and economic cooperation with the BRICS nations.

6. Conclusion

In the three decades since the end of apartheid, the South African government has greatly expanded its diplomatic relations both bilaterally and multilaterally. Whereas the previous white regime maintained ties with a limited number of countries, democratic South Africa has formalised and strengthened relationships with nations in the Global South and emerging powers, particularly China. It has also generally maintained cordial relations with countries in the Global North, although it remains to be seen how relations with the United States will evolve during Trump's second presidency.

The evolution of South Africa's foreign policy after the end of apartheid has been a gradual process, influenced by the country's economic needs as well as the international relations developed by the ANC during its national liberation struggle. The significant continuities in foreign policy across different presidencies, as emphasised in this article, question the notion of a rupture between Mandela's and Mbeki's foreign policy on one side, and Zuma's and Ramaphosa's on the other. The analysis presented in this article indicates that the foundations of South Africa's post-apartheid foreign policy were established by Mandela and Mbeki. Subsequently, Zuma and Ramaphosa have continued to advance along a path that had already been set, consolidating the trends started by previous presidencies. As a result, the key objectives of the foreign policy have remained constant, although the methods for achieving these goals have evolved in response to changes within South Africa, as well as at the regional and international levels.

South Africa is currently an influential voice in the Global South; however, its foreign policy contains significant contradictions that undermine its effectiveness. Firstly, Pretoria has not yet ensured that its international relations contribute to a more inclusive model of economic development both domestically and globally. The growing economic relations with China highlight this issue, given their contradictory impacts on South Africa specifically, and Africa as a whole. Secondly, it remains unclear how South Africa will promote security in Africa, a priority shared by various presidencies since 1994. Without a commitment to strengthening democratic institutions at the national level, South Africa's efforts to address the root causes of violence on the continent may continue to prove an elusive goal.

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Prayers, Politics, and Peace: the Role of Religious Institutions in Conflict Onset and Prevention in Mozambique and Tanzania

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Abstract

This study examines the divergent trajectories of Islamist militancy in Mozambique and Tanzania by analysing the role of formal and informal religious institutions in conflict onset and prevention. While Mozambique's Cabo Delgado province has been engulfed in a protracted insurgency since 2017, neighbouring Tanzania has largely avoided sustained terrorist violence despite similar risk factors. The study traces the historical evolution of Islamic governance along the Swahili coast, the marginalisation of Muslim communities under colonial rule and the post-independence establishment of national Islamic councils. It argues that institutional decay and fragmentation in Mozambique created a vacuum exploited by extremist actors, while internal reform and strategic engagement by Tanzania's Islamic council (BAKWATA) helped foster religious cohesion and mitigate violence. By highlighting the importance of institutional credibility, inclusivity and alignment between formal and informal religious actors, the study offers critical insights into how religious governance structures can contribute to or help prevent the escalation of violent extremism in fragile contexts.

Keywords: Peacebuilding, Institutions, Violent Extremism, Islamist Militancy, Tanzania, Mozambique

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, Islamist1 armed groups have expanded their operational footprint across multiple regions in Africa, evolving from localised insurgencies into transnational threats. These can broadly be grouped into the Sahel theatre, including the regions of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger; the Lake Chad Basin theatre, including the regions of Cameroon, Chad, Nigeria and Niger; the Horn of Africa theatre, including the regions of Somalia and Kenya; the North Africa theatre, including the regions of Algeria, Egypt and Libya; and the Southern African theatre, including the regions of Northern Mozambique and the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) (Serwat 2024). Understanding how and why these groups spread across states in some regions and not others is critical to countering them.

Since 2017, Cabo Delgado, a province in Mozambique, has been the epicentre of a violent Islamist insurgency led by ahlu Sunna Wal Jammah (ASWJ) against the government of Mozambique and its regional and international allies.2 ASWJ attacks were originally limited to the port town of Mocímboa da Praia and a few surrounding districts. However, the group has spread its area of activities to most districts of Cabo Delgado and southward into neighbouring Niassa and Nampula provinces. The conflict has claimed at least 5 800 lives, displaced several hundred thousand civilians and brought major Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) projects to a standstill (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project [ACLED] 2024). In contrast, Tanzania, which shares a porous 800-kilometre southern border with Mozambique, has seen only two significant attacks by ASWJ over the same period, both of which occurred in October 2020 on borderland villages in the country's Mtwara district. Concerns amongst security analysts that these attacks marked a new northward expansion by the group into Tanzania have not materialised (Oxford Analytica 2020). Despite Tanzania's proximity to the conflict and their history of domestic Islamist terrorist incidents, the country has seen a significant decrease in terrorist violence since 2017 (ACLED 2024).

Given these divergent security outcomes, it is important to ask why Tanzania has been able to contain the threat of sustained terrorist

[1] Islamism refers to a political ideology that seeks to implement Islamic law (sharia) and principles as the foundation of government and society. Unlike Islam as a religion, Islamism is a modern political movement that advocates for the establishment of Islamic states and the integration of religious doctrine into political governance. Islamist movements can range from those working within democratic systems to more radical groups that reject secular governance entirely. See: Esposito (1992:12).

[2] Ahlu Sunna Wal Jammah (ASWJ), which translates from the Arabic as "Supporters of the Tradition" are locally referred to as Al-Shabaab or "The Youth". However, they share no direct relation to Al-Shabaab in Somalia. In 2019, ASWJ pledged allegiance to the Islamic State, affiliating with its Central African 'wiliyat' or province, with non-contiguous territories in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo and Northern Mozambique—Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP). Following this development, some refer to the group as IS-Mozambique or ISCAP, however, their relationship with the Islamic State is still unclear. Evidence suggests the group has received some limited financial and operational support from IS associates. IS also regularly feature successful ASWJ attacks in their media outlets (United Nations Security Council, 2024).

violence, while Mozambique has succumbed to it?

To date, scholarly literature on the causes and nature of the conflict centred in Cabo Delgado have identified a range of potential hypotheses. Some authors emphasise the role of domestic socioeconomic and political factors that have been instrumentalised by the ASWJ, including interethnic cleavages, political marginalisation, poverty and unemployment, lack of education, corruption and human rights abuses by the state (Pirio et al. 2018; Matsinhe & Valio 2019;Feijo, 2020; Hanlon, 2021). Others have focused on regional drivers, including the relationship between the insurgency and illicit economies and transnational extremist networks (Morier-Genoud, 2020; Heyen-Dube and Rands, 2022). However, less attention has been given to the role of formal and informal institutions or the interplay between them in preventing or fuelling conflict in Tanzania and Mozambique.3 Where institutions have received analytical attention in literature, it has not been in a structured comparative approach. This study seeks to fill this gap by examining the formal and informal religious institutions in Tanzania and Mozambique and their role in fuelling or mitigating conflict.

Most definitions of formal institutions emphasise their rules, laws and organisational structures that are codified and officially recognised by the state or governing authority (Leftwich and Sen, 2010; North 1991) Whilst the definitions of informal institutions are much more varied, some scholars describe them as unwritten rules, social norms and practises that influence behaviour outside formal legal and organisational frameworks (Helmke and Levitsky 2004). Other scholars—and for the purpose of this study—broaden the definition to include associations, cartels, organisations and civil society movements that play a role in shaping norms, influencing behaviour and providing governance functions outside of formal state structures (Sheranova, 2020).

This study draws on Helmke and Levitsky's (2004) typology of informal institutions, which classifies them as complementary, accommodating, substitutive or competing, based on their interaction with formal institutions. It expands this framework by linking these institutional dynamics to conflict trajectories, particularly in contexts vulnerable to violent extremism.4 By assessing whether formal institutions are effective and whether their interests converge or diverge with informal ones, the study outlines four potential conflict outcomes. It argues that institutional alignment and strength are key determinants of conflict intensity, with the highest risk of escalation occurring where institutions are both weak and misaligned.

In both Tanzania and Mozambique, the analysis of formal religious institutions will focus on the state-sponsored Islamic councils, which serve as official interlocutors between the government and Muslim communities. In contrast, informal institutions will encompass a range of local Islamic groupings, including independent clerics, community-based networks and unaffiliated religious movements operating outside formal state oversight.

1.1. Summary of findings

Among the most important formal institutions in representing Muslim interests and fostering religious harmony in both Tanzania and Mozambique, have been national Islamic councils. Established in the wake of independence, these councils were intended to serve as intermediaries between the state and Muslim communities, advancing Muslim interests and addressing socioeconomic disparities rooted in Christian-dominated colonial legacies. Crucially, they were also meant to resolve intrafaith disputes by providing a centralised authority capable of mediating between different Islamic sects and schools of thought. In doing so, they were tasked with guiding religious practice in ways that harmonised with the values of democratic and multifaith societies, while reinforcing broader legal and social frameworks.

However, despite these aspirations, both Tanzania's BAKWATA and Mozambique's CISLAMO struggled to fulfil their institutional mandates. Over time, they came to be seen by large sections of their respective Muslim populations as corrupt, co-opted by political elites and unresponsive to community needs. This crisis of legitimacy coincided with the rise of a new generation of Salafi5 clerics and the expanding influence of transnational Islamist networks. As a result, both countries experienced fragmentation within the Islamic sphere

[3] Peter Bofin (2022), in examining Tanzania's success in containing terrorism identifies Tanzania's national Islamic Council as an important role player as part of a series of security-related, political and administrative measures by the state. Jannis SaalFeld (2019) examines the establishment of national Islamic Councils in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and Mozambique and finds their failures created political environments conducive to collective radicalisation. Similarly, Liazzat Bonate's (2010) extensive work on the history of Islam in Northern Mozambique and the wider Swahili coast, identifies failures in Mozambique's national Islamic Council as a driver of political violence. This study will draw from all three of these authors' work.

[4] There is no universal agreed upon definition of violent extremism (VE). However, UN policy frameworks and resolutions generally characterize it as the advocacy, support, or use of violence to achieve political, ideological, or religious objectives, particularly when such actions are rooted in extreme ideologies that reject principles of pluralism and tolerance. See, for example: United Nations General Assembly. (2015). Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism: Report of the Secretary-General (A/70/674). United Nations.

[5] *Salafism* refers to a conservative Islamic reform movement that advocates a return to what its followers consider the pure and unadulterated practices of the early generations of Muslims (the *salaf al-salih*). It emphasises strict adherence to the Quran and Hadith, often rejecting later interpretations or innovations (*bid'ah*) in Islamic thought. See: Wiktorowicz (2006).

and the proliferation of informal religious associations operating beyond the control of the national councils.

While this institutional decay created vulnerabilities in both settings, Tanzania was able to stem the escalation of extremist violence through a combination of internal reforms within BAKWATA and strategic engagement with more conservative Islamist actors. Importantly, these efforts unfolded in a context where state security institutions also demonstrated greater capacity and coordination in responding to emerging threats. The relative strength and responsiveness of Tanzania's security apparatus likely played a decisive role in complementing religious institutional reform and preventing the entrenchment of militant networks. These dynamics offer important lessons for Mozambique, where the national Islamic council has yet to achieve similar levels of institutional cohesion or public legitimacy, and where efforts to contain VE may also hinge on strengthening both religious and security governance.

1.2. Structure

This article will begin by providing a short history of the spread of Islam along the Swahili coast and its appropriation by African communities. This will be followed by an examination of how European colonisation changed interreligious power dynamics in the region and embedded administrative, educational, and economic systems that would create lasting socioeconomic disparities between Muslims and Christians. The role of Islam as a force for collective mobilisation against colonial rule will be discussed along with some of the difficulties in managing diverse Islamic movements in the post-colonial era. This will be followed by examining the performance of national Islamic councils in Tanzania and Mozambique, and their respective ability as formal institutions to mediate intrareligious disputes and mitigate violence in the face of increasingly radical Salafi movements in the region. Finally, lessons learned and potential recommendations for policy and practise will be provided.

2. Tracing the crescent: The spread of Islam along the Swahili coast

Islam has a rich and longstanding history in Africa, dating back to the seventh century. Over time, successive schools of Islamic thought have become appropriated by African communities in unique ways and deeply woven into the cultural, political and social fabric of societies across the continent. The way in which Islam has been practised in East Africa has also been influenced over the centuries by shifting power dynamics in the region related to Omani and Portuguese conquest, the slave trade, European colonisation and post-colonial state building, among other factors (Wynee-Jones and LaViolette 2017).

Arab and Persian traders originally introduced Islam to communities along the Swahili coast over a 1 000 years ago. Kufic inscriptions in the Kizimkazi Mosque in Zanzibar, for example, are thought to be from the 1100s (Sheriff 2020). These trade networks not only facilitated the movement of goods between Africa, the Middle East and Asia, they also served as conduits for the transmissions of ideas, beliefs and customs. Over time, coastal communities in East Africa began to adopt and adapt to Islamic practises, with intermarriage between Arab traders and African local Bantu-speaking women creating mixed Arab-African populations (Mwaliwa 2018).

The emergence of powerful city-states like Kilwa, Zanzibar and Pemba, ruled by the Shirazi clans of mixed Persian, Arab and Indian influences, served as hubs of Islamic scholarship and cultural exchange. Swahili emerged as a lingua franca, blending Bantu and Arabic elements and became a vehicle for spreading Islamic teachings (Mwaliwa 2018).

The arrival of the Portuguese in the late fifteenth century disrupted the dominance of Arab and Persian trade networks along the Swahili coast. When Vasco da Gama arrived in 1498, for example, he noted that much of Mozambique's coastal towns and cities were subject to the rule of the Sultan of Kilwa, who was able to maintain control of coastal gold and ivory trade (Bonate 2010). Many Swahili city-states like Kilwa and Mombasa, resisted Portuguese control, leading to violent clashes. In other places such as Malindi, ruling Swahili elites sought alliances with the Portuguese as a protection against rival clans. The construction of Fort Jesus in Mombasa (1593), which served as an administrative base to control trade, impose taxes and tariffs on Swahili city-states and suppress rebellion, emerged as a symbol of Portuguese dominance in the region (Bonate 2010).

Despite being closely associated with the Catholic church, after initial confrontation between the Portuguese and Swahili-Muslim communities, the Portuguese pursued no concerted effort to interfere in the international religious affairs of the region, preferring to maintain control through distant administration and local rulers and sultans (Bonate 2010). However, economic exploitation by the Portuguese led to periodic Swahili rebellions, often with the support from the Ottoman Empire and Omani Arabs who were also vying for the dominance of the Indian Ocean trade networks (Campbell 2016).

In 1698, the Arab rulers of Oman captured Mombasa from the Portuguese bringing Zanzibar under the control of the Sultan of Oman

who maintained this rule up until the late nineteenth century. Trade in ivory and slaves, along with exports of cloves, vastly increased Zanzibar's wealth, and Stone Town became one of the wealthiest and largest cities in East Africa. Under Omani rule, Islam became further entrenched, particularly among coastal elites who benefited from trade wealth (Bonate 2010; Sheriff 2020).

Between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Northern Mozambique and Swahili leaders became deeply involved in the international slave trade. This was in part due to their location near ports and their roles as middle-men between mainland African slave suppliers and slave buyers from across the Indian ocean (Bonate 2010; Campbell 2016). This also saw more inland African societies embrace Islam and further merge traditional African spiritual practises, like ancestor worship, with Islamic teachings (Premawardhana, 2019). A unique feature of some Muslim communities in Northern Mozambique, for example, were that they were matrilineal (Bonate 2010). However, these practises would later be challenged by successive waves of more reformist Islamic thought.

The spread of Islam along the Swahili coast illustrates a dynamic interplay between faith, culture and power over centuries. While Islam was initially introduced through Arab and Persian trade networks, African communities embraced and reshaped its practices to align with local traditions, resulting in a distinctive synthesis of Bantu and Islamic influences.

3. Muslim exclusion and resilience under colonial rule

The arrival of British and German colonial powers in East Africa during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries profoundly reshaped Muslim polities, disrupting long-standing trade networks, imposing new administrative systems and challenging traditional Islamic authorities. Colonial systems also introduced new disparities around access to education, healthcare and employment, which favoured Christians over Muslims. In response, Muslim communities sought to strengthen their identity and position by forming various associations and informal institutions, laying the groundwork for greater political mobilisation during the independence era.

The Berlin Conference (1884–1885) and subsequent treatise served to delineate borders between Portuguese, British and German colonial territories in East Africa. The German empire established a colony in Tanganikya, named German East Africa, while Zanzibar became a British protectorate in 1890. Following Germany's defeat in World War I (WWI) and the Treaty of Versailles, Tanganyika was transferred to British control in 1920. Tanganyika became a United Nations (UN) Trust territory under British administration in 1947—a status it kept until its independence in 1961 (Sheldon and Penvenne 2025). Zanzibar was ruled as a British protectorate up until 1963 when the Zanzibar Act of the United Kingdom (UK) made provision for full self-governance as an independent country within the Commonwealth. However, only a year later, the Zanzibar revolution saw the last reigning sultan, Jamshid bin Abdullah, deposed and the establishment of a new socialist government led by the Afro-Sharazi Party (ASP) (Sheldon and Penvenne 2025). In April 1964, Zanzibar merged with mainland Tanganyika, creating the United Republic of Tanzania within which Zanzibar remains an autonomous region. By the nineteenth century, Portuguese control over the Swahili coast had diminished considerably, and was predominantly confined to Mozambique (Bonate 2010). Without the strength to develop the region on its own, Portugal favoured leasing large tracts of land to private companies. However, the Portuguese government eventually terminated the charters of the major concession companies in the 1940s and 1950s, bringing all of Mozambique under direct Portuguese rule, until gaining independence in 1975 (Bonate 2010).

Under both German and British rule, colonial policy consistently favoured the spread of Christianity over Islam in Tanganyika. British control used Article 438 of the Versailles Treaty, Article 22 of the League of Nations and Command Paper No. 2374 to establish colonial state-missionary partnerships as a vehicle for spreading Christian education across its colonies in Africa (Seimu and Komba 2024). While this education system primarily aimed at producing a workforce tailored to the administrative and economic needs of colonial governance, not intellectual advancement, it left Muslims with fewer opportunities to access colonial government jobs (Seimu and Komba 2024). The British also did little to support madrassas or integrate them into the formal education system (Bertz 2015; Dilger 2021). The limited access Muslims had to education during the colonial period has created a stratified education landscape, elements of which persist today (Dilger 2021).

Christianity was similarly crucial to the formalisation of direct Portuguese colonial rule in Mozambique. As highlighted by Bonate (2010), in her historical overview of Islam in Mozambique, Portugal adopted a system known as Indigenato, fashioned after the French code d'Indigent (native code). This system was instituted through policies such as the Acto Colonia (1930) (colonial act), Carta Organica do Imperio Colonial Portugues (1930) (organic charter of the Portuguese colonial empire) and Reforms Administrativa Ultramarina (1933) (overseas administrative reforms). Collectively, Bonate (2010) argues that these policies meant "Africans became colonial subjects living within the jurisdictions of 'local traditional customs and usages', administered by indigenous authorities (regulos/regedores) appointed by Portuguese administrators (p. 584)." Like national Islamic councils to come, the early association of Muslim regulos with the colonial

regimes caused controversy and internal conflict within Muslim communities (Bonate 2010). Catholicism, Bonate (2010) argues, was as a crucial marker of Portuguese culture, viewed by the colonial government as a vehicle to "nacionalizacao" (nationalise) and "portugalizacao" (portugalise) colonial subjects. Teaching the precepts of Catholicism was made obligatory in all schools, while the government worked in partnership with the Vatican to expand mission schools throughout the country. Portugal adopted an assimilationist stance towards its colonial subjects. Subjects could opt for status of assimilado, provided they could prove they had adopted Portuguese customs, language and culture, including dress code. Importantly, Bonate (2010) notes that, unlike African Christians, African Muslims in Northern Mozambique could not become assimiladoes without having to denounce their religion.

Despite marginalisation under British and Portuguese colonial systems, the number of Muslims grew in both Tanzania and Mozambique during the first half of the twentieth century. This can be attributed to the arrival of new Islamic Sufi orders, which challenged older Islamic authorities tied to clan and chieftainship, and sought to uplift and develop Muslim communities sidelined by colonial authorities.

As Bonate (2010: 584) writes:

> *These new Orders transformed local conceptions and practices of Islam. For example, in contrast to the authority of the old Muslim rulers, the Sufi leaders claimed an authority of religious learning ('ilm) and of written authorization (ijaza), situated within a chain of transmission (silsila/isnad). These features had nothing to do with the hereditary power and legitimacy of an African chieftainship or Shirazi families. However, local chiefly clans fought hard and managed to appropriate an Islamic authority inked to the Orders, which contributed greatly to a significant expansion of Islam.*

These Sufi orders were instrumental in establishing new inclusive Muslim organisations that, regardless of race, tribe or sect, were dedicated to Muslim progress in the face of colonial economic and social marginalisation. Influential informal institutions emerged, such as the East African Muslim Welfare Society (EAMWS). Founded by Sheikh Hassan Bin Ameir of the Qadriyya Sufi brotherhood and Mufti of Tanganyika, EAMWS was dedicated to advancing Muslim education, economic and social interest across the East Africa region, indicating early forms of Islamic mobilisation and Pan-Islamic thought (Juma and Islam 2017).

The colonial period in East Africa was a time of profound upheaval for Muslim communities, embedding socioeconomic disparities that heavily favoured Christian populations while marginalising Muslims. This era of exclusion not only reshaped traditional Islamic authorities, it also sowed the seeds of resistance and mobilisation (Lomeier 2007). Muslim communities responded to colonial injustices by forming Sufi-led networks and welfare organisations, which promoted education, social progress and unity beyond racial or sectarian lines associated with former Islamic centres of power like the Shirazi clans. These early efforts laid the foundation for Islamic resilience and the emergence of Pan-Islamic movements, showcasing how faith became a tool for both spiritual and political empowerment in the face of systemic colonial discrimination (Lomeier 2007).

4. Post-colonial politics and the establishment of national Islamic councils

Islamic leaders and organisations in East Africa were instrumental in the nationalist and independence movements of the twentieth century. By mobilising Muslim communities marginalised under colonial rule, they fostered unity and resistance against imperial powers. Groups like the EAMWS championed education, economic progress and political participation, aligning their goals with broader liberation movements. However, following independence, these same leaders and organisations, while embraced within independence movements, posed a threat to newly independent states dominated by predominantly Christian political elites seeking to consolidate their power and a centralised authority (Bofin 2023). To mitigate these potential threats, ruling parties in both Tanzania and Mozambique encouraged or actively participated in the establishment of national Muslim councils as a form of monitoring and control.

The Tanganyika independence movement was initially led predominantly by influential Muslim traders among the coastal elite (Saalfeld 2019). Figures such as Ali Said, for example, were instrumental in the establishment of the Tanganyika African Association (TAA). The TAA, founded in 1929, began as a social and cultural organisation for Africans from diverse backgrounds living under British colonial rule. As Iliffe (1979) argues, the TAA was the institution through which many diverse ideas and ambitions were woven into a more focused political nationalism which formed the foundation of the TAA's successor movement—the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU). However, colonial education and administrative systems of the 1950s led to the rise of educated Christian elites who came to dominate TANU and after independence in 1961, the Tanganyika government (Loimeier 2007).

In 1961, following the independence of Tanganyika, the EAMWS headquarters were moved to Dar es Salaam. During the struggle for independence, the organisation had evolved from a social welfare institution focused primarily on Muslim social and cultural issues, to Tanzania's de facto Muslim council. The EAMWS was able to bring together both nationalist/pro-socialist and pan-Islamic/anti-socialist factions within Tanzania's diverse Muslim communities (Saalfeld 2019). However, while the wider independence movement could embrace a diversity of political and ideological voices, a newly independent Tanzania, inheriting a Christian-dominated colonial governance structure, found it more difficult (Bofin 2023). The EAMWS's mobilising strength, its access to foreign ideas and finance through its transnational structures and the charismatic nature of some of its leaders posed a problem to President Nyerere (Bofin 2022). Nyerere's socialist vision for Tanzania and efforts to minimise ethnic and tribal differences through his Ujamaa programme6 were at odds with elements of EAMWS who supported a more capitalist outlook and pan-Islamic vision for Tanzania's Muslim community (Saalfeld 2019). Relations between leading members of the EAMWS and Nyerere quickly deteriorated. In 1963, Tanganyika's Justice Minister and Chairman of the EAMWS resigned in protest of the president's efforts to create a single party state, which came into being a year later (Saalfeld 2019). Following the Arusha declaration,7 with growing tensions between nationalist-pro-socialist and capitalist/pan-Islamic factions within EAMWS, the government dissolved EAMWS and supported the formation of the Baraza Kuu la Waislamu Tanzania (BAKWATA) (The National Muslim Council of Tanzania). Headed by Muslim leaders loyal to TANU's vision, the new council effectively became part of the wider party-state machinery under TANU's single-party vision for Tanzania (Saalfeld 2019). BAKWATA leadership decided against issuing membership cards, as every Tanzanian Muslim was officially considered a member (Gilsaa 2012, as cited in Saalfeld 2019).

The route to the establishment of Mozambique's national Islamic Council was influenced by the civil war (1977–1992) and there was a need for government to consolidate its base of support in the face of Resistencia Nacional Mocambicana (Mozambican National Resistance Movement, Renamo) aggression. Over the course of the 1940s and 1950s, Sufi Islam had become widespread in Northern Mozambique. However, by the 1960s, these orders began to be challenged by a southern-dominated Salafi movement led by Saudi-educated cleric Abubacar Ismael Mangira. Mangira openly challenged Mozambique's Sufi leadership, and publicly derided Sufi Muslim's "unIslamic" forms of mysticism, such as ancestor worship, saint veneration and collective dancing and drumming rituals (Bonate 2010). Looking to shore up its base of support in the context of the Mozambican War of Independence (1964–1974), the Portuguese government chose to support the more popular and entrenched Sufi leadership against Mangira's reformist agenda. Consequently, Mangira shifted his focus, presenting himself to Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (Mozambique Liberation Front, Frelimo) as a devout nationalist (Bonate 2010; Saalfeld 2019). While initially this move was unsuccessful, in time, Mangira's courting of Frelimo paid off.

Following independence, in line with Frelimo's Marxist-Leninist agenda, the party took a strong anti-religious stance during their first years of rule. This included the nationalisation of religious properties, expulsion of missionaries, closure of religious schools, banning of religious education and restrictions on religious festivals and public expressions of faith (Bonate 2010; Saalfeld 2019). However, Frelimo quickly realised that such an aggressive anti-religious posture risked alienating potential allies and moved to a more pragmatic stance (Bonate 2010; Saalfeld 2019). In January 1981, the Conselho Islâmico de Moçambique (Cislamo) (The Islamic Council of Mozambique) was established at a meeting between the government and a group of predominantly reformist clerics, with Mangira appointed as the institution's chief coordinator (Saalfeld 2019). In early 1982, another national Islamic organisation, the Congresso Islamico de Mocambique (the Islamic Congress of Mozambique), was launched. The Islamic Congress, comprised a variety of pre-colonial Muslim movements and associations, including the dominant northern Sufi orders, all shared an anti-Salafi stance.

Unlike Tanzania where BAKWATA was the only formal national Islamic council, Mozambique had a more fractured religious landscape. Following their establishment just a year apart, the Islamic congress and Islamic council quickly came to compete for Frelimo's attention and party patronage (Bonate 2010). These dynamics still play a role in intrareligious tensions within Mozambique today.

5. Institutional decay

National Islamic councils have been established throughout post-independent African countries. While their role, responsibilities and legal status differ, ostensibly they are intended to fill several cultural, political and religious responsibilities. These include, for example, providing

[6] The Ujamaa programme was a social and economic development initiative launched by President Julius Nyerere in the 1960s as part of his vision for African socialism. Rooted in the Swahili word "ujamaa", meaning "familyhood" or "brotherhood", the programme aimed to create a self-reliant, egalitarian society by emphasising collective ownership, communal living and cooperation. The programme was part of Nyerere's broader effort to avoid interethnic conflict by forcing different communities to come together. See: Jennings (2002).

[7] The Arusha Declaration was TANU's landmark policy documents outlining President Nyerere and TANU's vision for a socialist and self-reliant independent Tanzania. It played a pivotal role in Tanzania's post-independence governance landscape.

religious guidance and leadership by unified interpretations of Islamic teachings and jurisprudence; issuing fatwas (religious rulings) and resolving doctrinal disputes; and offering guidance on Islamic practises and holidays. These also include administrative affairs, such as overseeing the management of mosques, madrassas and Islamic charities; regulating the training, certification and conduct of imams and other religious leaders; managing Islamic endowments and distributing resources for community benefit. In addition, Islamic councils are generally expected to act as mediators in disputes involving Muslim individuals or communities, and work to prevent interreligious or intercommunal tensions (Whyte 2021).

The first two decades following the establishment of BAKWATA in Tanzania, the council proved extremely ineffective and was embroiled in several corruption cases. Addressing the major interreligious education inequality between Christians and Muslims in independent Tanzania was a central task of the council. However, they were unable to build a single new secondary school or successfully establish an Islamic university for over two decades (Chande 1991; Bofin 2022). Founding members, including Adam Nasibu, the council's secretary general and Masasi, the chairman, were both caught in major embezzlement scandals (Saalfeld 2019).

Similarly, in Mozambique, Cislamo's proximity to a Christian-dominated political elite widely perceived as corrupt, undermined its credibility. So too did their failure to advance key Muslim interests. Following the end of the civil war, the relationship between Frelimo and Cislamo further strengthened as the party sought to consolidate power. In 1992, President Joaquim Chissano set out to recruit prominent Muslim leaders from Cislamo directly into Frelimo. In the 1994 legislative elections, 20 Cislamo members from Southern Mozambique were elected into parliament on a Frelimo ticket. As a parliamentary caucus, the Movimento Islamico (Islamic Movement) campaigned, among other things, for the recognition of the Eid festivals as a national holiday (Bonate 2010). The bill establishing the new holiday was passed in parliament. However, strong interdenominational church opposition led President Chissano refused to sign it into law, calling for a Supreme Court review which ultimately deemed the bill unconstitutional (Bonate 2010; Morier-Genoud 2020).

6. Institutional fragmentation and conflict

In both Tanzania and Mozambique, the national Islamic councils' ties to non-Muslim authoritarian elites undermined their credibility and institutional efficacy, fuelling discontent and leading to factionalism within these institutions and the wider Muslim community. At the same time, Salafi clerics, educated abroad and critical of what they saw as compromised Muslim leadership, exploited this discontent, mobilising support and connecting with militant networks advocating for violent subversion of the socio-political order (Bonate 2010).

Saudi Arabia and Kuwait first began offering scholarship opportunities to East Africans as early as the 1960s, coinciding with the rise of their influence in the Islamic world after oil wealth greatly boosted their economies (Ali 2016). However, in the 1980s, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and other gulf states began to support the building of Islamic educational institutions in East Africa and greatly expanded their scholarship programmes. State-sponsored organisations like the Saudi-based al-Haramain Foundation or Kuwaiti-based African Muslim Agency (AMA) were crucial in supporting a new generation of Muslim leaders throughout the region (LeSage 2014; Ali 2016; Bofin 2022;). In Tanzania, one such leader supported by the al-Haramein Foundation was Sudanese cleric Sheikh Abbas Mustafa who became an influential figure within an intra- BAKWATA force trying to reform the institution and push a more hardline Salafi agenda. However, while some returnees found work within BAKWATA, the majority became part of Ansar al-Sunnah,[8] an informal network of individuals privately-owned organisations seeking to purify local Islamic practises in Tanzania (Saalfeld 2019).

In the early 1990s, historic efforts were made by Muslim President Ali Hassan Mwinyi to introduce multi-partyism in Tanzania. In this context, internal tensions within BAKWATA and public criticism of the institution had reached a high point (Saalfeld 2019; Bofin 2022). In 1991, an important conference was held at the University of Dar es Salaam, which brought together leading representatives from across the Muslim community, including Muslim scholars, civil servants, leaders of local Sufi orders and members of the Ansar al-Sunna movement. Boycotted by BAKWATA leadership, the conference formed a taskforce to oversee the drafting of a revised BAKWATA constitution (Saalfeld 2019). Acting on the instruction of the taskforce, a large crowd unlawfully occupied BAKWATA's headquarters in Kinonondi. Government intervention forced mediation between old BAKWATA leadership and its contenders by initiating the creation of a ten-member-committee—consisting of five members from each group. However, the mediation process broke down when it became clear the BAKWATA establishment were unwilling to undertake any substantial reform (Saalfeld 2019).

Over the next two decades, Muslim civil society in Tanzania became increasingly fragmented, creating space for both the emergence of domestic militant movements and infiltration by regional and international militant Islamist networks. Failed BAKWATA reformers established the Baraza Kuu la Jumuiya na Taasisi za Kiislamu Tanzania (Supreme Council of Islamic Organisations and Institutions of

[8] The Arab name Ansar al-Sunnah roughly translates into "defenders", or "saviours" of the "sunnah", or the body of traditions and practises of Prophet Muhammad.

Tanzania, Baraza Kuu). However, after Baraza Kuu failed to effectively institutionalise and establish a countrywide structure, several constituent movements broke away to establish their own associations and networks, such as the Jamaat wa Ansar al- Sunna Tanzania (The Congregation of the Ansar al-Sunna in Tanzania, JASUTA), and the Shura ya Maimamu (Council of Imams/Mosque Leaders, Shura) (Saalfeld 2019; Bofin 2022). Hardline clerics such as Sheikh Ilunga Hassan Kapungu and Sheikh Ponda Issa Ponda began to gain a wider following, mixing calls for reform with more overly anti-state and anti-Christian messaging. Sheikh Ponda's Simba wa Mungu (God's Lion) were involved in the physical takeover of several moderate mosques, which led to his arrest in 2012 by the Tanzanian government and violent confrontations between his followers and the security services (LeSage 2014). More fundamentalist movements in Zanzibar also began to emerge, including Imam Me- jlis (Imam Society) and Daawa Islamiya (Islamic Call) who openly challenged the rule of traditional Muslim authorities (LeSage 2014; Saalfeld 2019). One such movement, Ju- muiya ya Uamsho na Mihadhara ya Kiislam (also known as the Association for Islamic Mobilisation and Propagation, UAMSHO) led by Sheikh Farid Hadi was implicated in a series of terrorist attacks against more moderate Zanzibari clerics who were not supportive of their call for full Zanzibari independence from Tanzania and the enforcement of strict sharia (LeSage 2014).

In addition to domestic militancy, evidence of connections between regional and international militant networks began to emerge. The Al-Qaeda orchestrated simultaneous bombing of the United States embassies in Nairobi, Kenya and Dar es Salaam; Tanzania was an early indicator of the growing strength and ambition of transnational Islamist terrorist organisations. Among those implicated were Ahmed Khalfan Ghailani, a Tanzanian citizen who was later captured and tried in connection with the attacks. Ghailani played logistical roles in preparing for the bombing in Dar es Salaam, including purchasing gas cylinders and a truck used in the attack (Shinn 2007). Two years later, a Zanzibari, Qaed Sanyan al- Harithi, was involved in the October 2000 USS Cole bombing (Shinn 2007). The emergence of Al-Shabaab in Somalia in 2005 and its spread into Kenya and Uganda through local affiliates like the al-Hijra group, caused an additional security concern for Tanzania. By 2012, Al-Shabaab affiliates, such as Emrah Erdogan and Hassan Ali Iqbal, were beginning to be intercepted travelling through Tanzanian airports on their way to Somalia. In 2012, UN investigators identified the Ansaar Muslim youth centre (AYMC) (formally known as the Tanzanian Muslim youth union) as providing material support to Al-Shabaab (Bofin 2022). By 2013, multiple Al-Shabaab training and indoctrination camps had been identified and dismantled by Tanzanian authorities (LeSage 2014). However, the use of different media platforms and growing Internet penetration in the region meant that al-Shabaab linked militant clerics, like Kenya's Sheikh Aboud Rogo and Sheikh Abubakar Sharif Makaburi, which enabled them to easily spread their message across borders. Even today, over a decade since Sheikh Rogo was assassinated, recordings of his speeches are still widely used by East African Islamist militant groups for propaganda and indoctrination purposes (International Crisis Group 2018).

Between 2012 and 2017, Tanzania saw a major spike in Islamist violence in both Tanganyika and Zanzibar. These included the violent takeovers of mosques by Islamist actors, the assassination of local government officials and members of the ruling Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) (Party of the Revolution) party; attacks on churches and priests; and the bombing of tourist sites (LeSage 2014). Tanganyika saw some of the most serious incidents. In November 2013, police uncovered a significant arms cache and training complex in Tanganyika's Kilindi district and in May 2014, seven soldiers of the Tanzanian Peoples Defence Force (TPDF) were killed in a sustained engagement with an armed group linked to al-Shabaab in the Tanganyika's Amboni Caves complex (Bofin 2022).

The Southern Pwani district also saw some of the worst violence of this period. Between 2015 and 2017 over 40 police officers, local government officials, and local leaders of the CCM were assassinated by Islamist actors (Bofin 2022; Walwa 2022). Young clerics associated with the region's Islamist milieu attempted to take over local mosques or establish their own, which served as sites of militant recruitment and radicalisation. They quickly came into conflict with local communities and authorities. A strong security crackdown in early 2017 led those militants not killed or captured, to disperse south into Cabo Delgado, Mozambique, or northwest to Eastern DRC (International Crisis Group 2022).

In Mozambique, Cislamo's failures and perceived corruption, saw several younger members defect in the late 1990s and establish a new organisation, ASWJ. Research on the organisation is limited. Some scholars argue its members were motivated by frustration towards Cislamo's perceived corruption and institutional failings. It was also perceived by some to be dominated by Mozambicans of South Asian descent who were biased against Black Africans (Bonate 2010).

ASWJ founders belonged to a cohort of young northern clerics who received scholarships distributed by Cislamo in the 1990s to study in the Middle East. It appears that members of ASWJ split from the main group in the mid-2000s. In the early 2010s, this sect increasingly came into confrontation with local communities in Cabo Delgado's Balama, Mucujo, and Mocimboa da Praio districts (Habibe et al. 2019). This included attempting to forcefully ban the sale of alcohol in the area, prohibit children from attending public schools and access medical services and overtaking a local mosque (Habibe et al. 2019; Feijo 2020). Following persistent calls by local community members, in 2017, Mozambican police eventually intervened and detained several alleged members of the sect. However, police intervention came too late and in October 2017, around 30 members of the sect attacked three police stations in Mocimboa da Praia killing several policemen and raiding their armouries.

Over the next two years, the sect wase able to successfully recruit members and expand an insurgency by tapping into local grievances and leveraging ethnic tensions. As Feijó (2020) argues, just as the sect was establishing themselves in Cabo Delgado in 2015:

> The arrival in power of a Makonde President coincided with a greater affirmation of the State in the control of natural resources (namely precious stones, but also timber and ivory) interrupting local economic circuits. The situation reinforced speeches of victimisation and denunciation of the State's capture process by specific ethnic groups. This situation has reemerged historical resentments of the coastal populations, skilfully capitalised on by radical Islamic groups, who have found there an important social base of support.

In the initial years of the insurgency (2017–2018), the group primarily targeted civilian populations, launching attacks on villages in in Macomia, Mocímboa da Praia and Palma districts, with further activity in Nangade, Pemba, Muidumbe and Quissanga districts of Cabo Delgado. In 2019, the formal affiliation of the group with ISCAP was broadcast via Islamic State (IS) media channels. As argued by Bofin (2023), over the coming years, affiliation with IS sharpened the group's messaging, positioning them with a clearer ideology focussed around establishing a regional caliphate governed by sharia law; challenging the state's authority; harnessing local grievances and targeting Liquid Natural Gas (LNG) projects.

Over the course of 2020–2021, the security situation in Cabo Delgado significantly deteriorated. The rate of political violence events peaked in June 2020, however, the attack on Palma in March 2021 represented a major inflection point in the conflict. The attacks led TotalEnergies to evacuate their staff from the nearby Mozambique LNG project on the Afungi peninsula and declare a force majeure. In July 2021, Rwandan and Southern African Development Community security forces were deployed to the province in separate missions under different mandates. The Tanzanian government deployed additional security forces to its southern border and closed the Namoto-Kilambo and Negomano-Mtwambaswala border crossings—the two largest official border posts connecting Cabo Delgado with Mtwara, Tanzania.

Since 2022, ASWJ has dispersed, and shifted to operating in small mobile groups. However, despite a general improvement in the security situation in Cabo Delgado, ASWJ has shown an ability to evolve strategically and operationally and survive in the face of national and regional security forces (Bofin 2023).

The institutional failures of BAKWATA and Cislamo fragmented Muslim communities, creating a vacuum that militant actors could exploit. Younger, foreign-educated clerics leveraged these fractures to establish informal institutions which could ostensibly fight for those Muslim communities tired of the status quo and frustrated at the failure of national Islamic councils to adequately represent their interests. In both cases this fragmentation ushered in periods of violence, demonstrating the dangerous consequences of weakened religious governance in volatile socio-political landscapes. However, while Mozambique still faces a deepening insurgency, Tanzania has been able to contain the escalation of violence and conflict within its borders.

7. Back from the Edge: Institutional Reform and Convergence in Tanzania

Since 2017, despite concerns of conflict spillover, Tanzania has experienced just two attacks by ASWJ, both of which occurred in October 2020 on borderland villages in the country's Mtwara district (ACLED 2024). Moreover, targeted assassinations of local government officials in the Pwani region, which was prevalent between 2015 and 2017, has ceased. Violent takeovers of mosques and killing of moderate clerics in regions such as Mwanza have also largely subsided and Tanzania has not witnessed any sustained clashes between security forces and militant groups anywhere near the scale of the 2013 Amboni Caves incident.

In a study of Tanzania's ability to contain widespread instances of terrorism9 within its borders, Bofin (2022) outlines several factors which has led Tanzania's more militant leaders and informal institutions to come into a modus vivendi with the state and by proxy, BAKWATA. In 2015, when intrareligious violence in Tanzania was at a high, Sheikh Abubakar Zubeir bin Ally Mbwana became the third leader of BAKWATA. One of his first priorities was to improve relations between the council and some of the country's more religiously conservative informal institutions. He did this through activating Article 103 of the council's constitution which allows for the establishment of a Majlis Tansiq (coordination council) comprising members from across Muslim organisations, including the chairman of the Tanzania Islamic Foundation (TIF) and leader of the Baraza Kuu. Both the TIF and Baraza Kuu were previously associated with promulgating a highly confrontational stance towards the government and BAKWATA in the 1990s, which led to several violent incidents. Directly engaging these influential voices in addressing violence helped to strengthen the credibility of BAKWATA and marginalise jihadist elements (Bofin 2022).

This contributed to a reorientation of institutions associated with hardline Salafism from confrontation with the state towards settlement. For example, in July 2017, Sheikh Salim Barahiyan, head of the Africa Muslim Youth Centre (AMYC) which in 2012 was identified by UN investigators as supporting al-Shabaab, began to speak out publicly against Muslim groups that declared takfir10against fellow believers and challenge the state violently and illegitimately. In one speech, Sheikh Barahiyan spoke of Muslim institutions being 'infiltrated by a group that identifies as Salafi...these groups have entered our country, and are dividing it" (Tanzanian Islamic Foundation 2017 as cited in Bofin 2022: para 29). Similarly, other informal Islamic institutions which had only a decade earlier participated in violent demonstration against "mfumo kristo" (the Christian system), moved from a more confrontational agenda to social service provision, particularly education–more acceptable for the state. This allowed these institutions to maintain their access to foreign donor fundings, while compelling them to assert greater control over local mosques and madrasas (educational institutions) under their control (Bofin 2022). Today, both the AMYC and TIF have extensive education programmes and operate dozens of schools (Bofin 2022). In response to guarantees by Uamsho to not engage in public activism towards Zanzibari independence and institution of sharia, the government agreed to release over 100 prisoners associated with a spike in terrorist attacks in Zanzibar in 2012–2013 (Bofin 2022).

The evolution of BAKWATA underscores the potential for formal institutions to adapt and reclaim their roles in fostering conflict resolution and intrafaith unity. Over time, BAKWATA's reforms allowed it to partially overcome its earlier inefficiencies and corruption, enabling it to better fulfil its institutional responsibilities and re-establish some legitimacy within Tanzania's Muslim community. This period also marked a significant shift in the relationship between formal and informal institutions, as BAKWATA's interests began to align more closely with those of informal networks such as ASWJ, the Tanzanian Islamic Foundation and other hardline groups.

8. Conclusion

This study has shown that the divergent trajectories of Islamist militancy in Mozambique and Tanzania cannot be fully understood without considering the interaction between formal and informal religious institutions. Drawing on Helmke and Levitsky's (2004) typology, the analysis demonstrates that where institutions are both misaligned and weak, as in the case of Mozambique, there is a greater risk of conflict escalation. In Mozambique, the national Islamic council (Cislamo) failed to maintain credibility or cohesion, enabling informal institutions like ASWJ to evolve into substitutive and ultimately competing actors. These informal groups filled the vacuum left by decaying formal structures, initially attempting to provide religious guidance and community leadership, before actively undermining state authority and formal religious governance.

In contrast, Tanzania's formal religious institution, BAKWATA, though initially compromised by inefficiency and public distrust, undertook substantive internal reforms that fostered a more complementary relationship with informal religious actors. By strategically engaging Salafi-inspired networks and integrating their interests into a broader institutional framework, BAKWATA was able to neutralise extremist narratives and redirect activism toward constructive forms of engagement, including education and social services. This process of institutional convergence, underpinned by dialogue and strategic coordination, played a central role in containing the domestic spread of Islamist militancy.

[9] This article employs the understanding of terrorism reflected in various UN instruments and resolutions, recognising that no universally accepted legal definition exists. The UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (2006) and subsequent resolutions condemn 'criminal acts, including against civilians, committed with the intent to cause death or serious bodily injury, or taking of hostages, with the purpose to provoke a state of terror in the general public or in a group of persons or particular persons, intimidate a population or compel a government or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing any act'.

[10] Takfīr is an Islamic term referring to the act of declaring another Muslim to be a non-believer. Takfir has been at the centre of theological debates, particularly with the rise of extremist groups such as the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda who are perceived by many scholars to have weaponised takfir to label other Muslims as apostates and justify their actions against them.

It is, however, important to note that religious institutional alignment alone does not account for these divergent outcomes. Tanzania's relatively robust and coordinated security institutions likely played a decisive role in complementing these religious reforms, enabling the state to disrupt militant networks, deter violent spillover from Mozambique and uphold public order. Conversely, Mozambique's weaker security architecture has struggled to contain the insurgency and protect local communities, amplifying the consequences of religious institutional fragmentation.

Ultimately, this comparison highlights how both institutional interactions, whether complementary, substitutive or competing, and the strength of broader governance systems, particularly in the security sector, shape conflict trajectories. For policymakers, fostering alignment between formal and informal religious institutions while concurrently investing in capable, rights-respecting security institutions, should form the cornerstone of any strategy to mitigate violent extremism and associated acts of terrorism in fragile contexts. Mozambique's experience underscores the urgency of such reforms, while Tanzania's approach offers practical lessons in institutional resilience and coordinated conflict prevention.

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Revisiting French Influence in Francophone Africa: A Case of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger

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Abstract

Citizens of Francophone African countries, such as Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, publicly demonstrated support through civil protests to the military juntas that took over power in these countries. The protesters pressured the juntas to expel French military personnel from the countries. The expulsion of French military and diplomats from these countries is a demonstration of the decline of France's influence in Francophone Africa. The decline is triggered by a rise in anti-French sentiment across Francophone Africa. Francophone African countries remain the most underdeveloped countries in Africa. The level of underdevelopment has stimulated mal governance which has rendered the struggle for power across Francophone Africa to become intense, to the point that it overshadows the pursuit of democratic stability because of frequent military coups. This chapter, therefore, seeks to answer the following questions; What is the root cause of the decline of French influence in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger? Why did the public demonstration of anti-French sentiment only take place during the military coups? Were the civilian protests in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger an expression of pro-coups? Answers to these questions are obtained through an extensive literature review of secondary data that comprise of journal articles, government publications, websites, books and other relevant sources. The study found that because citizens of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger protested against French military presence in these countries does not mean that they are pro-coups. Anti-French sentiments existed in these countries prior to the recent military coups. The protest, therefore, took place during the military coups because both the juntas and the people had one common aspiration, which is the withdrawal of French military personnel from these countries.

Keywords: Francophone Africa; military junta; coups d'etats; civil protests; underdevelopment; anti-French sentiment

1. Introduction

Francophone Africa refers to African countries where French is used as the official medium of communication (Le Vine 2004; Clark 2018). French became the official language in these countries post the Berlin conference of 1884–1885 that saw the partition of Africa and the establishment of French colonial administration in the territories it claimed after the partition (Austin 1984). In similar ways English was the official language in former British colonies in Africa hitherto (Daniels et al. 2011).

Nonetheless, before the Second World War (1945–1948) (Bethell and Roxborough 1988) that preceded the Cold War (1941–1945) commenced (Davis 2015), sparks of resistance already existed against colonial rule that came with the independence of Ethiopia after defeating Italy in 1941 (Abate 1980). The defeat of Italy signalled a blueprint to end colonial rule in Africa. Hence, by 1950, Africa experienced increasing agitations to end colonial rule in the continent (Mekoa 2005). The agitations took place across Africa's political landscape and culminated into resistance movements with nationalism at the heart of it.

The movements resisted colonial rule until an increasing number of African countries gained independence from former colonial masters between the 1950s and 1980s (Mekoa 2005), except for Namibia and South Africa that had gained independence from colonial rule in the 1990s (Saunders 2016). Among the African countries that gained independence in the 1950s was Ghana. Ghana gained independence from the British on 6 March 1957 (Aryeetey and Kanbur 2017). The independence of Ghana increased the desire for liberation from colonial subjugation across the continent after Ghana's President Kwame Nkrumah proclaimed, 'the independence of Ghana is meaningless unless it is linked up with the total liberation of the African continent' (Nugent 2012: 7).

However, while the quest for political liberation increased in Africa and many countries were gaining independence, Africa's political leadership did not have a common vision on the political future of the continent, post-independence (Alemazung 2010). There was disaccord regarding the political future of the continent, which led to the emergence of two schools of thought (the Monrovia- and the

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Casablanca groups) (Adula 2022). The Casablanca group, for example, advocated for political unification or federation as opposed to the Monrovia group that advocated for co-existence among independent African states without political federation (Adula 2022).

2. Background

While African leaders continued to engage with each other on the future of the continent, the future of Africa was simultaneously reimagined by its former colonial powers who lingered around former colonies because they had created socioeconomic and political structures of governance that were not African centric (Gumede 2017). As newly independent states, African political leaders needed to rely on former colonial powers to understand how to integrate the global socioeconomic and political structures without much disruption (Gumede 2017). The reliance on former colonial masters led to neocolonialism (Nkrumah 1965).

Kwame Nkrumah describes neocolonialism as the last and the most dangerous stage of colonialism (Nkrumah 1965). The reason being, neocolonialism used economic, political and cultural pressures to control Africa with the help of African political leaders. It also brought the newly independent African countries into Euro-North American ideological struggle. The struggle that was aimed at global dominance opened the door for deeper reflection on neocolonialism in an increasingly divided world (Mekoa 2005).

The world experienced further division after the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962 (Lebow and Center 2000). The crisis is described as the most serious military confrontation during the Cold War era (Lebow and Center 2000). The world was mainly divided along ideological lines. The ideological division coincided with the reconstruction of Western Europe after it was destroyed in World War II (WWII) (Milward [1984] 2003). The United States, the leader of an ideological faction, put the Marshall plan in action for the reconstruction of Western Europe (Steil 2018).

The Marshall plan provided financial and material "support/aid" towards the reconstruction of Western Europe. The gesture strengthened the bond that existed between the United States and Western Europe (Lee 2017). It also paved the way for the smooth integration of Western Europe as a political bloc—the European Union (EU) (Yesilada and Wood 2015). Arguably, due to the role that the United States played in the reconstruction of Western Europe, Western Europe did not hesitate to align itself with the ideological faction led by the United States against the Soviet Union (Cooper 1989).

In relation to Africa, some countries of Western Europe (former colonial powers) that have vested interests in their former African colonies needed to "keep an eye" on the socioeconomic and political affairs of their former colonies until they aligned themselves with the ideological leadership of the United States which was all about global dominance (Cooper 1989). Western European countries needed to dominate their former colonies because their future survival depended on the level of access they have to exploit Africa's mineral resources (Mazrui 2004: 54). Drieghe (2020) and Moss (2019) attest that former colonial powers did not only strive to have access to Africa's resources, they wanted to have full control of it. The implication of having full control of Africa's resources would give former colonial masters the power to preside over the future of Africa (Moss 2019; Drieghe 2020).

The fight to maintain a close relationship with Africa added complexity to the fragile relationship existing between Western and Eastern Europe (specifically the Soviet Union) (Bruno 1992), which was helping some African countries to resist European colonialism by propagating communism which was a disdain to the United States. Communism had made inroads into countries such as Angola, Mozambique and South Africa (Asante 2014). The spread of communism in these countries increased the ideological struggle between the United States and Western Europe against the Soviet Union, that is, until the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991 (Marples 2016).

Prior to the demise of the Soviet Union, Western Europe countries that were involved in colonial projects had intensified their relationship with former colonies through organisations such as the European Economic Community (EEC). The EEC was formed in 1957 by the Treaty of Rome (Lumb 1961). It gathered former African and Caribbean colonies in the capital of Togo in 19751 to sign the Lomé Convention (Moss 2019; Drieghe 2020). The principal aim of the Lomé Convention was to allow agricultural and mineral exports from Africa and the Caribbean to enter the EEC free of duty (Minta 1984).

[1] The Lomé Convention was a partnership agreement between the EEC and former colonies of the EEC member states in Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific (ACP) in 1975. The convention introduced ground-breaking features such as nonreciprocal market access and several mechanisms to stabilise ACP countries' export revenues (Drieghe 2020).

3. Conceptual framework

Prior to the Lomé Convention, France was already a step-ahead in its effort to deepen relationship with its former colonies. France created an Intergovernmental Organisation for Cooperation called 'L'Agence de Coopération Culturelle et Technique (ACCT)—Agency of Cultural and Technical Cooperation (ACTC) in 1970 (Thérien 1993). Members of the ACTC included a few Asian and European countries (Thérien 1993). However, following several reforms the ACTC was transformed into L'Agence intergouvernementale de la Francophonie (AIF)—Intergovernmental Agency of Francophonie (IAF) in 1985 (Barraquand 2004).

The IAF was later transformed into L'Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF)—Francophone International Organisation (FIO) in 1998 (Barraquand, 2004),2 which Tréan (2006) coined 'La Francophonie', meaning—people who share French as a common language. The aim of La Francophonie was to bring former French colonies in Africa and elsewhere together. Morris and Bouillon (2001) assert that Francophone African countries who are members of OIF are countries whose governments have adopted French as the official language and the people of these countries use French in daily communication and transactions (Morris and Bouillon 2001).

However, it is imperative to interrogate whether the adoption of French as the official language in an African country is what qualifies such a country as a member of La Francophonie. In a similar way, it is vital to understand whether the use of French as a medium of communication in an African country is enough reason to label such a country a Francophone African state (Mazrui 2004). The precedent viewpoints are important, because African countries such as Equatorial Guinea, Egypt and Cape Verde, who are members of La Francophonie (Mazrui 2004), do not have French as their official language.

Instead, these countries use Spanish, Arabic and Portuguese respectively, as official languages. The citizens do not use French in daily communication and transactions (Mazrui 2004). This adds complexity to the homogenous description of La Francophonie as a reflection of countries using French in daily communication. In addition to the contradiction, a former French colony, Algeria, which has French as an official language, is not a member of La Francophonie (Mazrui 2004). Similarly, Mazrui (2004) argues that the reason non-French speaking countries are members of La Francophonie is because of the political, economic and cultural ambition of France to expand French dominance in Africa and beyond (Mazrui 2004).

Notwithstanding, irrespective of the complexity involved in membership of La Francophonie (Cogneau et al. 2021), the organisation remains one that is originally French with Francophone Africa as its primary niche, because French is 'the lingua franca in government offices, judiciaries, legislatures and academia' (Mazrui 2004: 6). The dominant use of French in Francophone Africa has heightened the socioeconomic and political influence that France exerts over Francophone African countries. France often makes decisions and acts on behalf of Francophone African countries without conducting due diligence (Tardy 2020).

4. Revisiting French influence in Francophone Africa

The dominant use of French as the medium of communication and transaction in Francophone Africa and the inability of the governments of these countries to switch to an African language, exacerbated the influence of France in the region (Kaninya 2020). French remains the channel which France uses to transfer its custom, tradition and political philosophy, even to new generations of Francophone Africans hitherto (Kaninya 2020). The severity of French as a force to reckon with in the influence of France in Francophone Africa is explained by Ngugi wa Thiong'o (2005), who argues that the European language used in an African country creates the lens through which citizens of African countries view the world.

In addition, the influence of France in Francophone Africa increased because of its colonial policy of assimilation which treated former African colonies as an integral part of France—Françe outre mer (Fallers 2017). Francophone Africans were given rights to elect representatives to the French parliament, to have a free press, trade unions and political parties. In a nutshell, assimilation was aimed at transforming citizens of Francophone African countries into "Frenchmen" (Crowder 2023).

The consequence of assimilation was that it influenced Francophone Africans to support French colonial and neocolonial projects at the expense of their emancipation and self-determination (Crowder 2023). Garuba (2001) argues that even today; to understand the influence of France on Francophone Africa, one must observe the influence of French in terms of how citizens of Francophone African countries use it as an enabler for in-group solidarity when interacting with fellow Africans from other exoglossic linguistic backgrounds (Fardon and Furniss 1994).

[2] Community of countries using French as official language (Barraquand 2004)

Furthermore, the influence of France in Francophone Africa allowed France to maintain privileged political, cultural, economic and military relations with the former colonies (Vallin 2015). France became the "gendarme of Francophone Africa." It provided military and technical assistance to these countries with the purpose of getting Francophone African countries to support and promote France's global agenda (Vallin 2015). France uses it influence to transform it relationship with Francophone Africa to one of patronage—a relationship base on hierarchy which allows Francophone African countries to exercise limited sovereignty even after independence (Vallin 2015). Francophone African countries did not have the right to adopt any policy that affects the interest of France in these countries or elsewhere.

Therefore, for France to maintain a lasting influence in Francophone Africa, it needed to position itself in supranational organisations in a way that it has a high international status as a superpower (Vallin 2015). This is how France advocated and obtained a permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in 1945 with the intention of quenching any form of agitation against French dealings in Francophone Africa at the level of the UNSC (Vallin 2015), as well as guiding politics related to Francophone Africa to its own advantage within the UNSC (Vallin 2015).

The ascension of France to a permanent seat at the UNSC allows France to determine the balance of power in Francophone Africa. France was allowed to use military force in any Francophone African country (if needed) to achieve its foreign policy objectives in Africa (Vallin 2015). Hence, France instigated several military coups in Francophone Africa. The coups were against Francophone African political leaders who tempered with French interest such as Modibo Kéita of Mali who withdrew the country from the African Financial Community (CFA) in 1962 (Zolberg 1965).

In another instance, Thomas Sankara of Burkina Faso was accused of jeopardising foreign relations with France and assassinated in 1987 by Blaise Compaoré who was supported by France (Dolcerocca 2016). France made it clear that it would crush any political leader who stands in its way (Ziankahn 2011). It had resources to unconstitutionally change governments in any country in Francophone Africa. This increased the "fear of France" across Francophone Africa. It transformed Francophone African political leaders to "puppets" of French regimes who place the interest of France above that of the people they govern (Good 1964).

In addition, France increased "foreign aid" in its foreign policy to Francophone African countries to increase the level of dependence that these countries have on France (Yates 2018). France (until the economic rise of China) was Francophone Africa's principal provider of foreign aid to increase its influence (Yates 2018). Foreign aid was used by France as a "carrot and stick" when dealing with its former African colonies (Yates 2018). By the end of the twentieth century, France provided foreign aid to the tune of more than €10 billion annually (Yates 2018), of which, Francophone African countries were the primary beneficiary (Yates 2018).

However, the foreign aid that Francophone African countries received from France could not achieve significant development objectives for two reasons; first, the aim of foreign aid was to create dependence instead of independence (Yates 2018). Second, Francophone African countries were created to supply primary products to French manufacturing industries (Yates 2018) and to consume the finished products that were often expensive. France intentionally did not provide the technical know-how needed to transform raw materials into finished products, in order to maintain it influence in Francophone Africa (Yates 2018).

Consequently, a large portion of the financial aid received in the form of grants, loans or direct investments were mostly spent on the importation of consumer products from France (Yates 2018) which resulted in Francophone African countries suffering with a huge burden of debt. The debt owed to France placed Francophone African countries at a vulnerable and precarious position when negotiating trade deals with France (Yates 2018). France had leverage over these countries and therefore, was the main decision-maker when signing agreements with Francophone African countries (Yates 2018).

That is why, even when it was inconvenient, France influenced several Francophone African countries to accept austerity measures which did not help in the economic growth of these countries (Powers 2019). Instead, the austerity measures weakened the socioeconomic and political steps that these countries have made after independence (Yates 2018), as it increased the level of unemployment and poverty in Francophone Africa (Yates 2018). These countries debt increased, thereby rendering the countries unstable.

When the local currency (Franc CFA) used in Francophone African countries was devalued in an attempt to stabilise the economies of these countries (Yates 2018), not much was achieved, because Francophone African countries are deprived of financial freedom, as the foreign currency reserves of Francophone African countries is kept in a Bank in France (Yates 2018). This has generated a polemic situation because of the irrationality involved in such an action. The Franc CFA is, therefore, perceived as an instrument of French influence in postcolonial Francophone Africa (Yates 2018),the reason being that French neocolonial influence in Francophone Africa has imposed Francophone African governments to allow France to decide on monetary policies affecting these countries. The Bank of France is the

main driver of the monetary policies of Francophone Africa (Yates 2018). As a result, there is presently much agitation against France in Francophone Africa, since France controls key economic activities in these countries (Majumdar 2019).

In the case of Francophone African countries, such as Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, the agitations led to military coups (Hansen 2024). The coups came with new dynamics of military coups in what analysts describe as "a coup in a coup" in the case of Burkina Faso and Mali. The motives behind the military coups that took place in Francophone Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries seem to be different from the motives that fuelled the military coups in that region in the twenty-first century. In the twenty-first century, the primary reason why military coups were plotted and succeeded without the help of France, is because of the decline of French influence in Francophone Africa. In line with the precedent point of view, this study seeks to answer the following: What is the root cause of the decline of French influence in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger? Why did the public demonstration of anti-French sentiment only take place during the military coups? Were the civilian protests in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger an expression of pro-coups? Answers to these questions were obtained by the following methodology.

5. Methodology

Answers to the research questions in this study were obtained through qualitative research design using secondary data comprising of journal articles, government publications, websites, books and other relevant sources. Subsequently, content analysis was employed to analyse the root cause of military coups in Francophone Africa in the twenty-first century; the reason why the public demonstration of anti-French sentiment only took place during military coups; and whether civilian protests in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger were expressions of pro-coups. This was done with a view of proffering understanding to whether the citizens in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger acted out of self-will or an internal or external influence.

6. Findings

6.1. The decline of French influence in Francophone Africa

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, several scholars (Julienne 1988; Pouemi 2000; Migani 2008; Granvaud 2015) have attested to the fact that France was the most influential foreign power in Francophone Africa. The reason being, France's ability to create lingo-cultural, economic and political dependence in Francophone Africa (Mazrui 2004). Campbell (2008), however, argues that France was the most influential power in Francophone Africa during that time, since China has not achieved sufficient recognition as an economic superpower.

That is why when China became Africa's largest trading partner, surpassing the United States in 2009 (less than a decade into the twenty-first century), the French influence in Francophone African started declining gradually (Sun 2014). African countries in general increasingly turn towards China (Wekesa 2021). The reason African countries lean towards China is because they were confronted with new challenges in the twenty-first century. The century came with intense climate change and agricultural productivity challenges, livelihoods and wellbeing, youth unemployment and persistent poverty, increasing crime and violence, weak institutions and poor governance and the rising threat of jihadists and Islamic extremist movements (Owonikoko and Momodu 2020).

The latter added complexity in the decline of French influence in Francophone Africa (typically its influence in the countries of the Sahel), because of the failure of France to eradicate jihadists and Islamic extremist groups in the Sahel after its promise to the respective governments (Erforth 2019). However, the reason why the large-scale military operations of France in the Sahel was not successful, was because the military operations were expensive in terms of finances and material supply (Yates 2018).

Even though the success of the operation in the Sahel would have maintained France's image as a great power and preserve its reputation in the world system, France was overburdened (Yates 2018; Erforth 2019), and it could not completely eradicate terrorism at the height of high insecurity in the Sahel. By ignoring France's efforts in the region (Dakono 2022), conspiracy theories turned into accusatory discourses in Sahel countries like Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, who accused France of aiding jihadist movements instead of eradicating them (Cheriet 2023). Architects of accusatory discourses in the Sahel claim France is negotiating with terrorist organisations in order to preserve French interest (Cheriet 2023).

The accusation not only damaged France's reputation in the region, but also made citizens question the nation's capabilities (Adeyeye and Adeyeye 2024). The military juntas in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger leveraged on the resentment that citizens of these countries evince towards France and found it to be wanton. It was, therefore, concluded that France's military presence is no longer needed in these

countries (Adeyeye and Adeyeye 2024), Hence, the diplomatic and military cooperation signed with France was severed (Adeyeye and Adeyeye 2024).

France was forced to exit from the said countries. The expulsion of French military and diplomats by the juntas remains a clear indication of the decline of its presence in the Sahel and shows the return of military coups in Francophone Africa two decades into the twenty-first century (Adeyeye and Adeyeye 2024). As countries such as Guinea Conakry and Gabon also experienced successful military coups. The military coups across Francophone Africa echoes the level of distrust existing between governments and people of many Francophone African countries vis-à-vis France (Adeyeye and Adeyeye 2024).

One point of note regarding the decline of French influence in Francophone Africa and the military coups, is the fact that the coups that took place in Niger in July 2023 (Olayinka 2023), Mali in May 2021, Burkina Faso in January and September 2022, Guinea Conakry in September 2021, Chad in April 2021 and Gabon in August 2023 as a result of the decline of French influence, were without bloodshed (Taruvinga, 2023; Adeyeye and Adeyeye, 2024). The reason there was no bloodshed is partly because the coups capitalised on the anti-France demonstration of the people. Growing anti-France sentiment is, therefore, part of the reason of the decline of the influence of France in Francophone Africa.

Nonetheless, while it is important to note that anti-France sentiments and the rising presence of China in Africa are among the reasons behind the decline of the influence of France in Francophone Africa, it is imperative to further explore the triggers of military coups in the Sahel. This is important, because no matter how appealing military coups may appear to be (Lynch and Crawford 2013), the consequences of military coups are overwhelming, as it interrupts democratic processes and reverses the democratic gains that have been made over time (Lynch and Crawford 2013). As a result, constitutions and democratic institutions are often suspended.

Lynch and Crawford (2013) further claim that occasionally, military coups install military rulers that often become authoritarian and corrupt in nature. The historical experience of military coups in Francophone Africa attest to the fact that military leaders are not better than elected civilians. In most cases, they become worse. This is attributed to the paradoxical relationship that exists between democracy and military coups (Lindberg and Clark 2008). France is guilty in this regard, since it orchestrated several military coups in Francophone African countries. Thus, deforming the democratic process that some of these countries embarked on after independence.

The distortion of democratic process in Africa is what renders the continent continually vulnerable to military coups, as political leaders get stronger than democratic institutions. It has been observed that countries with a high level of democratisation have lesser chances of experiencing military coups (Lindberg and Clark 2008), because military coups are a result of disentrancement of democracy, corruption and family dynasties, as the was the case with Gabon and Togo (Ogueri 1973; Adeyeye and Adeyeye 2024).

The military juntas in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger all invoke the question of a national security threat as the main reason of their actions. The question of national security in the Sahel is salient, since it is the primary reason why France built military bases in those countries. Therefore, for France to not be able to end Islamic jihadists movements, violent extremism and irregular armed groups not only demonstrated the decline of the influence of France (Taruvinga 2023; Adeyeye and Adeyeye 2024), it also highlights the double standard of the security approach in the region.

France was joined by United States at a military base in the Sahel. The inability of France and the United States to eradicate armed groups in the Sahel left the governments of that region in disbelief. The governments could not understand how France with all its military prowess could not eliminate the security threat in the region (Taruvinga 2023; Adeyeye and Adeyeye 2024) as well as France's inability to end terrorism in the Sahel which cast doubts on national democratically elected governments of the region. The governments appeared weak and incompetent (Taruvinga 2023; Adeyeye and Adeyeye 2024). The political leaders were accused of complicity with France, at the expense of the security of their citizens.

This was another argument that the juntas used to justify why the governments were overthrown in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger (Taruvinga 2023; Adeyeye and Adeyeye 2024). They insisted the elected governments failed to provide security for the people and cast doubts on the determination of French and United States military to eradicated terrorist groups (Bourgeot 2020; Adeyeye and Adeyeye 2024). The juntas accused the French and United States forces as being tools which are used to gain more control and access of the mineral resources of the countries (Dunn 2013).

The foreign ministers of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger who were appointed by the juntas, repeatedly accused France of returning weapons that the national military seized from terrorist groups (Moreno-Cosgrove 2022). The precedent argument was echoed by anti-French protesters. Notwithstanding, it was observed that during the anti-French protests, some protesters were seen waving the Russian

flag, while others burnt the French flag (Elischer 2021). The role that the Russian state-funded private military group, the Wagner Group, has played in eliminating the security threat in Central African Republic also played a role in the decline of France's influence in Francophone Africa (Harkins 2021).

Francophone African governments were exposed to other viable alternatives in matters of national security, as opposed to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries where their options were limited.

The military juntas and the citizens of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger were confident to express the importance of inviting Russia as a partner in the efforts to counter threats of insecurity (Mensah and Aning 2022; Engels 2023). They echoed such sentiment confidently on international media, because they believe the Wagner mercenaries have a better strategy of eliminating Islamic jihadists and other terror groups, since they have no regard for Western wartime morals and ethics (Bourgeot 2020). However, amidst such opposing views, it is important to determine why the public demonstrations of anti-French sentiment across the Sahel only took place during the military coups, and whether the civilian protests in these countries were expressions of pro-coups in the region.

7. Public demonstration of anti-French sentiment

Francophone African countries are rich in mineral resources (Avom et al. 2022). This is partly why these countries are attractive to the rest of the world. Katoka and Dostal (2022) attest that mineral resources in Francophone African countries have contributed to economic growth in Africa. Paradoxically, citizens of Francophone African countries are the poorest in the world (Mamo et al. 2019), with some citizens found to be living in extreme poverty (living on less than USD$1.00 per day) (Ilyas et al. 2023).

Extreme poverty in Francophone African countries is the root cause of crises that have created a high level of insecurity in these countries (Taylor 2019). Sometimes, in response to the crises and insecurity in these countries, foreign governments and institutions often set up programmes to improve socioeconomic and security conditions of the citizens of these countries (Bagayoko 2022). These efforts have not resolved the crises and security issues. Instead, the security situation, for example, is worsening (Bagayoko 2022), which led scholars to interrogate the relevance and effectiveness of the programmes (Bagayoko 2022).

The ineffectiveness of the socioeconomic and security interventions in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger has rendered these countries vulnerable to protest actions as a demonstration of public disaffection of resource governance in these countries (Loada 2021). Citizens of these countries are aggrieved at the level of corruption and political nepotism in their countries (Loada 2021). The citizens have also shown their discontent towards French involvement in these countries through anti-French protests from urban to rural areas while displaying frustration that was also incited by the social media (Bamako AFP, 2021).3

For example, protestors in Burkina Faso and Niger were seen on social media hindering a large French military supply convoy that was travelling from the Ivory Coast to Mali (France24 2021). Even though local forces intervened to escort the trucks, it took more than a week for them to navigate their way through Burkina Faso. Many people got injured in the resistance. The actions were uploaded on social media which increased the level of agitation in Burkina Faso (Loada 2021). Also, in Western Niger, two people were murdered when a convoy of foreign troops attempted to escape protesters (Loada 2021). This added "salt to the wound" as the incident provoked the local population and increased the level of anti-French sentiment across the Sahel (Loada 2021), which resulted in public demonstrations, demanding the end of French military presence in the Sahel (Loada 2021).

During the anti-French protests, protesters were seen waving Russian flags, holding posters praising Russia to step in while publicly burning French flags (Engels 2023). A French diplomat who felt the frustration of the protesters said that, 'many local people did not understand how jihadists could make such gains when French troops are present in the Sahel' (France24). The Malian Prime Minister Choguel Kokalla Maiga, even accused France of training a terrorist organisation in the north of Mali (France24).

It is clear that the level of anti-French sentiment in the Sahel is immeasurable. Nonetheless, the protests imposed on the politics of the region which saw the military seizing power of Mali in August 2020, Burkina Faso in January 2022 and again in October 2022 and Niger in July 2023. The juntas immediately considered hiring Russian paramilitaries private-security firm, the Wagner Group, to bridge the gap as they requested the departure of French troops (Issaev et al. 2022). This increased tensions with France (Issaev et al. 2022).

[3] https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20211130-french-military-facing-growing-protests-in-sahel

Nonetheless, there is a need to conduct further research to scientifically understand why the protests against the French presence in the Sahel became publicly intense during the military coups. This is important, because there is the need to understand whether the protests were instigated by Russia or the military juntas (Issaev et al. 2022). In addition, one must understand whether actions of the protesters were truly pro-military coups and Russia (Miles 2024). Addressing these concerns would help to dismiss controversies and conspiracy theories (if any).

8. Protests and coup d'etats in the Sahel

African countries including those in the Sahel region (specifically Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger) answered to the call of democratisation in the early 1990s (Villalón 2023). However, the political events surrounding individual African countries' transition to democracy varied according to domestic and international factors. Regarding domestic factors on the one hand, citizen political empowerment, a culture of fair democratic process, responsive policies and social cohesion among ethnic groups guaranteed the future of democracy in many African states (Cheema and Maguire 2002).

On the other hand, in terms of international factors, colonial legacy played a key role in democracy that is practiced in African countries. For example, looking at stable democracies in Africa, former British colonies are more democratic than previous French colonies (Lee and Paine 2019). Francophone Africa has experienced more military coups than Anglophone or Lusophone Africa, because of the interference of France in the political affairs of these countries (Lee and Paine 2019). Consequently, Paine (2019) asserts that former French colonies have little to offer in terms of democratic institutions.

Nonetheless, democracy was welcomed across Africa, including in countries of the Sahel, because it was portrayed as a system of governance where state power is vested in the citizens of the country. The citizens are called upon to exercise their power through universal suffrage (the right for every citizen to vote in an election) (Singh 2017). The United Nations Organisation supported the spread of democracy across the globe, as it believed it would provide an environment that respects human rights and fundamental freedoms where citizens freely express their will, and their choice of political leadership is respected (Singh 2017).

However, the paradox of democracy is that for it to succeed, there must be a high level of socioeconomic development (Cilliers 2016). The latter is absent in Africa. The reason a high level of socioeconomic development is absent in Africa is because governance capacity is lacking, the quality of electoral democracy is thin and the rise of neopatrimonialism which undermines electoral democracy across the continent (Cilliers 2016). The precedent factors have made it possible for democracy in Africa to continually experience a regression (Cilliers 2016).

Democratic regression in Africa has created room for corruption which tend to undermine state institutions, thereby increasing the level of illicit financial flow and money laundering out of a country (Atabongwoung 2022). According to Mugarura (2010), illicit financial flow and money laundering undermines the stability of the national economy, as they constrain the government's ability to provide public amenities to citizens (Albouy et al. 2020). The lack of access to public amenities in most of the Francophone African countries has been a major source of public agitation and protests in countries such as Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger.

Therefore, to affirm that the protests in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger were expressions of pro-coups or pro-juntas is problematic. The reason being, it remains unclear whether the anti-French protesters in the Sahel were instigated or encouraged by an external force. The reason is that history has shown that citizens in countries such as Burkina Faso and Mali have always look forward to building resilient state structures that allow for a functional democracy to exist (Villalón 2023). Therefore, military coups have never been known to encourage democracy (Pion-Berlin 2016).

9. Conclusion

Military coups reverse democratic achievements anywhere in the world, because coups involve an unconstitutional ascension to political power. A military coup is always accompanied by the suspension of the country's Constitution. The military junta often imposes laws that forbid public demonstration to stabilise the country. These laws are sometimes an infringement on the political rights of the citizens. This is a recipe for agitations, since citizens are never willing to give up their freedom.

In the case of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, however, the citizens demonstrated support for the juntas. They even manifested the willingness to sacrifice their political rights to afford the juntas an opportunity to prove themselves. The citizens did that because the previous elected government did not resolve some of the crises confronting them, such as extreme poverty, food crises, poor governance,

crime, corruption as well as security threats. It is important to note that the security threat in the Sahel remains a cause of concern for the whole continent and beyond.

It appears that the anti-France protesters of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger had no option other than to give the juntas the "benefit of the doubt". Therefore, it means that even though the anti-France protests took place alongside the military coups, the protests are by no way an expression of pro-coups. Anti-French sentiments existing in these countries and elsewhere in Francophone Africa, has been growing since before military coups in the Sahel. The protesters were only seen demonstrating alongside the military juntas, because at the time of the military coups, both the juntas and the protesters shared a common aspiration, which was the expulsion of French military personnel from the region.

The protesters and juntas believe that the political systems that led the countries of the Sahel was only beneficiary to the ruling political elites who they believe assisted French companies to plunder the mineral resources of these countries without showing empathy towards the economic hardship of the citizens. Therefore, the frustration of living in poverty without prospects of improvement and the disparity between political leaders and the people was conducive enough for military coups or armed rebellions. The citizens could not vote incompetent leaders out of office, because democracy in Francophone Africa, like elsewhere in the continent, remains flawed with massive electoral fraud.

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Beyond Liberation Hegemony: Electoral Realignments and the Prospects for Democratic Consolidation in Southern Africa

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Abstract

This paper interrogates the electoral decline of former liberation movements in Southern Africa and the implications for democratic consolidation. Focusing on South Africa's African National Congress (ANC), Namibia's South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO), the Zimbabwe African People's Union- Patriotic Front (ZANU–PF) and the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (FRELIMO), it employs a comparative qualitative design to analyse electoral data, party manifestos, parliamentary debates and media reports. Findings reveal three key issues. First, liberation legitimacy as a political resource is steadily eroding, undermined by corruption, socio-economic crises and generational shifts that weaken historical loyalties. Second, trajectories diverge: South Africa and Namibia point to potential democratic renewal through pluralism and coalition governance, while Zimbabwe and Mozambique illustrate how liberation decline can entrench authoritarian resilience through coercion and institutional capture. Third, the implications for democratic consolidation are contingent, rather than uniform. Institutional strength and the coherence of the opposition shape whether electoral realignments generate pluralism or reinforce authoritarianism. The analysis demonstrates that the decline of liberation hegemony is neither linear nor uniformly democratising. Instead, it opens contested political pathways that reveal the conditions under which the decline of the dominant party strengthens or undermines democratic consolidation in post-liberation states.

Keywords: Liberation movements; electoral realignment; democratic consolidation; Southern Africa; authoritarian resilience; political pluralism

1. Introduction

The post-independence political landscape in Southern Africa has been strongly shaped by the long-term legacy of liberation movements, which, upon attaining state power, often transformed into dominant political parties. This phenomenon, "liberation hegemony", has been characterised by prolonged single-party dominance, often fortified by historical legitimacy derived from the struggle against colonialism (Zimbabwe, Zambia, Mozambique, Namibia) and apartheid (South Africa) (Melber 2009). However, recent decades have witnessed emerging, yet significant electoral realignments across the region, signalling a potential erosion of this hegemony and prompting critical questions about the future of democratic consolidation. Understanding these electoral shifts is vital, as the trajectory of Southern African democracies hinges on the ability of political systems to adapt to changing citizen demands and institutionalise competitive, fair electoral processes beyond the shadow of historical grievances and loyalties.

The basis of this inquiry is that the prolonged dominance of former liberation movements, while initially serving as a stabilising force in emerging democracies, has also presented significant challenges to the deepening of democratic institutions. Such challenges include the blurring of party-state lines, limited accountability and restricted political contestation. However, recent electoral outcomes in countries like Zimbabwe, South Africa and Mozambique suggest a growing voter discontent and a willingness to challenge established powers, leading to more competitive electoral environments and in some cases, shifts in governmental control (Troco 2019; Siachiwena and Saunders 2021; Ochieng et al. 2025). These realignments are not merely episodic electoral fluctuations, they appear to be symptomatic of deeper structural changes within Southern African societies, encompassing evolving political, socio-economic and generational dynamics.

This paper is guided by a central research question: How do electoral realignments following the decline of former liberation movements shape the prospects for democratic consolidation in Southern Africa? To address this principal question systematically, three sub-questions will be investigated. First, the factors that explain the erosion of electoral dominance among liberation movements in Southern Africa are examined, specifically the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa, the Zimbabwe African People's Union- Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) in Zimbabwe, the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) and the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique

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(FRELIMO). The political, socio-economic and generational forces at play are also analysed. Politically, the longevity of these movements in power has often led to accusations of corruption, state capture and a growing disconnect between the ruling elite and the citizenry. The initial broad-based national liberation agenda has, in many instances, been usurped by factional interests and struggles for internal power, further alienating segments of the electorate.

Socio-economic factors are equally critical; despite initial promises of equitable development, many Southern African nations still struggle with persistent high levels of inequality, unemployment and poverty. These unmet expectations, particularly among the youth, fuel disillusionment with the incumbent liberation parties, who are increasingly perceived as failing to deliver on post-liberation dividends. Moreover, generational shifts play a pivotal role. A significant portion of the electorate in Southern Africa today consists of "born-frees", individuals with no direct memory of the liberation struggle, whose political loyalties are less bound by historical narratives and more by contemporary issues of governance, economic opportunity and service delivery. This demographic change fundamentally alters the electoral calculus, compelling parties to compete on policy platforms rather than historical legitimacy alone.

Secondly, the paper investigates how opposition parties, social movements, and new political actors have capitalised on these electoral realignments to challenge liberation hegemony. The decline of liberation movements has created a political vacuum and an opportunity structure for alternative political forces. This sub-question explores the strategies employed by opposition parties, ranging from coalition-building to issue-based campaigns that resonate with disaffected voters. It also scrutinises the role of civil society organisations and social movements in mobilising public opinion, advocating for democratic reforms and holding liberation parties accountable. The emergence of entirely new political actors, often youth-led or focused on specific grievances, signifies a political environment where traditional allegiances are weakening, and innovative approaches to political mobilisation are gaining traction.

Finally, the paper explores the implications of these shifts for party system stability, governance and the broader trajectory of democratic consolidation across the four selected countries. Electoral realignments, while indicative of democratic vibrancy, can also introduce instability. This sub-question analyses how the erosion of a dominant party system affects the fragmentation and coherence of opposition forces, potentially leading to volatile coalition politics or electoral impasses. Also, the impact on governance is assessed, considering how increased political competition might raise greater accountability, transparency and policy responsiveness, or conversely, lead to political paralysis and gridlock. At the end of the day, the central problem is the trajectory of democratic consolidation. Do these realignments represent a genuine deepening of democracy, characterised by robust institutions, stronger rule of law and greater citizen participation, or do they risk descending into political uncertainty and democratic backsliding?

The paper employed a comparative qualitative analysis, utilising a four-country design to investigate the electoral realignments and their implications for democratic consolidation in Southern Africa. This approach was particularly suited for in-depth exploration of political processes within a limited number of cases, allowing for an appreciation of causal mechanisms and contextual variations. The case selection rationale is guided by the shared characteristic that all selected countries are led by former liberation movements, providing a consistent baseline for comparison. The selected countries are South Africa, Namibia, Mozambique and Zimbabwe. The selection of four countries provides a manageable scope for in-depth analysis and offered sufficient variation for meaningful comparison. This enabled a focused examination of how the erosion of their electoral dominance plays out under different political and socio-economic conditions. The comparative element involved systematically analysing similarities and differences across these cases to identify common patterns and unique trajectories. Additionally, electoral data, party manifestos, parliamentary records, media reports and other archival sources were analysed to triangulate findings and provide a comprehensive understanding of the political landscape.

2. Literature review

2.1. Liberation movements and post-independence dominance

Post-independence politics in Southern Africa has been shaped by the enduring legacy of liberation movements, which often leveraged their historical role as "liberation dividends" to secure political legitimacy and electoral dominance. This dividend functioned as a form of political capital, granting these movements a unique advantage in the initial decades of independence (Melber 2018; Tsholo 2021). The ANC in South Africa, ZANU-PF in Zimbabwe, SWAPO in Namibia and FRELIMO in Mozambique exemplify this phenomenon. These parties were not merely political organisations, they were deeply entwined with the nation-building process, having led the struggle against colonial rule and apartheid.

The historical centrality of these movements in achieving independence provided them with an almost unchallengeable moral authority and a narrative of national heroism that resonated deeply with the populace, as noted with the landslide victories they secured at independence (ZANU-PF (1980): 57 per cent; ANC (1994) 62.65 per cent; SWAPO (1989) 57.3 per cent; FRELIMO (1977): 100 per cent (one-party), later 44.3 per cent in 1994 multiparty) (Wood 1993; Saunders, 2011; Plaut 2014). Their early governance was often characterised by extensive state control, patronage networks and the integration of party structures into state institutions, further entrenching their power. This period saw the establishment of dominant party systems, where the liberation movement consistently won majorities, often stifling effective opposition and concentrating power within their ranks. The legitimacy derived from their liberation struggle superseded conventional democratic accountability for a considerable period.

2.2. Electoral decline and realignment

The sustained dominance of liberation movements, however, has not been absolute, and recent decades have witnessed a discernible trend of electoral decline and subsequent realignment across Southern Africa. This erosion of electoral support is not unique to the region and finds parallels in comparative studies of dominant party systems in other parts of the world, such as Latin America and Asia (Southall 2019; Carty 2022). In these contexts, various factors, including economic crises, corruption and a failure to adapt to changing societal demands, have contributed to the weakening of previously unassailable parties.

The realignment theory offers a valuable framework for understanding these shifts, advancing that fundamental changes in voter preferences and party loyalties lead to significant alterations in the electoral landscape. A key driver of this realignment in Southern Africa is generational turnover. Younger voters, who did not experience the liberation struggle directly, are less swayed by the historical liberation dividend and are more inclined to prioritise contemporary issues, such as service delivery, economic opportunities and government accountability (Van der Brug and Franklin 2017). This phenomenon is particularly evident in Southern Africa, where recent presidential transitions have prompted discussions about new generational politics, potentially bringing economic reform and democratic possibilities, though liberation movements may remain constrained by patronage and corruption (Southall 2018). The realignment framework proves valuable for understanding these shifts, as critical realignments represent important subnational electoral phenomena that vary considerably in form and can endure for decades (Nardulli 1995).

In South Africa specifically, the emergence of "born-free" generations has significantly impacted electoral outcomes, changing aggregate turnout patterns at the macro level, while exhibiting distinct attitudinal differences at the micro level (Schulz-Herzenberg 2019). However, contrary to expectations, post-apartheid generations show less commitment to democracy than older cohorts (Mattes 2012), illustrating how dealignment over time can coexist with realignment across generations (Van der Brug and Rekker 2020). This shift towards issue-based politics contrasts with the historical reliance on nationalist narratives and collective memory that characterised previous generations. Consequently, voter volatility has increased, as citizens are more willing to switch their allegiance to parties that they perceive as better addressing their immediate concerns, rather than remaining loyal to historical entities. The declining electoral performance of these long-ruling parties indicates a move away from hegemonic control towards a more competitive and potentially pluralistic political environment.

2.3. Democratic consolidation in Africa

The implications of the decline of liberation movements for democratic consolidation in Southern Africa are a subject of ongoing debate among scholars. One perspective argues that the erosion of liberation hegemony is a necessary step towards greater pluralism and a more robust democratic system (Melber 2002; Butler 2009; Southall 2019). As dominant parties lose their grip on power, space opens for opposition parties to compete more effectively, leading to increased political contestation, improved accountability and in due course, a more consolidated democracy. This view suggests that the breaking of a long-standing one-party dominant system can usher in a period of more genuine multi-party democracy where power can genuinely alternate.

However, a competing view cautions against an overly optimistic interpretation, highlighting the potential risks of instability associated with the decline of historically dominant parties. This perspective suggests that while the weakening of liberation movements may create opportunities for greater pluralism, it can also lead to fragmentation of the party system, political uncertainty and even social unrest (Dorman 2006; Melber 2011; Bayer 2017;). Some scholars, such as Butler and Southall (2015), have characterised many African cases as "unfinished transitions", implying that while formal democratic institutions may exist, the underlying processes of consolidation, such as the rule of law, robust civil society and accountable governance, remain fragile. The challenge has been managing the transition from dominant party rule to a more competitive system without succumbing to political decay or authoritarian reversals.

3. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for analysing electoral realignments and democratic consolidation in Southern Africa integrates several key concepts: Post-liberation politics; party system institutionalisation; democratic consolidation and generational politics. These theoretical lenses collectively provide a framework for understanding the issues at play.

Post-liberation politics theorises that the legacies of liberation struggles, act as both assets and liabilities for incumbent parties. Initially, the historical role in achieving independence endows these movements with significant political capital, legitimacy and a strong sense of national identity, which serves as a powerful electoral asset (Gumede 2017). However, over time, these very legacies can transform into liabilities, particularly as the initial "liberation dividend" diminishes. This occurs when the narratives of past glory fail to address contemporary grievances, such as corruption, economic inequality, and inadequate service delivery (Cawood and Fisher 2022). The inability to adapt to evolving societal demands, coupled with internal factionalism and authoritarian tendencies often cultivated during the struggle can alienate new generations of voters and ultimately undermine their legitimacy.

Party system institutionalisation refers to the degree to which party systems are stable, predictable and accepted by political actors and the electorate (Kuenzi and Lambright 2001). In many Southern African states, the party systems have historically been characterised by weak institutionalisation, primarily due to the overwhelming dominance of liberation movements. This weak institutionalisation can manifest as high party volatility, frequent defections and a lack of clear programmatic differentiation between parties (Lindberg 2007). The erosion of liberation movement dominance, while potentially opening up political space, can also exacerbate this weak institutionalisation, leading to further volatility and unpredictability. A highly institutionalised party system, conversely, is typically associated with stable electoral competition, predictable government formation and a robust democratic process (Randall and Svåsand 2002). The decline of hegemonic parties without the simultaneous strengthening of party system institutions can, therefore, lead to a fragile democratic landscape rather than a consolidated one.

Democratic consolidation, in this context, refers to the process by which democracy becomes the "only game in town", where all significant political actors accept democratic rules and institutions as the legitimate framework for political competition. The decline of dominant parties, in this case former liberation movements, presents a dual pathway for democratic consolidation. On one hand, it can serve as a pathway to pluralism, increasing greater competition, accountability and responsiveness, which are crucial for consolidating democracy (Cooper 2017). This scenario envisions a shift from a *de facto* one-party state to a vibrant multi-party system where citizens have genuine choices and governments are regularly held to account. On the other hand, the decline can lead to political instability, fragmentation and even democratic backsliding (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020; Mbandlwa 2023). This risk is heightened if the incumbent liberation movements resist electoral defeat through undemocratic means, or if the emerging opposition is too fragmented or weak to provide a credible alternative. The outcome hinges on the capacity of institutions and political actors to manage the transition peacefully and constructively.

Generational politics emphasises the role of differing political attitudes and priorities across age cohorts. Younger voters, who form an increasing proportion of the electorate in Southern Africa, often have distinct political experiences and expectations compared to older generations (Resnick and Casale 2014; Schulz-Hezenberg 2019; Tsandzana 2022; Masunda 2024). Unlike their predecessors, younger voters did not directly participate in or vividly recall the liberation struggles and thus, are less inclined to be bound by historical loyalties or the "liberation dividend". Instead, their political engagement is frequently driven by present-day concerns, such as the demand for tangible service delivery, economic opportunities and accountability from their leaders. This generational shift in political values and priorities contributes significantly to the erosion of traditional support bases for liberation movements and fuels electoral realignments, forcing parties to adapt or face further decline.

4. Findings

This section presents a comparative analysis of four nations, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Namibia and Mozambique, illustrating how varying patterns of erosion in liberation hegemony, driven by distinct political, socio-economic, and generational factors, have produced diverse implications for party system stability, governance and democratic prospects.

Table 1: Vote shares over time for the ANC, ZANU-PF, SWAPO and FRELIMO

Liberation Movement	Founding or Early Election Year (Independence or First Major Post-Independence Election)	Vote Share in Founding / Early Election (%)	Most Recent Election Year	Vote Share in Most Recent Election (%)
ANC (South Africa)	1994	62.65 %	2024	40.18 %
ZANU-PF (Zimbabwe)	1980	57.0 %	2023	56.18 %
SWAPO (Namibia)	1989	57.33 %	2024	53.37 %
FRELIMO (Mozambique)	1977 (one-party system)	100 % (no opposition)	2024	70-75 % regionally in some contested areas; national figures (data less precise)

Source: Electoral management bodies for the respective countries

4.1. Zimbabwe (ZANU-PF)

ZANU-PF exemplifies a liberation movement that has largely maintained its electoral dominance through a combination of coercive and manipulative strategies. The pattern of ZANU-PF's sustained rule is characterised by the strategic manipulation of state resources, widespread voter intimidation and the entrenchment of patronage networks, particularly within rural constituencies. In the urban areas, ZANU PF has, since 2000 to date, continually lost local government and parliamentary elections. Despite frequent economic crises and highly contested elections, ZANU-PF has consistently leveraged these mechanisms to secure disputed victories.

ZANU-PF's enduring power in Zimbabwe stems from multiple interconnected mechanisms that have created a resilient authoritarian system. The party's dominance is anchored by a militarised electoral authoritarianism, where the military serves as the primary guarantor of regime survival through an executive-military alliance that deploys violence and coercive measures to maintain control (Bratton and Masunungure 2008; Masunungure 2011; Moyo and Ncube 2015; Maringira 2024). The executive-military alliance has created a competitive authoritarian regime that uses violence and intimidation to maintain power regardless of electoral outcomes (Moyo and Ncube 2015). Even during COVID-19, the government exploited health measures to further consolidate authoritarian rule (Yingi and Hlungwani 2024). This system is reinforced by systematic corruption and the strategic distribution of state resources, with the ZANU-PF maintaining extensive patronage networks and abusing public resources to secure electoral advantages (Bratton and Masunungure 2008; Ndakaripa 2020). The party's liberation credentials provide ideological justification for perpetual rule, supported by strong organisational cohesion forged through violent struggle (Levitsky and Way 2012; Mangongera 2014). However, some scholars identify potential vulnerabilities, including declining elite cohesion and the emergence of independent candidates from within the ZANU-PF itself (Sithole and Makumbe 1997).

The implications of this pattern for democratic consolidation are intensely negative. Entrenched authoritarian practices actively hinder the democratic process, manifesting in restricted civil liberties, limited media access for opposition voices, and documented instances of violent suppression against political dissent. This environment undermines the foundational principles of free and fair elections, the rule of law and institutional checks and balances, thereby delaying or preventing genuine democratic consolidation in Zimbabwe. Research demonstrates that a network of political elites has systematically worked to prevent democratic consolidation through deliberate disregard of constitutionalism, politicisation of state institutions and protection of politically connected persons (Bvekerwa et al. 2025). Elections have been consistently marred by violence, intimidation and killings, creating an environment incompatible with democratic governance (Zinyama 2012). The ruling party has enacted restrictive legislation that curtails civil liberties and limits participatory spaces, often reincarnating colonial-era laws to suppress opposition (Mapuva and Muyengwa 2017). Civic space is now legally constricted with the enactment of the Maintenance of Peace and order Act (MOPA), Private Voluntary Organisations (PVO) Bill, with the latter imposing onerous registration requirements and grants authorities' powers to suspend or deregister civil society organisations, thereby, undermining their fundamental rights and operational capacity. Media freedom remains severely constrained, contributing to a narrowing democratic culture (Tsarwe 2020).

4.2. South Africa (ANC)

The ANC in South Africa presents a contrasting pattern, moving from a position of undeniable liberation hegemony in the immediate post-apartheid era to facing historic electoral declines, particularly evident in the 2024 elections. This shift reflects a gradual and significant realignment in political preferences, signalling an erosion of trust that has accumulated over years.

Research on South Africa's electoral politics reveals a pattern of declining ANC support driven by multiple interconnected factors. Corruption scandals and poor governance have severely eroded public trust in government institutions, creating a direct relationship between declining electoral fortunes and institutional trust deficits (Rapanyane 2021; Tsheola and Sebola 2023). Service delivery failures at local levels significantly influence voter behaviour, with the ANC experiencing losses due to perceived inadequate performance (De Kadt and Lieberman 2017; Justesen and Schulz-Herzenberg 2018). High unemployment rates compound public grievances, particularly affecting younger demographics (Cilliers and Aucoin 2016; Rapanyane 2021). Generational shifts are evident as "born-free" voters demonstrate weaker partisan attachments and evaluate parties based on contemporary performance rather than historical legacy (Engel 2014; Braun 2024). This has resulted in "thin loyalty" among ANC supporters who continue voting, despite dissatisfaction (Braun 2024), while voting decisions increasingly vary by demographics and performance evaluations (Paret 2018).

Factionalism has also largely impacted the ANC's electoral performance and organisational integrity. Disputes within the ANC led to party splits, most notably the formation of political parties The Congress of People (COPE) and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), which emerged from internal ANC conflicts (Sarakinsky and Fakir 2015). At the local level, factionalism has often involved both party elites and ordinary members competing for resources in constrained socio-economic conditions (Mukwedeya 2015). Factional conflicts have intensified, characterised by fraud, violence and increased court interventions that undermine candidate selection processes (Cooper 2015). These challenges have escalated gatekeeper politics, patronage networks and bitter factional struggles that compromise the party's organisational integrity and electoral mandate delivery (Beresford 2015). The emergence of the uMkhonto weSizwe (MK) party, formed by former ANC president Jacob Zuma, saw the new party severely dent the performance of the ANC in the 2024 elections, with the ANC, for the first time since 1994, attaining 40.2 per cent of the vote and forced into a coalition government.

This ANC decline has altered South Africa's politics, ending three decades of dominant-party governance and necessitating coalition arrangements (Everatt 2024; Noutchie 2025). The formation of coalitions, particularly evident in municipalities since 2016, reflects both opportunities and challenges for democratic governance (Thwala 2023; Gumede et al. 2025). In some cases, coalition governments have offered benefits including democratic consolidation, enhanced pluralism and expanded resource bases for governing parties (Gumede et al. 2025). On the other hand, they also present significant risks of instability, policy fragmentation and governance paralysis due to ideological divergences and the absence of formal coalition protocols (Labuschagne 2018; Noutchie 2025). The ANC's transformation from a dominant party to coalition partner marks a critical juncture that could either strengthen democratic institutions through increased accountability or undermine effective governance through political fragmentation (Southall 2014; Everatt 2024).

4.3. Namibia (SWAPO)

In Namibia, SWAPO exhibits a pattern of gradual decline in support, notably marked by the loss of its two-thirds parliamentary majority following the 2020 elections. This represents a shift from its historical dominance and indicates an emerging fragility in its once unassailable position.

Since independence, SWAPO has effectively operated as a *de facto* one-party state, with limited citizen participation leading to political apathy (Bertelsmann-Scott 2000; Melber 2015). The party's transformation from liberation movement to governing party has been marked by authoritarian tendencies and predatory behaviour, disappointing supporters who expected genuine democratic transformation (Southall 2013). Historical tensions within SWAPO, including the suppression of internal dissent in the 1970s, foreshadowed later democratic deficits (Leys and Saul 1994). Most significantly, the 2019 elections marked a turning point, with SWAPO recording its first loss in voter support since independence, suggesting shifting political ground and potential changes in Namibia's democratic landscape (Melber 2020). Despite constitutional guarantees, Namibia remains among the world's most unequal societies, with limited improvements in wellbeing for the majority population (Melber 2015). The decline of SWAPO is attributable to several key drivers. High-profile corruption scandals, such as the infamous "Fishrot" bribery case, have severely damaged the standing and credibility of SWAPO's leadership in the eyes of the electorate. A younger electorate, increasingly disconnected from the historical narrative of SWAPO's liberation struggle, feels alienated from the party, seeking solutions to contemporary challenges rather than revering past achievements. Persistent economic stagnation,

characterised by rising unemployment and pervasive inequality, further fuels this discontent and contributes to the erosion of SWAPO's popular support.

The implications of these shifts are largely positive for democratic development, as they open up space for a more competitive democratic framework to emerge. The reduction of SWAPO's dominant majority encourages greater parliamentary scrutiny and potentially more vibrant political contestation. Nevertheless, this transition also carries the inherent risk of increased political fractiousness and challenges to political cohesion, as a more fragmented political landscape may struggle to build consensus and implement stable governance.

4.4. Mozambique (FRELIMO)

FRELIMO, in Mozambique, maintains formal dominance, yet its legitimacy has been significantly eroded by scandals such as the hidden debt crisis and the ongoing insurgent conflict in the northern regions. This suggests a pattern where outward control masks internal fragilities and growing public distrust.

FRELIMO's continued dominance in Mozambique stems from systematic control over electoral institutions and authoritarian practices that have persisted since the 1990s democratisation. The party has intimidated opposition parties through its control of electoral governance institutions, creating skewed incentive structures that compromise democratic competition (Nuvunga and Salih 2013). This dominance has been facilitated by a weak and fragmented opposition, with RENAMO (a Mozambique political party) experiencing significant vote losses since 2004 and struggling to adapt from a rebellion movement to an effective political party (Azevedo-Harman 2014; Nuvunga 2014). FRELIMO employs various authoritarian strategies including electoral manipulation, suppression of dissent, media control and election-related violence to maintain power (Pitcher 2020; Weston et al. 2025). Despite allegations of electoral fraud and governance failures, including inability to address insurgencies and debt transparency issues, these challenges have not translated into significant electoral shifts (Manning 2010; Monjane and Pitcher 2022;). In 2024, following the presidential elections in Mozambique, youthful mass protests against the alleged electoral fraud perpetrated by the ruling party FRELIMO erupted. This resulted in Mozambique's transformation from a vibrant two-party system to a dominant-party system characterised by declining democratic institutions. Furthermore, the opposition coalitions remain weak and largely ineffective in consolidating power or presenting a unified, credible alternative to FRELIMO's rule.

The implications for democratic consolidation in Mozambique are that it remains inhibited. FRELIMO has adapted to emerging opposition by reinforcing authoritarian measures, rather than embracing democratic reforms. This limits electoral realignment, as the political machinery heavily favours FRELIMO's control, making it exceedingly difficult for opposition parties to challenge its hegemony effectively. Consequently, the trajectory toward genuine democratic consolidation remains stalled, characterised by superficial electoral processes, rather than substantive democratic deepening.

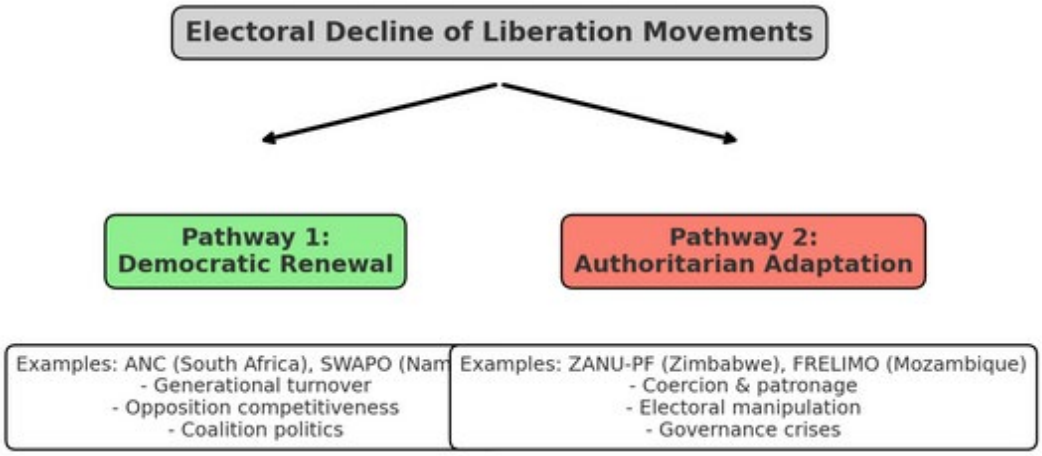
Table 2. Cross-case comparative analysis

Liberation Party	Pattern of Decline	Key Determinants	Implications for Democratic Consolidation
ZANU-PF (Zimbabwe)	Maintains dominance through repression, patronage and manipulation; legitimacy crisis persists.	Authoritarian resilience, rural clientelism, corruption, unresolved liberation narrative, youth disengagement.	Weakens democracy; entrenches authoritarianism and sustains electoral authoritarian rule.
ANC (South Africa)	Sharp electoral decline, lost outright majority in 2024; liberation dividend eroded.	Corruption scandals, unemployment, service delivery collapse, inequality, generational turnover.	Opens space for pluralism and coalition politics; risks instability and fragmented governance.
SWAPO (Namibia)	Gradual erosion since 2019; lost two-thirds majority in 2020.	Corruption scandals (Fishrot), economic stagnation, generational shifts, urban voter discontent.	Encourages competitiveness and pluralism; risks fragmentation and incoherent opposition.
FRELIMO (Mozambique)	Formal dominance declining, but legitimacy undermined by hidden debt scandal and insurgency.	Debt scandal, governance failures, authoritarian adaptation, violent conflict.	Stalls democratic consolidation; authoritarian adaptation blocks reform.

5. Discussion

The decline of former liberation movements across Southern Africa presents a multidimensional scenario for democratic consolidation, marked by contradictory routes ranging from democratic deepening to authoritarian resilience. This phenomenon is not monolithic; rather, it is shaped by a confluence of political, socio-economic and generational factors, which, in turn, influence the capacity of opposition forces and the stability of party systems.

Figure 1. Two pathways of liberation movement decline in Southern Africa



In cases like the ANC in South Africa and SWAPO in Namibia, the erosion of electoral dominance has led to a democratic opening, raising greater political competition and potential for democratic deepening. This process is characterised by a gradual, but discernible shift in voter loyalties and an increase in the political efficacy of opposition parties. In contrast, the ZANU-PF in Zimbabwe and FRELIMO in Mozambique have demonstrated authoritarian resilience, despite declining popular support. This resilience often involves leveraging state resources, employing coercive tactics and manipulating electoral processes to maintain power, thereby leading to democratic stagnation or even backsliding.

Several explanatory factors contribute to these varying patterns. Common to the decline of many former liberation movements are issues such as widespread corruption, which erodes public trust and legitimacy, and significant generational changes, where younger voters do not share the same historical allegiance to the liberation struggle as their predecessors (Southall 2011; Melber 2014;). However, divergent factors also play a notable role. The degree to which former liberation movements resort to coercion and the strength and unity of opposition movements are key determinants of whether electoral realignments lead to democratic progress or authoritarian entrenchment. In Zimbabwe, for example, the state's capacity for repression and the fragmentation of opposition forces have historically hindered democratic transitions despite significant discontent with ZANU-PF (Hove 2019). Conversely, the relative institutional strength and established democratic norms in South Africa have provided avenues for opposition parties to gain ground, even if they have not yet fully dislodged the ANC from power (Southall 2016).

The implications for democratic consolidation are regionally varied. In countries like South Africa and Namibia where democratic openings have occurred; there is evidence of democratic deepening. This involves increased electoral competition and the strengthening of democratic institutions, greater accountability and enhanced civic participation. The ANC's declining vote share, for example, has forced it to engage more substantively with coalition politics and public demands, raising a more dynamic democratic environment (Booysen 2014; Lodge 2020). This process, while challenging, suggests that the decline of FLM hegemony can indeed lead to democratic renewal.

However, the experience of Zimbabwe and Mozambique highlights a dimmer side, characterised by democratic stagnation or backsliding. Here, the former liberation movements have often responded to declining support by tightening their grip on power, undermining democratic institutions and limiting political freedoms (Dorman 2006; Gumede 2017). This authoritarian resilience suggests that the legacy of liberation, once a source of legitimacy, can also be instrumentalised to justify exclusionary and undemocratic practices. In these contexts, electoral realignments do not necessarily translate into a democratic dividend, but rather into intensified struggles between incumbent authoritarian forces and emerging democratic aspirations.

For the Southern African region, the legacy of liberation no longer guarantees perpetual electoral dominance. The political outcomes following the decline of former liberation movements are increasingly shaped by the interaction of institutional strength and opposition

capacity. Strong democratic institutions, an independent judiciary and a vibrant civil society can help channel electoral realignments towards democratic deepening. Conversely, weak institutions and a fragmented opposition create fertile ground for authoritarian entrenchment.

The theoretical insights derived from the noted political shifts suggest that the liberation legacy functions as both a source of dominance and a vulnerability. Initially, the historical narrative of national liberation provides immense political capital, nurturing a sense of unity and moral authority that can sustain electoral victories for decades. However, this same legacy can become a vulnerability when former liberation movements fail to address contemporary challenges such as corruption, economic inequality and governance deficits. As generations shift and historical memory fades, the liberation narrative loses its potency, creating space for new political actors and ideologies.

This brings forth a pertinent normative question: Does liberation decline equate to democratic renewal or democratic crisis? The evidence suggests that it can be both. Where institutions are robust and civil society is strong, the decline of former liberation movements can catalyse democratic renewal by encouraging greater competition and accountability. However, in contexts where institutions are fragile and political culture remains susceptible to authoritarian tendencies, the decline can precipitate a democratic crisis, as incumbents resort to undemocratic means to retain power.

These shifts also carry significant implications for regional politics within the Southern African Development Community and the African Union. The varying democratic trajectories among member states create tensions within regional bodies that are ostensibly committed to democratic principles (this was seen with the 2023 elections in Zimbabwe). The divergent experiences of democratic deepening in some nations and authoritarian resilience in others (Zimbabwe and Zambia, for instance) challenge the notion of a cohesive regional approach to democracy and governance. Furthermore, the internal political stability of Southern African nations directly impacts regional security, economic integration and the overall credibility of regional organisations on the global stage. For instance, prolonged political crises or democratic backsliding in a key member state can destabilise neighbouring countries through refugee flows, economic disruption and security threats.

6. Conclusion

The current study demonstrates that the decline of former liberation movements in Southern Africa is an undeniable reality, yet, its consequences for democratic consolidation are highly varied across the region. This research has delineated a spectrum of paths, from democratic opening in contexts such as South Africa and Namibia, characterised by increased political competition and accountability, to persistent authoritarian resilience in countries like Zimbabwe and Mozambique, where former liberation movements maintain power through coercive tactics and institutional manipulation. This divergence is primarily attributable to a combination of common explanatory factors, including corruption and generational shifts in political allegiance, and divergent factors such as the varying strength of opposition parties and the degree of state coercion employed by incumbent regimes.

This study extends existing theories on dominant party decline and democratic consolidation by applying them specifically to post-liberation contexts in Southern Africa. While previous literature has explored party system institutionalisation and its importance for democratic functioning, this research highlights how the unique historical legitimacy of former liberation movements can both entrench their dominance and over time, expose vulnerabilities to contemporary socio-economic grievances and changing demographic pressures. The findings highlight that a liberation legacy, while initially a powerful unifying force, does not guarantee indefinite electoral hegemony and can, in fact, become a source of contention as new political actors emerge and societal priorities evolve.

Future research should prioritise several interconnected areas to deepen the understanding of Southern Africa's evolving political landscape. Firstly, further investigation into coalition politics, particularly at the municipal and national levels, is key, as the declining dominance of former liberation movements increasingly necessitates power-sharing arrangements. Secondly, youth realignment warrants further investigation, examining how generational political attitudes and voter behaviour diverge from older cohorts and their implications for long-term party support. Such generational shifts can be pivotal in Southern African contexts. Thirdly, understanding the strategies of authoritarian adaptation employed by resilient former liberation movements is essential to predict and counter democratic backsliding.

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A Mission of Transformation: The ANC's Historical Project Turned One-Party Demise

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1. Introduction

Beginning in 2007 and peaking in 2023, South Africa experienced country-wide rolling blackouts as the public power utility, ESKOM, was unable to "keep the lights on". ESKOM's failure to perform, like many other state-owned enterprises (SOEs), was symptomatic of years of mismanagement, corruption and maintenance-neglect as the institution, its management and board were filled with party loyalists. Typical of dominant party systems, the ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC), captured state institutions and its resources utilising the strategy of cadre deployment. The ANC justified its capturing of the state under the guise of its historical mission of "transformation", attempting to place itself beyond public scrutiny. The dominant party system would characterise the South African political landscape between 1994 and 2024. This ended with the May 2024 national elections, as the ANC's support declined to 40 per cent compelling the party to form a Government of National Unity (GNU).

To be considered a 'dominant party', the ruling party must consecutively win four or more national elections under democratic conditions (Du Toit and De Jager 2013: 8–10). The party's election and re-election are, thus, characterised by predictability. The ANC won six consecutive national elections up until 2024. To analyse the rise and decline of the ANC's dominance the resource theory of Kenneth F. Greene (2007) is used. According to Greene (2007), a dominant party can sustain and consolidate its dominance if it can employ an acquiescent bureaucracy, and gain access to and control over state-owned resources. Gaining access to state resources enables the party to control both government and state and in doing so, determine both policy and the polity (De Jager and Steenekamp 2016). This ensures the almost unfettered use of state resources for party ends. However, Greene (2007) also identifies that dominance can decline, notably with the professionalisation of the bureaucracy and the privatisation of formerly SOEs.

Through the case study of the consolidation of the ANC's dominance between 1994 and 2024, and subsequent decline, this article adds to Greene's theory, concluding that while a compliant bureaucracy and state expansion might initially entrench dominance, it is also the source of its eventual demise. A core basis of the ANC's longevity in power—deploying party loyalists into all levers of the state and establishing a party partisan bureaucracy—was also the seed of its own destruction. It can be argued that the ANC's partisan governance (using the state for party ends through deploying party loyalists rather than merit-based appointments), placed party interests over public interests, and produced dysfunctional institutions, unravelled trust and diminished social support. The ANC's decline in support, indicates the former ruling party receiving its just desserts—being punished at the ballot box. The current evidence of professionalisation and privatisation within the state sector, is still in the early stages. Thus, the ANC lost its position of dominance, rather due to society's response to the consequences of partisan governance.

This article explores the above issues, asking: What accounts for the ANC's dominance from 1994 until 2024?[1] And what explains the ANC's recent decline? To better understand the ANC's approach and strategies, its national conference proceedings are analysed. While the ANC leadership is elected at the national conference, this is also the forum where the party's policies are discussed and tabled. The documents emanating from these conferences, thus, help to understand the sources and aims of its historical mission of "transformation" and strategy of deploying cadres. Furthermore, firsthand accounts of the party's cadre deployment policy and its consequences are derived from the Zondo Commission Report. The Zondo Commission Report released by the former Public Protector, Thuli Madonsela, documented the outcome of the investigation of state capture between 2009 and 2018, under the Zuma-administration. It consisted of the testimonies of various political officials who provide insight into gross misconduct, personal partisanship, and cronyism during South Africa's so-called nine wasted years. This report will be used to unpack what happened at two SOEs—ESKOM and Transnet. These cases are presented as illustrations of how an acquiescent bureaucracy and the politicisation of state-owned resources were achieved through cadre deployment and its subsequent consequences. And thereafter, to trace levels of (dis)trust in societal support for the ANC, survey data

[1] It must be acknowledged that while the ANC's support has declined, the combined "liberation movement vote" in 2024 which includes the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), the newly formed uMkhonto weSizwe (MK Party) and the ANC, was still at the 1994 level. The EFF and MK are both breakaway parties from the ANC.

from Afrobarometer is used. Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan survey research network that collects data on topics related to democracy and governance through regular surveys.

This article is set out as follows: Greene's resource theory and the dominant party system are explained. "Transformation"—the mantra used to justify the ANC's increased state control and use of cadre deployment is presented. Thereafter, the party's capturing of two SOEs—ESKOM and Transnet—is discussed; considering how an acquiescent bureaucracy through cadre deployment was setup and how the SOEs were in-turn, politicised for private and party gain. Lastly, it is argued that the ANC had, through repurposing the state and SOEs for partisan party ends and not for public benefit, set in motion its own eventual demise.

2. A theory of party dominance: Consolidation and decline

There are recognised criteria in the literature identifying one-party dominance. These include: uninterrupted incumbency (Pempel 1990; Greene 2010) in the context of electoral competition (Sartori 2005); and the to-be dominant party winning its initial election during a time of heightened political change (Levite and Tarrow 1983; Mozaffar 2006). In South Africa, the ANC won six consecutive national elections (see Table 1.1). It has done so in an ostensibly democratic nation-state, as the nation scored 7,05 on the democratic index, making it a flawed democracy (World Population Review 2024). Furthermore, the ANC won its first national election at the end of apartheid during South Africa's transition to democracy. This ripe moment acted as a catalyst for its dominance (Di Palma 1990), as the ANC gained symbolic credibility from presenting itself as the nation's liberator and leader of political change.

Table 1.1 ANC's percentage of vote share and number of seats in the National Assembly, 1994–2024

Year	1994	1999	2004	2009	2014	2019	2024
% of Vote Count	62,6	66,6	69,7	65,9	62,1	57,5	40,2
Seats Obtained	252	226	279	264	249	230	159
Total Seats	400	400	400	400	400	400	400

Source: Adapated from IEC Results Dashboard for National Elections, 1994–2024 available at https://www.elections.org.za/pw/

Party dominance is by no means unique to South Africa. Greene (2007) in his seminal book, *Why dominant parties lose: Mexico's democratization in comparative perspective*, studied the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) which held uninterrupted political power in Mexico from 1929 until 2000. Greene (2007) studied the PRI to understand its political endurance in the face of a competitive electoral system, and then its eventual decline. The author noted that once a dominant party had gained access to an SOE and established an acquiescent bureaucracy, it could repurpose state-owned resources for party ends and hence, maintain one-party dominance. An acquiescent bureaucracy means that party loyalists are dispersed into the public (state) sector to ensure loyalty to the ruling party and as a means of curtailing the measures of accountability. Sustained dominance was, thus, dependent on the politicisation of public resources—institutions and people. Greene (2010) identified four ways in which the incumbent maintained its dominance:[2] repurposing state resources for party ends; enlarging the state sector; using public agencies for political campaigning and making local businesses complicit in maintaining its dominance. The latter goes beyond the public and into the private sphere. Local businesses may decide to strategically comply with the dominant party in the hopes that they can secure business offers that relate to SOEs. If a local business offers financial support to the dominant party, the latter will potentially offer the former economic protection and access to state contracts (Greene 2010). This mutually benefiting relationship between the local business sector and the dominant party enables the former to sustain its business even under highly regulated and constrained economic conditions, while providing the latter with both financial and electoral support, ultimately sustaining its dominance.

[2] It should be noted that the literature on party dominance is broad. Other explanations for one-party dominance, include a weakened or weak opposition, and voter behaviour. The arguments include that opposition parties are weakened due to resource disparity and an unfair playing field (Levitsky and Way 2010). The incumbent party, thus, has resources and institutional advantages over opposition parties (Pempel 1990; Mtimkulu 2006; De Jager and Meintjies 2013; Langfield 2014). However, opposition parties can themselves be weak due to poor electioneering decisions such as, but not limited to, their campaigning and political positions (Sebudubudu and Osei-Hwedie 2010; Mbete 2024). In addition, voter behaviour has been argued to explain party dominance through its sociological, sociopsychological and rational choice models (Dalton and Wattenberg 1993; Popkin 1994; Magaloni 2006). Taking weak and weakened opposition and voting behaviour into consideration as party dominance explanations, Greene's (2007) resource theory offers an explanation that speaks to and goes beyond these explanations. It identifies that the dominant party's hyper access to state-owned resources enable it to have unfair electoral advantages, which both weaken and result in weak opposition due to resource disadvantages and decision-making limitations. In turn, resource advantages attract voters, because the dominant party is perceived to be the best resourced to realise voters' political aspirations.

The theoretical framework of Greene (2007) furthermore identifies that dominant parties tend to lose their dominance when their access to state-owned resources is reduced. This means that the decline of one-party dominance is inversely proportional to having availability to state-owned resources. Sustaining the political economy of dominance requires that incumbents resist pressures to liberalise their economies (Greene 2007). This speaks to the relationship between resource monopoly and political monopoly. It also explains why dominant party systems were more prevalent before the 1980s shift towards free markets. It may also explain why the dominant party system remains prevalent in many southern African countries where the free-market system is constrained and the economies are weak, thus, making the state the key holder of resources. On the other hand, access to state-owned resources is lessened through liberalising the economy, professionalising the bureaucracy and privatising SOEs. Professionalism is the transformation of occupations to make them independent professions characterised by formal education requirements, forming professional identities and associations, with a code of professional rules and ethics and performance reviews (Mathonsi et al. 2012). Professionalism creates a public sector system based on merit, whereby citizens are served by professionally qualified individuals instead of those who are politically vested (Jarbandhan 2022). Privatisation and professionalisation encourage the separation of public administration and ruling party and the separation between the public and the private spheres, as local businesses are less beholden to the ruling party for access to limited resources. Hence, one-party dominance declines as the state can no longer be repurposed to sustain partisan party and narrow private ends. For Greene (2007), privatisation best explains the reduction in the dominant party's access to SOEs and therefore, the decline of one-party dominance.

3. "Transformation": The ANC's mantra for gaining access to and politicising the public sector

Democratic South Africa inherited an ethnically partisan apartheid-designed public sector. The public sector was filled by white Afrikaners, who in turn, ensured that the state's budget and policies favoured a specific ethnic group—white South Africans. It was, thus, a statist system characterised by partisan governance. During the apartheid era, so-called homelands[3] handled public service delivery differently (Gumede 2015). Specific ethnic groups provided public service in these homelands, whilst the apartheid government prioritised public service in areas that located the minority white populace (Gumede 2015). This led to Black communities receiving an inferior quality of service delivery compared to that in white communities (Nkoana, et al. 2024). Following the transition to democracy, which began in the early 1990s, the much-needed changes in the public administration enabled the ANC to set itself up as the champion of public sector reform or transformation. At its 50th National Conference, the ANC (1997) argued for 'the transformation of the old machinery' which 'should see the location of the motive forces of the revolution at the helm of the state'. The ANC (1997) goes on to identify itself as 'the vanguard of all these motive forces of the NDR'. The democratic transition and its victory at the 1994 elections thus enabled the ANC to position state institutions to implement the South African Communist Party (SACP) backed National Democratic Revolution (NDR). The SACP confirmed this at its 2022 National Conference: 'The April 1994 democratic breakthrough opened the prospects for a new, radical phase of the national democratic revolution, our strategy for democratic transformation and development towards socialism' (Mashilo 2022).

Since the 1960s the SACP has had considerable influence over the ANC (Myburgh 2017). The ANC adopted the Communist Party's programme of *Strategies and Tactics* with the goal of a National Democratic Revolution (NDR) at the Morogoro conference in 1969 (Filatova and Davidson 2017). The NDR was developed in the Soviet Union in the late 1950s as a two-stage revolution, first liberation, then socialism, to justify its support of Africa's bourgeois liberation movements. If the end goal was the adoption of socialism, then the Soviet Union could overlook the educated, middle-class composition of the liberation movements. The 1980s saw the decline of the Soviet Union and in 1991 its eventual collapse with the NDR being presumed fruitless (Filatova 2012). Despite this, the ANC and SACP have persisted with the NDR as the "transformation" project for South Africa (ANC 2017, 2022).

Recognising this strong communist influence helps to make sense of the ANC's determination to persist with the NDR, despite its deeply flawed outcomes. The party is, thus, not unlike other communist parties such as the Socialist Unity Party (SED) of the former German Democratic Republic, which considered themselves to be on a 'historical mission' (Schöne 2024: 11). In such systems there was "no room for doubt" or even self-doubt, let alone criticism from outside parties. The mission needed to be fulfilled. Like the SED, the ANC fashions itself to be the vanguard party, assigned to lead the way forward without any alternative. This thinking remains evident in the ANC leadership today.

[3] Homelands were areas set aside for Black South Africans to supposedly self-govern and eventually have independence (Maharaj n.d). It was an apartheid policy initiative aimed at ensuring white supremacy in South Africa (Maharaj n.d).

More than three decades into South Africa's democracy the NDR remains the 'shared theory of fundamental change' according to the President of South Africa and the ANC, Cyril Ramaphosa (2024). In typical Soviet-style, the NDR calls for the deployment of loyalists (cadres) and the centralising of all power around the state. The historical mission for both the SACP and the ANC has been to remove any impediments to its final goal of socialism. Framing 'transformation' as redressing past injustices towards 'a united, non-racial, non-sexist, democratic and prosperous nation' (Ramaphosa 2024), has provided a morally-based motivation for extensive state control that is difficult to contend with. This transformation is euphemistically shrouded in calls for redress due to South Africa's racialised past, effectively protecting it from criticism. In his 2024 speech at the 113th anniversary of the ANC, Ramaphosa (2024) called those who resist the ANC as 'counter-revolutionary' and opposition parties that hinder the ANC's control over the majority of the voter share as 'as forces ... to deprive the ANC of the ability to use state power to effect change'. Ramaphosa (2024) goes on to argue that 'to pursue the NDR effectively, the democratic movement needs to have a decisive influence over the state and a clear mandate to govern in pursuit of fundamental change', finally exclaiming: 'Without state power, the NDR will not succeed'. The NDR, with its end goal of socialism, is the transformation envisaged by the ANC. Control of state power and cadre deployment are then touted as the means of achieving this "transformation".

3.1. Cadre deployment: Deploying party loyalists into the public and private sectors

Cadre deployment, the placement of loyal party members into key state positions (Booysen 2011; Twala 2012), has enabled the ANC to gain access to and control over the state and state-owned enterprises. In 1997, the ANC ratified the cadre deployment strategy at its Mafikeng conference, providing for the 'deployment of ANC cadres to all areas which the movement regards as crucial for the transformation project' (Politicsweb 1998). The party used the goal of transformation to justify the deployment of party loyalists into all sectors of the South African society (Myburgh 2016). The strategy has resulted in the establishment of an extensive client-patron network using state resources.

Various public policies have since been enacted through the legislature, dominated by ANC members of parliament, to enable the deployment of cadres into the public service, as well as into the private sector. For example, the *White Paper on Affirmative Action in the Public Service* and the *Employment Equity Act* adopted in 1998 were justified based on transformation, arguably to make the public sector and the workplace more racially representative (Myburgh 2016). This inevitably led to the state being enlarged and politicised. The state was politicised by granting political affiliates key positions, repurposing state institutions and resources meant for public use, instead for the political sustainability of the ruling party. Furthermore, "redress" policies for the private sector, such as Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) have served to enrich those politically-connected to the ANC (Gumede 2025). These policies have thus, created client-patron networks that have extended beyond the public sector and into the private sector.

The use of cadre deployment ensured that the political party could fulfil its aspiration of state control through lessening measures of accountability and possible hindrances associated with opposition. Cadres are expected to display loyalty toward their deployers (Booysen 2011; Twala 2014; Gumede 2015; Mlambo 2023). For example, the ANC granted members of the Tripartite Alliance (the SACP and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU)) key state positions (Fredericks and De Jager, 2022). In turn, these organisations campaign for the ANC during election time (Southall 2017). This makes it likely that cadres will display favouritism or loyalty toward those who placed them in their job positions and hence, indicates the opportunistic behaviour associated with cadre deployment. Consequences include the entrenching of dominance (Twala 2014), the erosion of accountability as cadres become answerable to the political elite or party that deployed them instead of the public, and an acquiescent bureaucracy. An acquiescent bureaucracy implies that civil servants become compliant to those who deploy them (Gumede 2015).

4. Capturing the state for party ends: The repurposing of two SOEs

South Africa's state sector is large. Its large size is partly a function of the government's developmental agenda with the emphasis on the state to address the nation-state's triple challenge of inequality, poverty and unemployment (Kleynhaus and Coetzee 2019) as opposed to a free market economy. As a result, South Africa has become economically, partly unfree (The Heritage Foundation 2023). The nation-state was ranked 111 out of 184 nation-states and scored 55,3 per cent on the Economic Freedom Index, due to extensive state regulations and labour market inflexibility (The Heritage Foundation 2023). Despite unsustainable levels of unemployment, between 32 and 40 per cent (depending on whether the official or broader definition is used), and lacklustre levels of growth of below 1 per cent, the ANC has resisted changes which would release small- and medium-sized businesses to grow and create jobs or ensure an environment which would attract investors. Instead, it doggedly pursues policies that support state intervention and regulation such as highly redistributive social spending (Inchauste et al. 2015), employment equity, BEE), land reform, the state ownership of mineral and water resources and extensive labour legislation (IRR 2024). This has, in-turn, created a system of dependency on the state. Many citizens see the ANC as the political party that provides for their social needs through grant distribution (Braun 2024). Hence, blurring the line between state and governing party, as citizens perceive the ANC party as the distributor of resources instead of the public state.

The conflation of state and governing party is a common practice for dominant parties (Mukwedeya 2021). If a dominant party can successfully capture a historical project (for example, redress after apartheid) and present itself as the solution to socio-economic challenges, that is, to use these powerful narratives to reinforce its public policy of state control, it can create enduring dominance (Pempel 1999). The ANC has done this through its creation and implementation of transformation and social welfare policies arguing for them based on redressing apartheid injustices—a powerful invocation. These policies have not only enabled the ANC to cadre deploy, but has garnered support from those reliant on the said policies. Moreover, those who receive social welfare tend to accredit it to the ANC, as opposed to the taxpayers and the state.

The ANC's control of the state went as far as state capture. State capture is the term that describes the severity of corruption regarding the repurposing of state resources for party and personal ends, and the Zondo Commission provides the best account of how it took place. State capture encompasses the actions of individuals or collectives in the public and private sectors aimed at influencing decrees, regulations, law formation and other government policies for self-interest (and party interest) (Martin and Soloman 2016.). It was the systematic reduction of checks and balances to enable the use of state resources for party and private ends. The personal-political tie between the Indian-Born Gupta family and the ANC—particularly ex-President Jacob Zuma, who epitomises state capture. Moreover, the Zondo Commission (Zondo 2022a) identified that ex-president Jacob Zuma was effectively controlled by the Gupta family. Rajesh "Tony" Gupta, at one of the Gupta's infamous residences, personally said that Zuma was willing to do anything his family instructed (Zondo, 2022a). This was particularly evident with the alarming rate at which ministers were removed and replaced. When the Gupta family instructed Zuma to remove and replace a minister with one that would be more co-operative, he complied (Zondo 2022a). When Zuma became president, he initially appointed Barabra Hogan as Minister of Public Enterprise (Zondo 2022c). In the Zondo Commission (Zondo 2022c), Hogan testified that Zuma allowed political corruption, lack of accountability and nepotism in all state bodies and he improperly and recklessly interfered in matters relating to the appointment of Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) and Boards of Directors at SOEs. Hogan was initially replaced by Malusi Gigaba, however, at the insistence of Ajay Gupta, Gigaba would subsequently be replaced by Lynn Brown in 2015 (Zondo 2022c).

The Zondo Commission identifies how state capturers were able to: capture parts of the independent media, were complicit in corruption, reduce parliamentary oversight, appoint willing corroborates in key state positions and elude law enforcement (Momoniat 2023). State capture occurred in several SOEs, however, for this article ESKOM and Transnet are given focus.

4.1. Cadre deployment and politicisation of Transnet and ESKOM

SOEs are state-owned businesses, with the government as the largest shareholder (Greene 2010). Many SOEs have a direct impact on the lives of citizens, because they create infrastructure and deliver services. Ministers (executives) are tasked with ensuring the smooth running of SOEs to the best of their ability. They are to exercise government oversight and ensure efficient and effective service delivery (Du Toit 2005). The President of South Africa appoints members from the National Assembly (NA) in ministerial and deputy ministerial positions (Parliamentary Monitoring Group 2024). Under the Zuma administration ministers were handpicked for the purpose of party and personal endowment. Ex-president Zuma both hired and fired ministers with the aim of monetising state resources for personal (and party) ends). Compliant ministers, in turn, selected compliant boards of directors. The boards of directors are tasked with governing SOEs

(Du Toit, 2005). They are to manage SOEs by safeguarding the entity's assets and managing its expenditure and liabilities (Du Toit 2005). However, compliant ministers had instead done the opposite and rather enabled the repurposing of SOE resources for party and private ends.

The account that follows provides information from the Zondo Commission as to how the respective SOEs were used for personal and political ends with the aim of self-enrichment and sustaining ANC dominance.

4.2. Transnet

Transnet is a state-owned transport and logistics company with over 57 000 employees (World Economic Forum 2024). It has five operating branches: Transnet Freight Rail; Transnet National Authority; Transnet Port Terminals; Transnet Engineering and Transnet Pipelines (World Economic Forum 2024). The purpose of the SOE is to transport goods and services via sea, land and air. It is also the SOE that experienced the greatest loss due to state capture (Zondo Commission 2022c). State capture at Transnet began with Jacob Zuma being elected as president and Maria Ramos resigning as the Group Chief Executive Officer (GCEO) (Zondo 2022c).

Upon Maria Ramos's resignation from Transnet, the position for GCEO was open. Initially the board wanted Pravin Gordhan to fulfil the position, however, he retracted his candidacy once he became Minister of Finance (Zondo 2022c). For the board, the next ideal candidate would be Sipho Masako (Zondo 2022c). Zuma, however, did not want him to fulfil this position, instead wanted Siyabonga Gama. This led Hogan (Minister of Enterprise from 11 May 2009 to October 2010) to inform Zuma that the board found Gama unqualified for the position (Zondo 2022c). It should be noted that the decisions against Gama's fulfilment of the position were based on an array of factors. These factors included Gama not even being the board's second choice; he was under investigation for disciplinary action and Masako was already the board's ideal candidate (Zondo 2022c). On several occasions Hogan tried to sway Zuma against Gama as a candidate, however, Zuma insisted that the position remained open until the conclusion of Gama's investigation (Zondo 2022c). Hogan's resistance to Gama's appointment worked against her as on the 31 October 2010, Zuma and the ANC Secretary-General of the time, Gwede Mantashe, summoned her and removed her as Minister of Public Enterprises (Zondo 2022c). The next day Zuma appointed Malusi Gigaba as Minister of Public Enterprises (Zondo 2022c). Thus, non-compliant ministers were removed and replaced with loyal "deployees".

Gigaba, in turn, instated Gama as CEO of Transnet Freight Rail and appointed Brian Molefe and Anoj Singh as directors of Transnet (Zondo 2022c). Molefe, Gama and Singh then gave free rein to Iqbal Sharma, ex-head chair of the Board of Acquisitions and Disposal Committee (BADC) (Zondo 2022c). The power vested in BADC to make procurement decisions was so extensive that it signed off billions of rands worth of procurement (Zondo 2022c). Moreover, the Gupta-Essa racketeering[4] ring received billions from procurement deals (Zondo 2022c). It is explicitly stated in the Zondo Commission (Zondo 2022c) that under Singh as Chief Financial Officer, Sharma as BADC chair head and Molefe and Gama as GCEOs, most of the corruption and money laundering regarding locomotion procurement and financing had taken place. An acquiescent, political-connected bureaucracy resulted in the capturing and redirecting of state resources away from used in the public interest.

4.3. ESKOM

The Electricity Supply Commission (ESKOM) is the nation-state's main electricity producer and uses a mix of nuclear, coal, pump storage, diesel and hydroelectric to supply South Africa's energy needs (Zondo 2022a). The Minister of Public Enterprise is its shareholder representative, and the South African government is its sole shareholder (ESKOM 2024).

Most of the corruption at ESKOM stemmed from directors and managers improperly managing procurement practices (Zondo 2022a). Some of the improper managing of procurement practices included the unscrutinised or non-oversight tampering of finalised procurement contracts with the aim of expanding or modifying contracts (Zondo 2022a). The politicised bureaucracy at ESKOM enabled the misconduct regarding wrong procurement practices and reduced the measures of checks and balances.

Subsequent to his "usefulness" with capturing Transnet, Minister of Public Enterprises, Malusi Gigaba had become uncompliant to the wishes of the Gupta family and was summarily replaced. The newly appointed Minister of Public Enterprises, Lynn Brown, then

[4] The Essa and Gupta racketeering ring describes that way that Salim Essa managed business arrangements with a range of companies for procurements at ESKOM. Essa would then get a kickback from the deals made and from the percentage of money he received, he then gave most of it to the Guptas, almost in compensation for doing business based on the Gupta's connections; this is evident in the Zondo Commission report.

appointed a board of directors with close ties to Gupta associate Salim Essa, the Gupta family and Duduzane Zuma (Zondo 2022a). The connection the Gupta family and Essa had to the board of directors at ESKOM ranged from business associates to cousins to the wives of cousins (Zondo 2022a). Moreover, many of the members of the boards of directors were unqualified to fulfil a position of such seniority (Zondo 2022a). This identifies how cadre deployment and state politicisation led to corruption, nepotism and poor management as underqualified people were placed into high profile positions. In turn, this resulted in poor service delivery and social consequences for society at large, namely loadshedding, economic loss and increased electricity prices.

The misconduct at ESKOM is further seen with the lucrative procurement contract given to Tegeta, a company owned by Duduzane Zuma (Jacob Zuma's son) and the Gupta family (Pillay et al. 2023). ANC cadres, placed as members of the boards of directors, established lucrative tender deals with the company (Zondo 2022a). In return, the company offered monetary support for the ANC's political campaigning. Ex-ANC treasurer General Zweli Mkhize admitted that the Guptas had offered the political party money (Gerber 2017).

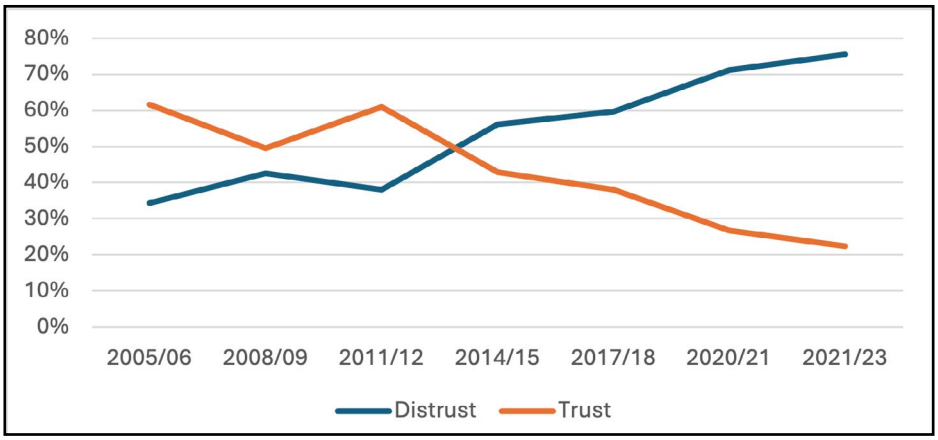
The contract had been awarded to Tegeta, even though the company did not meet the procurement requirements. Initially Tegeta did not have a water-use license which meant it was unable to conduct mining activities. The said license was eventually acquired even though the Department of Water Affairs indicated that the company did not comply with the requirements to obtain this licence (Zondo 2022b). Moreover, the coal-blend the company offered ESKOM was unsuitable to be used at its power stations (Zondo 2022b), making such a deal with the company a farce. Furthermore, the procurement period agreed and signed by ESKOM and Tegeta was later extended from five to ten years (Zondo 2022b). At the Zondo Commission (Zondo 2022b), it was explicitly noted that the procurement agreement with Tegeta had been given strong support from higher-up. It should be noted that non-compliant employees like Kiren Maharaj (ex-head of Primary Energy) who tried to ensure cost saving at ESKOM and keep the measures of checks and balances, were dismissed (Zondo 2022b). The procurement deals with Tegeta became especially questionable when, as stated in the Zondo Commission (Zondo 2022a), ESKOM had signed over R564 000 000 in contracts with a company that was of little benefit to the SOE and, in turn, the public. On the other hand, the procurement contracts with Tegeta benefited the ANC, as the political party received donations from Tegeta (as stated earlier) as reciprocation for giving it access to state resources.

5. Self-inflicted demise: The ANC in decline

One-party dominance can bear the seeds of its own demise (Duverger 1954). While cadre deployment may have enabled the ANC to prolong its dominance over six election periods, it is argued the resultant poor service delivery and the decline in the state structures has also led to a loss in societal confidence and trust in the political party. It is, thus, unsurprising that the ANC eventually experienced losses in electoral support. Cadre deployment resulted in an ill-equipped bureaucracy, mismanagement of funds, corruption and a reduction in accountability and transparency (Shava and Chamisa 2018; Bless 2023). The practices of corruption and nepotism meant the appointment of unqualified persons into high-profile positions. This practice has been very costly for the South African economy with President Cyril Ramaphosa admitting at the 2019 *Financial Times* Africa Summit in London that corruption had cost the nation-state ZAR1-trillion (Ngqambela 2020). This consequently led to outcomes such as poor service delivery in the public sector and municipalities (Shava and Chamisa 2018; Fredericks and De Jager 2022; Bless 2023). Ironically, the practice of cadre deployment which was argued to improve the service delivery for the disenfranchised was the same practice that instead created endemic poor service delivery for all. For example, loadshedding has caused many to experience a loss in their income and even their livelihoods (Ledger 2023). It is estimated that loadshedding had resulted in a loss of ZAR224 billion in economic activity between 2020 and 2023 (Ledger 2023). It makes sense to think that many would begin to question and even lose trust in the governing party. Between 2005 and 2012, the ANC as ruling party, enjoyed fairly high levels of trust (see Figure 1.1). In 2005 and 2011 trust peaked to just above 60 per cent. Thereafter, trust began to plummet, reaching a low of barely 20 per cent in 2023. On the other hand, distrust hit highs of nearly 80 per cent in 2023. Thus, during and following the years of state capture under the ANC, South Africans increasingly distrusted the ruling party.

Consequently, the ANC's inadequacies led to a reduction in its support base and the eventual end of parliamentary dominance in 2024. As seen in Table 1.1, the ANC's vote count for the 2024 National Election fell below 50 per cent, requiring the political party to form a GNU with the leading opposition party, the Democratic Alliance (DA). Eight other political parties were included, a move likely used to diminish the power of the DA within the GNU. The ANC, thus, holds less than 200 parliamentary seats out 400 as seen in Figure 1 causing it to no longer hold a parliamentary majority.

Figure 1: Trust in the ruling party, 2005–2023



Source: Adapted from Afrobarometer Data, [South Africa], [R3-9], [2005/6; 2008/9; 2011/12; 2014/15; 2017/18; 2020/21; 2021/2023], available at http://www.afrobarometer.org.

The percentages do not add up to 100 per cent as "Don't Knows" were excluded. The categories "Not at All" and "Just a Little" were merged into "Trust" and the categories "Somewhat" and "A Lot" were merged into "Distrust".

6. One-party dominance in decline: The Privatising and professionalisation of ESKOM and Transnet

Privatisation reduces the access dominant parties have to SOEs. It is the outcome of private firms purchasing SOEs or parts thereof (Bond and Ruiters 2024). Due to years of mismanagement and the siphoning out of public funds into private pockets and the ANC's purse, South African SOEs are, out of necessity, being privatised and professionalised. South African president, Cyril Ramaphosa has dissolved the Department of Public Enterprise (DPE) (Khoza 2023; Maeko 2024). With the DPE tasked with overseeing seven SOEs, it is unsurprising that it was infamously the ministry with the highest repurposing of public goods for party ends. Some of the recognised problems associated with the DPE included not carrying out proper oversight functions and not achieving targets nor clean audits (Corruption Watch 2023). Sixty-three per cent of audits were outstanding from five of the seven SOEs in the financial year 2021/22 and the DPE achieved only 58 per cent of its targets (Corruption Watch 2023).

In its stead, the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME) is tasked with co-ordinating the SOEs and advancing the National State Enterprise Bill B1- 2024 (SOE Bill). The SOE Bill was introduced in September 2023, by the late minister Pravin Gordhan, as a way to hinder political interference in the running of SOEs (Mahlaka 2024). The SOE Bill establishes the State Asset Management SOC (SAMSOC) Limited (Reyburn et al. 2024). By duty, SAMSOC Limited is required to uphold the interest of thirteen of South Africa's chief SOEs, which include: Central Energy Fund; the South African Post Office; Transnet; ESKOM; National Road Agencies; South African Airways and the Airports Company South Africa, amongst others (Reyburn et al. 2024). An important facet of the SOE Bill is the limiting of government access to SOEs, which can be seen with how the directors of SAMSOC are to be selected. First, the President as shareholder representative sets out how many directors are to be appointed, then an independent panel (including a retired judge as head) must develop and implement the appropriate processes for selecting a president, and the selection of a board of directors are to be promulgated by public consultation, which not only further limits the role the President has in the selection of board members, but also makes the process more participatory, independent and transparent (Reyburn et al. 2024). Essentially, the SOE Bill offsets the current ownership model of government overseeing the functioning of its agencies (Maeko 2024). If correctly administered, the SOE Bill has the potential to hamper the access of an incumbent party to SOEs and hence, limit its ability to repurpose state-owned resources for political gain. This is because it provides for the professionalisation of SOEs, as it becomes very likely that the appointment of board members will be based on merit and not political affiliation.

In addition, the *Electricity Regulation Act of 2006* has been amended to provide procedures for the privatisation of generating electricity (Klopper 2024). South Africans have begun to install more than 4 400 MW solar energy (from private companies) and ex-ESKOM CEO, André de Ruyter, rolled out 66 000 MW of renewable energy investments aimed at private management and investment before his resignation from the parastatal (Woode-Smith 2024). Plans have been ratified for the nation-state's energy sector to include private sector investment. This has been outlined in the Just Energy Transition (JET) Implementation plan (JET Implementation Plan,

2023–2027 2023). The plan is targeted at decarbonisation commitments whereby it aims at giving the private sector leeway to distribute renewable energy for large scale battery generation and storage (JET Implementation Plan, 2023–2027 2023). Furthermore, it appears that South Africans support the privatisation of ESKOM, as 59 per cent agreed that it should be privatised (Mpako 2023).

Transnet is also enroute to partial privatisation. The *Network Statement and Tariff Methodology* was released in May 2024 to provide the guidelines for rail privatisation. Also, Transnet terminals are being privatised in partnership with private partners (Khumalo 2024). A 25-year public-private partnership with the International Container Terminal Services Inc. (ICTSI) was entered into in 2024 and is set to take over Durban's container terminal (Jacobs 2024). High-volume corridors such as the iron ore and coal export routes have been touted for partial privatisation, and suggested logistics reforms include granting concessions to private operators, co-investing in the upgrade of infrastructure, while granting access to third-party service providers (Botha 2025).

If Greene's (2007) theory is accurate, one can expect that the professionalism of South African SOEs will lead to the further diminishing of the ANC's political power.

7. Conclusion

Greene's (2007) resource theory contends that dominant parties sustain political control through near-unrestricted access to state-owned resources and a compliant bureaucracy, but lose their dominance when privatisation and bureaucratic professionalisation take root. In the South African context, the ANC strategically employed the discourse of "transformation" to justify the deployment of loyal, but often unqualified cadres, expand the state apparatus for patronage and deflect criticism. Framing "transformation" as redressing past injustices, provided a morally-based motivation for extensive state control that was difficult to contend with. However, beneath this normative justification lay a deeper ideological orientation: the Soviet-inspired NDR—a historical mission to create a socialist state with the ANC as the vanguard. The party's capturing of the state and deploying party loyalists, resulted in the undermining of the state institutions and their potential to function. This, in turn, resulted in a decline in trust and electoral support of the ruling party. Thus, before the professionalisation of the bureaucracy and the privatisation of the SOEs had occurred, the social support of the party was already in decline. In its attempts to consolidate its dominance, the ANC had sown the seeds of its own demise. Through setting up a system of poor governance (placing individual and party interests above public interests), it failed to use the state and its personnel for its specified purpose—the public good.

This analysis extends Greene's (2007) framework by introducing poor governance as a mediating factor that accelerates the erosion of dominant party support. In the South African case, the eventual push toward privatisation and professionalisation appears less a voluntary relinquishment of control, and more a reactive measure to mounting public demand for accountable and effective governance.

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Beyond Neoliberal Paradigms: Integrating Ubuntu and Sam Moyo's Political Thought in Zimbabwe's Land Reform Policy

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Abstract

Land reform in Zimbabwe remains a deeply contested and symbolic issue entwined with historical injustices, cultural identity and socio-political power. Conventional neoliberal paradigms that frame land primarily as an economic commodity have failed to address the multifaceted realities of land dispossession and agrarian transformation. This study proposes a humanistic land nexus framework grounded in the political thought of Sam Moyo and African epistemologies such as Ubuntu, which reconceptualise land as intrinsically linked to human dignity, justice and communal identity. Drawing on a qualitative thematic analysis of diverse stakeholder perspectives, the study reveals critical tensions between policy intentions and lived experiences, highlighting issues of elite capture, marginalisation, disconnection from spiritual land values and inadequate state support. The findings affirm the necessity of integrating culturally grounded and participatory governance mechanisms, reparative justice and sustainable livelihoods into land reform policy. This framework challenges dominant neoliberal approaches and offers a normative roadmap for reimagining land reform in Zimbabwe and postcolonial Africa, emphasising the restoration of both land and humanity.

Keywords: Land Reform; Ubuntu; Sam Moyo; land reform in Zimbabwe; postcolonial justice; Zimbabwe

1. Introduction

Land reform in Zimbabwe remains one of the most contested and symbolically potent issues. At its core, the redistribution and restitution of land represent more than mere economic transactions; they reflect profound struggles over identity, justice, power and nationhood. Land in Zimbabwe is not simply a resource to be exploited for profit, but a deeply embedded cultural and historical anchor. It functions as a repository of historical trauma, cultural belonging and social dignity. The colonial conquest and subsequent settler dispossession fundamentally disrupted indigenous relationships with land, instituting racialised systems of ownership that entrenched inequalities and marginalised the majority Black population for over a century. The protracted struggle for land recovery was central to Zimbabwe's liberation war (1950–1980), underscoring land's centrality to political and social emancipation. The war was not only about sovereignty from colonial rule, but also about reclaiming access to ancestral lands that sustained livelihoods and symbolised identity. Post-independence, the new government faced the monumental task of redressing historical land imbalances while navigating a complex political economy and international pressures.

As a result, the Zimbabwean government sought to redress historical land inequities through various policy instruments. The Fast Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP), launched in 2000, marked a radical and accelerated effort to redistribute land to indigenous Zimbabweans. However, the programme was marred by elite capture, inadequate planning and limited support for beneficiaries. While it succeeded in dismantling the settler land monopoly, it also generated a range of unintended consequences including agricultural decline, food insecurity and socio-political instability. These outcomes have cast a shadow over the promise of land reform and sparked intense debate over policy effectiveness and justice. This study argues that the shortcomings of Zimbabwe's land reform cannot be fully understood or addressed through dominant neoliberal paradigms. Neoliberal approaches tend to reduce land to a tradable commodity and prioritise market efficiency and economic rationality over social justice, cultural legitimacy and historical redress. Such narrow frameworks overlook the profound social and spiritual connections Africans have with land, thus, undermining reform's transformative potential.

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This study draws on the political thought of Sam Moyo (2013), a seminal scholar of agrarian transformation in Africa, and African epistemologies such as Ubuntu, to propose a humanistic land-nexus framework. This framework reconceptualises land as intrinsically linked to human dignity, identity and justice. It emphasises a culturally grounded and participatory approach to land reform that recognises land as a site of historical redress, social cohesion and sustainable livelihoods. The objective of this study is to critically engage with Zimbabwe's land reform history, analyse the disjuncture between policy and lived realities and offer a normative model that situates land reform within a holistic understanding of land-humanity relations. This humanistic perspective underscores land as a foundational axis of identity and community, challenging technocratic paradigms and fostering transformative justice.

2. Literature review: Comparative perspectives on land in Africa

On examining land reform trajectories across Africa reveals diverse models and outcomes, illuminating important lessons and persistent challenges. Mozambique's post-conflict land reform has emphasised community governance and collective tenure, providing space for local control, though implementation has been uneven and sometimes contested (Manji, 2006). Rwanda's tenure regularisation programme has prioritised formalisation and state control, with efforts to clarify land rights, however, this has sometimes alienated customary systems and local authority (Ansoms and Murison 2013). Ghana and Zambia represent pluralistic tenure systems, combining statutory and traditional governance, however, grappling with tensions around power, legitimacy and inclusion (Lund, 2011). Common across these cases is the marginalisation of rural voices in reform processes and the insufficient integration of cultural and spiritual land meanings. Murisa (2017) and Chipenda (2021) stress that meaningful and sustainable reform requires embedding land governance within local epistemologies and participatory structures that honour communal values and histories.

Global institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) have historically promoted market-led land reform (MLLR), characterised by individual titling, privatisation, and economic liberalisation (Deininger 2003). Moyo and Yeros (2005) critique this approach as epistemologically narrow and epistemically unjust, imposing Western land concepts that marginalise African knowledge systems. This "epistemic injustice" silences indigenous perspectives and perpetuates colonial hierarchies of knowledge and power (Fricker 2007). These frameworks neglect the affective and symbolic dimensions of land, vital to African lived experiences where land is a source of identity, ancestral connection and social cohesion. The failure to recognise these dimensions fuels reform failures, social alienation and rural disenfranchisement.

An expanding body of African scholarship aligns with Moyo's critique, emphasising land's multifaceted role in social justice and identity. Mandizadza (2009) and Chambati (2022) foreground land's centrality in healing historical trauma and restoring dignity. Cousins (2019) and Fraser (2001) argue for reform paradigms prioritising both recognition and redistribution, linking land to human rights and cultural legitimacy. Tsikata (2015) and Cordes (2017) emphasise metaphysical and ritualistic dimensions of land, especially in rural contexts, calling for governance systems that respect traditional authorities and communal stewardship. These contributions collectively advance the humanistic land-nexus as a critical conceptual tool for understanding land reform as a profoundly social and cultural process.

Zimbabwe's colonial land regime, codified through legislation such as the 1930 Land Apportionment Act, entrenched racialised land ownership that dispossessed Black Africans of fertile land and relegated them to marginal communal areas (Baines 1991). This structural violence spurred decades of political struggle culminating in the liberation war, where land reclamation was a core demand. Post-independence reforms initially proceeded cautiously, constrained by political compromise and economic pressures. The FTLRP of 2000 sought to accelerate redistribution, however, was plagued by elite capture, weak institutional capacity and lack of support mechanisms, resulting in uneven land access and declining agricultural productivity (Bhatasara and Helliker 2018). Persistent rural poverty and food insecurity signal unresolved tensions between policy and grassroots realities.

Interestingly, an African philosophical concept of Ubuntu which emphases the interconnectedness, and respect for humanity, offers a compelling lens for land reform. Land, under Ubuntu, is sacred and communal, representing moral and ancestral ties that bind communities. Loss of land signifies loss of identity and belonging (Mbigi and Maree 1995). Moyo (2013) integrates Ubuntu's principles with land reform, advocating culturally relevant policies that honour collective rights and communal stewardship. Cousins (2019) warns that without reclaiming African moral economies, land reform risks becoming a technical exercise devoid of transformative potential.

While extensive literature addresses land reform's economic and political dimensions, there is a paucity of research systematically theorising the land-humanity nexus. Most studies emphasise material outputs such as yields or income, neglecting subjective experiences like trauma, belonging and healing. This creates a critical gap in understanding the ontological violence of dispossession and the restorative

potential of culturally grounded reform. This study contributes to this gap by centring African epistemologies, human dignity and justice in the analysis of Zimbabwe's land reform experience, offering a humanistic framework that bridges scholarship and policy.

3. Theoretical framework

Sam Moyo's political thought offers a vital corrective to technocratic and neoliberal approaches that commodify land and narrowly focus on economic outcomes. Moyo (2013) critiques the market-oriented reforms that treat land simply as an asset to be bought and sold, divorced from its social and historical contexts. Instead, the author proposes a humanistic land-nexus framework which integrates African ontological principles, notably Ubuntu, a philosophy emphasising relationality, dignity and communal belonging. This framework rests on five interconnected pillars:

Land as a Human Right: Land is foundational not only to economic survival, but to human dignity and identity. Secure access to land enables cultural continuity, social stability, and self-determination. Denial or alienation from land constitutes a form of ontological violence, severing people from their histories and communities.

Justice and Redress: Land reform must actively address historical colonial and settler injustices through reparations, restitution and transformative justice. This means going beyond simple redistribution to tackle systemic inequalities and legacy harms.

Participatory Governance: Empowering chiefs, traditional leaders and local communities as central actors in land management is critical. Such participation ensures reforms resonate with cultural norms and foster local agency, rather than imposing external, top-down solutions.

Redefinition of Land Value: Land's value must be understood beyond market metrics to include social, spiritual and moral dimensions integral to African worldviews. This holistic valuation challenges purely economic paradigms.

Sustainable Livelihoods: Land reform should promote long-term communal well-being, ecological sustainability and socio-economic resilience, recognising the interdependence of people, land and environment.

In essence, this model challenges dominant Global North paradigms and neoliberal logics that treat land as a fungible commodity. It underscores land's embeddedness in social relations and historical memory, offering a justice-oriented and culturally legitimate alternative (Moyo and Yeros 2005).

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the lived experiences, perceptions and interpretations of land reform stakeholders in Zimbabwe. Qualitative inquiry is particularly suited to unpacking complex social phenomena such as land reform, where subjective meanings, cultural contexts and human relationships are central. By focusing on rich, in-depth data rather than quantitative metrics, the current study aims to capture the nuanced ways in which land is understood as a humanistic, socio-cultural and political resource. The research is anchored in a constructivist epistemology that recognises knowledge as socially constructed through interaction, discourse and context. This orientation aligns with the study's emphasis on African epistemologies, human dignity and culturally grounded understandings of land.

The study utilised a purposive sampling to select participants who have direct and diverse experiences with Zimbabwe's land reform. The sample includes eighteen participants representing four key stakeholder groups: smallholder and resettled farmers who are direct beneficiaries and custodians of redistributed land; government officials involved in land reform policy and administration; academics and researchers specialising in agrarian studies and land governance and representatives of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) working on rural development and land rights. This diversity ensured a multiplicity of perspectives on the successes, challenges and meanings of land reform.

The data was collected through semi-structured interviews conducted primarily via virtual platforms, considering logistical constraints and the geographic dispersion of participants. The semi-structured format provided flexibility to explore participant narratives while maintaining focus on key themes such as land access, justice, cultural values and governance. Interviews lasted between 45 to 60 minutes, were audio-recorded with consent, and later transcribed verbatim. Interview guides were developed based on preliminary literature review and the humanistic land-nexus framework, enabling a dialogue that elicited both descriptive and interpretative insights.

Thematic analysis was used to systematically identify, analyse and report patterns within the qualitative data. This approach, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), involves iterative coding and categorisation to generate rich thematic representations. The analytical process followed six key phases: familiarisation (repeated reading of transcripts to immerse in the data); generating initial codes (systematic coding of data segments relevant to research questions); searching for themes (grouping codes into broader thematic categories reflecting recurrent ideas); reviewing themes (refining themes for coherence and distinctiveness); defining and naming themes (articulating the essence of each theme and its relevance to the land-humanity nexus) and producing the report (integrating thematic findings with theoretical frameworks and literature). A NVivo qualitative data analysis software was utilised to facilitate coding and organisation.

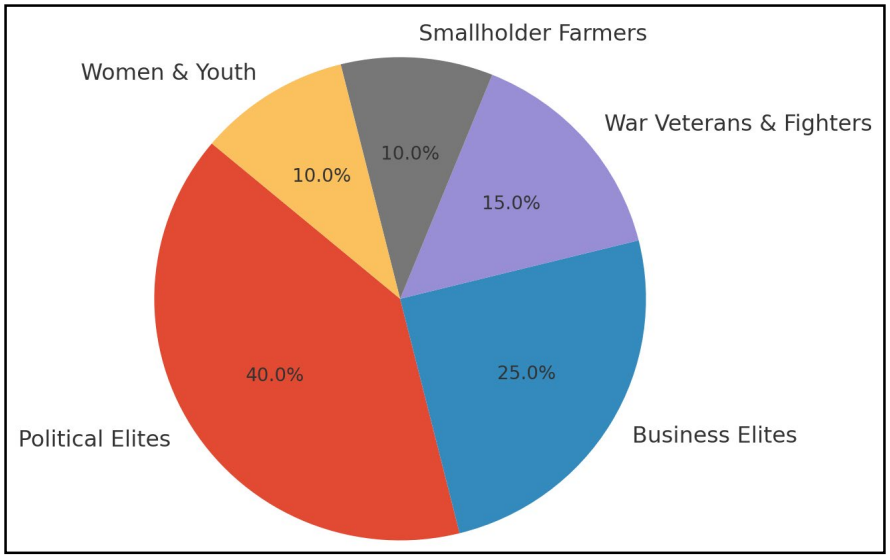
The study adhered to ethical research principles including informed consent, confidentiality and voluntary participation. Participants were fully briefed on the study's aims, their rights to withdraw and the use of data. Identifiers were anonymised to protect privacy. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board prior to data collection. While the qualitative design allowed for rich, contextualised insights, limitations include the relatively small sample size and reliance on virtual interviews, which may affect rapport and depth. Additionally, given the political sensitivity of land reform, some participants might have been cautious in sharing critical views. Nevertheless, methodological rigor and triangulation of perspectives mitigated these concerns.

5. Presentation of results

This section presents an in-depth thematic analysis of the data collected from the diverse group of Zimbabwean land reform stakeholders. Using the humanistic land-nexus framework as an analytical lens, the discussion elaborates on the complex realities of land reform on the ground, elucidating how policy rhetoric and lived experiences often diverge. The themes below (Figure 1) synthesise key tensions, challenges and possibilities articulated by participants, advancing a nuanced understanding of Zimbabwe's land reform beyond the dominant neoliberal paradigms.

Figure 1 shows the dominance of elites in land allocation.

Figure 1: Perceived beneficiaries of land reform



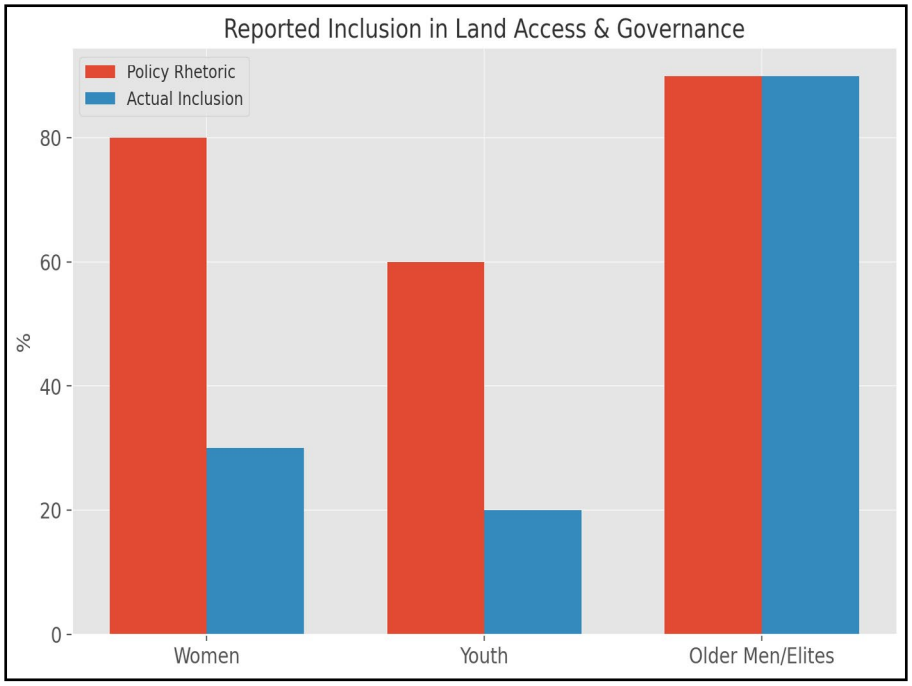
Elite capture and unequal access to land: Pie Chart: Perceived beneficiaries of land reform.

Category	Percentage of Perceived Allocation
Political Elites	40%
Business Elites	25%
War Veterans and Fighters	15%
Smallholder Farmers	10%
Women and Youth	10%

Key Message: Majority of land perceived to benefit elites, undermining equity and justice goals.

Figure 2 is an inclusion bar chart which highlights the gap between policy promises and real inclusion of women and youth.

Figure 2: Reported inclusion in land access and governance



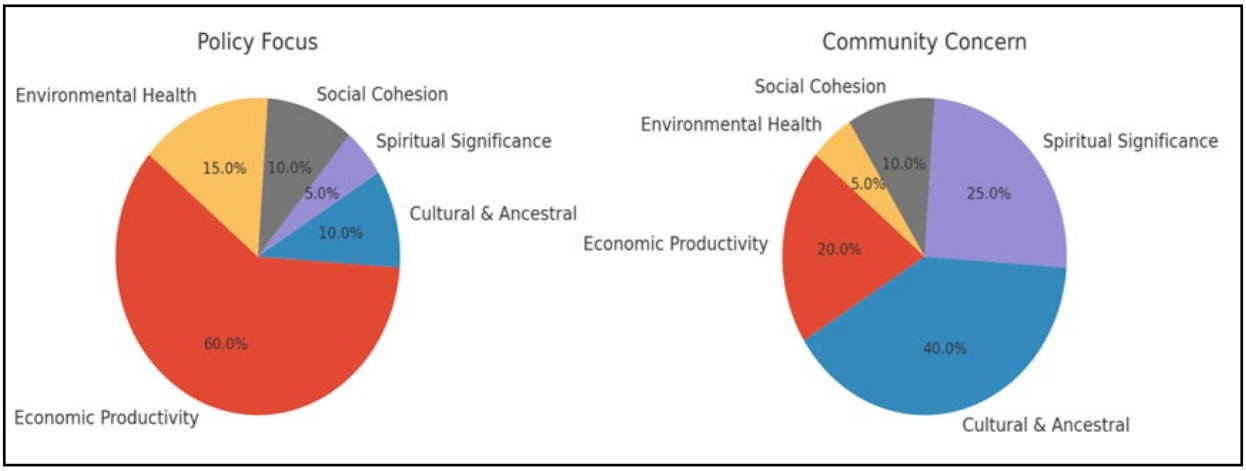
Gender and Youth Marginalization: Reported inclusion in land access and governance.

Group	Policy Rhetoric	Actual Inclusion
Women	High	Low
Youth	Medium	Very Low
Older Men/Elites	High	High

Key Message: There is a major disconnect between policy and practice, with women and youth consistently sidelined.

Figure 3 compares policy versus community needs. The pie charts contrast the technocratic policy emphasis with cultural and spiritual community values.

Figure 3: Add a relevant caption



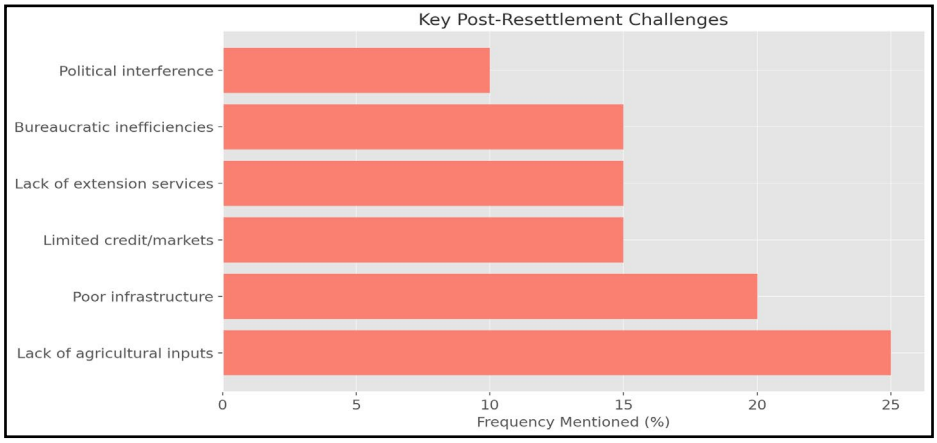
Cultural and Spiritual Disconnection: Pie Chart: Emphasis in Policy vs. Community Needs

Land Dimension	Policy Focus (%)	Community Concern (%)
Economic Productivity	60%	20%
Cultural and Ancestral	10%	40%
Spiritual Significance	5%	25%
Social Cohesion	10%	10%
Environmental Health	15%	5%

Key Message: Policy heavily emphasises economics, while communities prioritise cultural, spiritual, and communal values.

Figure 4 is a post-resettlement challenges bar chart which visualizes the main obstacles faced by smallholder farmers.

Figure 4: Key post-resettlement challenges



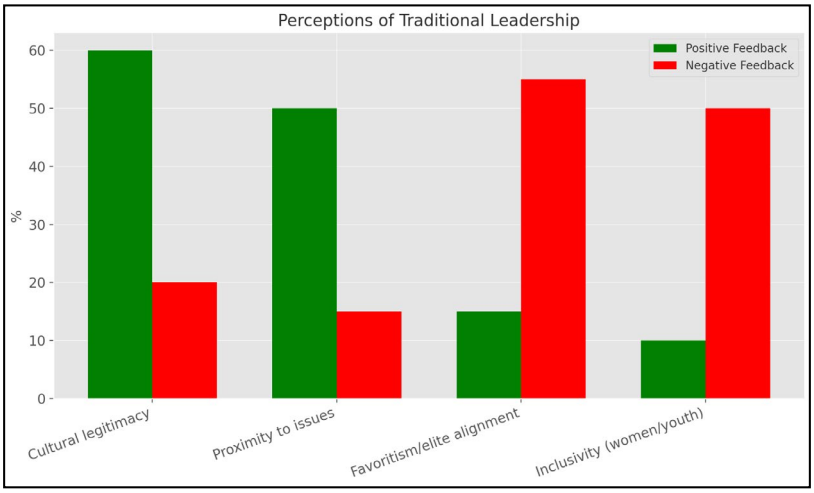
State Support and Institutional Deficiencies: Bar Chart: Key Post-Resettlement Challenges (as reported by participants)

Challenge	Frequency Mentioned (%)
Lack of Agricultural Inputs	25%
Poor Infrastructure	20%
Limited Access to Credit/Markets	15%
Absence of Extension Services	15%
Bureaucratic Inefficiencies	15%
Political Interference	10%

Key Message: Redistribution without strong institutional support undermines agricultural transformation.

Figure 5 is a traditional leadership perception bar chart which shows both positive cultural legitimacy and negative elite favouritism.

Figure 5: Perceptions of traditional leadership



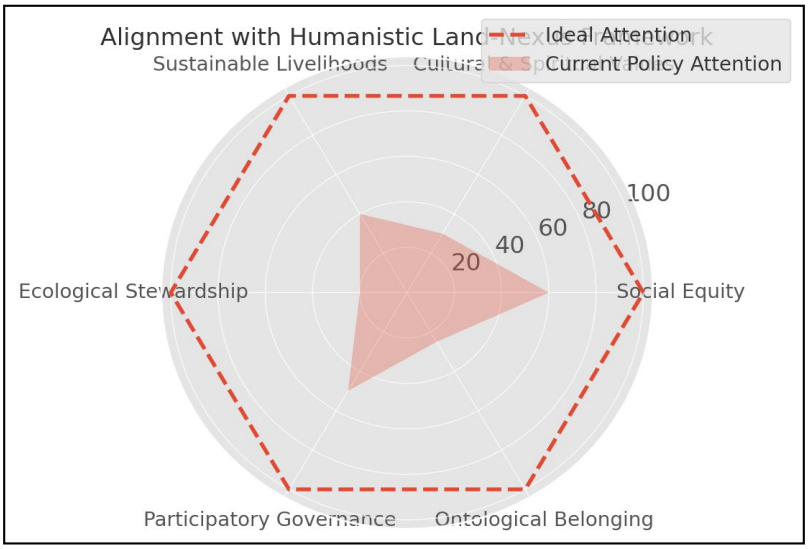
Governance: Role of Traditional Leaders - Dual Bar Chart: Perceptions of Traditional Leadership

Governance Aspect	Positive Feedback (%)	Negative Feedback (%)
Cultural Legitimacy	60%	20%
Proximity to Community Issues	50%	15%
Favouritism and Elite Alignment	15%	55%
Inclusivity (esp. women/youth)	10%	50%

Key Message: Mixed views—traditional leaders are trusted but also seen as part of exclusionary structures.

Figure 6 is a radar chart. This chart maps the disparity between current policy attention and the ideal alignment with humanistic values.

Figure 6: Add a relevant caption



Holistic Land Reform Needs: Radar Chart: Alignment with Humanistic Land-Nexus Framework

Humanistic Pillar	Current Policy Attention	Ideal Attention Needed
Social Equity	Medium	High
Cultural and Spiritual Values	Low	High
Sustainable Livelihoods	Low	High
Ecological Stewardship	Very Low	High
Participatory Governance	Medium	High
Ontological Belonging	Very Low	High

Key Message: Land reform must shift from technocratic to holistic, justice- and culture-centred approach.

6. Discussion and analysis of findings

This study makes several important theoretical, empirical and policy contributions that enrich scholarship and praxis around land reform in Zimbabwe and comparable African contexts. The contributions include: the theoretical innovation which advances the Humanistic Land-Nexus Framework; empirical insights from diverse stakeholder perspectives; addressing epistemological injustices in land discourse; policy relevance and practical implications and contribution to postcolonial and African scholarship.

The study also holds significant implications for policymakers and stakeholders engaged in land reform not only in Zimbabwe, but across postcolonial Africa. These implications include: reframing land reform as a human rights and justice; the inclusive and participatory governance structures; integrating cultural and spiritual dimensions into policy; building robust support systems for land beneficiaries; promoting multi-level and cross-sectoral coordination; advancing epistemic pluralism and knowledge co-production; addressing structural inequalities through affirmative action; strengthening institutional capacities and anti-corruption measures; integrating traditional knowledge systems in agricultural extension; long-term monitoring and impact assessment and the broader implications for Zimbabwe and postcolonial Africa, in which Zimbabwe's experience offers valuable lessons for the broader postcolonial African landscape where land reform remains a pivotal, yet unresolved issue.

One of the most pronounced themes emerging from the interviews is the persistent problem of elite capture during Zimbabwe's FTLRP. Participants frequently highlighted how political and economic elites disproportionately benefited from the land redistribution process, thereby undermining its redistributive and emancipatory goals. A resettled smallholder farmer voiced deep frustration: '*The land was meant to be for the people who fought and need it to live. Instead, it ended up in the hands of politicians and business people with power. We got land but no support to make it work. The land is useless without help*.'

This experience of exclusion resonates with Bhatasara and Helliker's (2018) critique that land reform in Zimbabwe, though radical in intent, became co-opted by networks of patronage and political favouritism. The skewed allocation of fertile land to elites not only perpetuated inequality, it also generated resentment and social tensions within rural communities. Moreover, the marginalisation of women and youth from land access and decision-making emerged as a recurrent concern. Despite constitutional and policy commitments to gender inclusivity, participants noted that patriarchal customs and political marginalisation continued to bar women from meaningful participation in land governance. This exclusion runs counter to the humanistic land-nexus pillar of justice and redress, underscoring that land reform cannot be disentangled from broader struggles for social equity and empowerment of marginalised groups. The findings suggest that without deliberate institutional reforms to check elite dominance and promote inclusivity, land reform risks reproducing the very hierarchies it aims to dismantle.

Participants across all stakeholder groups emphasised that land in Zimbabwe transcends its economic function. Land is deeply imbued with ancestral, spiritual and communal significance, which formal policy frameworks frequently neglect. This testimony vividly illustrates the epistemological gap between technocratic reforms that prioritise measurable economic outcomes and African worldviews that regard land as a sacred, living entity. The loss of ritual sites and the erosion of communal farming traditions reported by participants result in diminished social cohesion and identity crisis at family and community levels. These observations confirm calls by Tsikata (2015) and Cordes (2017) for land policies that explicitly integrate cultural and spiritual considerations. Failure to do so risks not only policy failure, but also profound ontological harm, disrupting the moral fabric that sustains community life.

Another significant barrier identified by participants is the lack of adequate post-redistribution support for land beneficiaries. Several smallholder farmers recounted challenges including shortages of agricultural inputs, lack of extension services, poor infrastructure and limited access to credit and markets. This deficiency highlights the critical importance of the sustainable livelihoods pillar within the humanistic framework. Land redistribution, while necessary, is insufficient to guarantee agrarian transformation and poverty alleviation. Without systemic support, beneficiaries struggle to convert land into meaningful livelihoods, which perpetuates rural poverty and food insecurity. Furthermore, participants noted that bureaucratic inefficiencies and political interference hindered effective service delivery. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) expressed frustration at the disconnection between national policy and local implementation, emphasising the need for decentralised and context-sensitive approaches that empower communities.

The qualitative data underscored a powerful linkage between secure land tenure and personal dignity, identity and human rights. Across narratives, land was framed not only as a resource, but as a fundamental human right that enables social recognition and survival. This articulation aligns closely with Moyo's (2013) humanistic perspective that land reform must transcend commodification to affirm ontological belonging and reparative justice. The data reveal that land dispossession constitutes a form of ontological violence, an existential severing from community and history that leaves scars beyond economic deprivation. The testimonies reinforce the urgent need to embed constitutional and legal protections for land rights within frameworks that respect cultural identity and social justice.

The role of traditional leaders and participatory governance structures elicited mixed views. Some participants lauded chiefs and local institutions for their custodial role in land allocation and conflict resolution, emphasising their cultural legitimacy and proximity to communities. However, concerns about elite dominance, corruption and exclusion within traditional governance structures were also raised. Several interviewees cautioned that chiefs sometimes perpetuate favouritism and suppress dissenting voices, undermining democratic participation and inclusivity. This ambivalence highlights the complex and pluralistic nature of land governance in Zimbabwe. It suggests that strengthening participatory governance requires reforms that enhance accountability, transparency and inclusion, especially of women and youth, within customary institutions.

The thematic analysis collectively points to a fundamental disjunction between the economic-technical framing of land reform and the humanistic, cultural realities of land in Zimbabwe. While the FTLRP disrupted settler monopolies, its limited attention to justice, cultural values and sustainable support has constrained its transformative potential. The humanistic land-nexus framework provides a vital corrective by foregrounding land as a multidimensional social and moral good. Integrating African epistemologies such as Ubuntu can help restore the spiritual and communal bonds severed by colonial dispossession and neoliberal reforms. Addressing elite capture and governance deficiencies demands inclusive mechanisms that empower marginalised groups and respect local traditions without entrenching authoritarianism. This analysis advances the argument that land reform must be reimagined as a holistic, participatory and justice-centred process, not merely a market transaction or technocratic programme.

One critical aspect that emerged from the data, corroborated by wider literature (Tsikata 2015; Murisa 2017) is the systemic marginalisation of women and youth in land reform processes. Participants consistently reported that despite policy rhetoric emphasising inclusivity, entrenched patriarchal norms and political patronage excluded these groups from meaningful land access and governance roles. This reflects a structural contradiction between formal policy commitments and on-the-ground realities, highlighting the need for gender-sensitive reforms that address cultural barriers and power imbalances. Youth, often seen as politically and economically disenfranchised, similarly face barriers to accessing land due to prioritisation of older elites and a lack of targeted youth programmes.

Another emergent theme is the environmental dimension, often overlooked in policy debates dominated by economic productivity metrics. Participants expressed concerns about land degradation, deforestation and unsustainable farming methods linked to the rushed nature of FTLRP resettlements without sufficient ecological support or training. This underscores the humanistic land-nexus pillar emphasising sustainable livelihoods and ecological stewardship. Integrating environmental conservation with agrarian reform is essential for long-term food security and rural resilience.

The study's participants highlighted how land reform has both disrupted and reshaped social relations in rural Zimbabwe. While redistribution sought to correct historical injustices, it also generated new conflicts between beneficiaries, traditional leaders, and former landowners. This points to the dual role of land as both a resource and a social glue, necessitating governance mechanisms that promote reconciliation and dialogue, aligned with Ubuntu's relational ethics.

6.1. Theoretical and empirical contribution

The current study advances a humanistic land-nexus framework that reconceptualises land reform as an integrative project linking human dignity, justice, cultural identity and sustainable livelihoods. By embedding African ontological principles such as Ubuntu, this framework transcends dominant neoliberal paradigms that narrowly commodify land. This innovation addresses critical gaps in agrarian studies by foregrounding moral, spiritual and reparative dimensions of land reform, thereby broadening conceptual and normative horizons. Through qualitative thematic analysis of eighteen stakeholders spanning farmers, officials, academics and NGOs, this study offers rich empirical insights into the lived complexities of Zimbabwe's land reform. These voices reveal disjunctions between policy and practice, highlighting elite capture, gender exclusion, cultural dislocation and institutional weaknesses. Such grounded knowledge enriches understanding of the socio-political dynamics shaping reform outcomes and points to actionable pathways for more equitable and effective land governance.

The study contributes to decolonising land reform scholarship by amplifying African knowledge systems and experiences marginalised by dominant Global North paradigms. It critically interrogates how market-led models impose epistemic injustice by silencing culturally embedded understandings of land. This epistemological pluralism is crucial for crafting policies that resonate with African realities and advance justice beyond technical fixes. Beyond academic theory, the humanistic land-nexus framework offers normative guidance for policy reform. Its emphasis on human rights, participatory governance, cultural integration and sustainable livelihoods informs a comprehensive agenda to redress Zimbabwe's land tenure insecurity, rural poverty and social fragmentation. By articulating concrete institutional and constitutional reforms, the study contributes to shaping land reform policies that are culturally legitimate, socially just and economically viable.

Therefore, theoretically, this study enriches postcolonial political thought by concretely linking land reform to ontological questions of identity, dignity and justice, dimensions often overlooked in mainstream development literature. The humanistic land-nexus framework bridges political economy, African philosophy and empirical social research, offering a multi-layered lens for understanding agrarian change. This framework contributes to decolonising development paradigms, challenging epistemic hierarchies and restoring African-centred narratives. Practically, the study equips policymakers, activists and community leaders with a normative guide for designing land reform policies that are context-sensitive and justice-oriented. By advocating for constitutional safeguards, inclusive governance, cultural integration and comprehensive support, the framework lays out actionable pathways that could enhance reform effectiveness and legitimacy.

Finally, the study contributes to postcolonial and African scholarship by situating Zimbabwe's land reform within broader postcolonial and African debates on sovereignty, identity and development. It aligns with movements for decolonisation and social justice, offering a critical reference for scholars, policymakers, and activists committed to transformative agrarian change grounded in African values.

6.2. Policy implications

The findings of this study hold significant implications for policymakers, practitioners and stakeholders engaged in land reform not only in Zimbabwe, but across postcolonial Africa. They reveal that effective land reform requires moving beyond narrow economic paradigms towards frameworks that integrate justice, culture and human dignity. A key implication is the urgent need to enshrine land tenure security as a constitutional human right that transcends individualistic ownership models. Policies must explicitly recognise communal and restitutionary claims, giving legal recognition to the historic and cultural entitlements of dispossessed groups. This human rights-centred approach counters the legacy of colonial exclusion and neoliberal commodification, establishing a legal foundation for reparative justice that addresses past injustices and current inequalities.

Land governance reforms must empower traditional authorities and local communities within transparent, accountable and inclusive frameworks. Mechanisms should be developed to mitigate elite capture and ensure the meaningful inclusion of women, youth and marginalised groups in decision-making processes. Strengthening participatory governance will not only enhance the legitimacy and responsiveness of land administration, it will also facilitate conflict resolution and social cohesion. Policy frameworks must formally recognise and safeguard the cultural, ancestral and spiritual values attached to land. This may include conducting cultural impact assessments prior to land allocation, preserving ritual sites and involving custodians of cultural heritage in land management. Such integration would promote policies that are culturally sensitive and resonate with community worldviews, addressing the ontological harm caused by colonial dispossession and technocratic reforms.

The lack of adequate institutional support for resettled farmers was a recurrent challenge highlighted in this study. Policymakers should prioritise investments in agricultural inputs, extension services, rural infrastructure and capacity-building programmes tailored to the specific needs of smallholder farmers. These support systems are essential to translating land access into sustainable livelihoods, improving food security and fostering rural development. Effective land reform requires coordination across multiple levels of government, sectors and agencies. Flexible policy designs that accommodate local contexts and evolve through participatory feedback mechanisms can enhance adaptability and effectiveness. Collaboration among governmental bodies, traditional institutions, civil society and academic actors will foster integrated approaches that balance economic, social and cultural objectives.

There is a need to bridge epistemic divides by fostering dialogue and co-production of knowledge among policymakers, scholars, and indigenous custodians of land. Encouraging epistemological pluralism will enable the design of land reforms that genuinely reflect African realities and aspirations. This entails institutionalising spaces for indigenous knowledge in policy forums, research agendas and educational curricula. Given the persistent marginalisation of women and youth, land reform policies should incorporate affirmative action measures that guarantee land access to these groups. This includes quotas, targeted support programmes and legal reforms to facilitate women's land ownership and inheritance rights. Such measures will advance equity and intergenerational justice in land redistribution.

The failures related to elite capture and governance inefficiencies highlight the need for institutional strengthening. This includes transparent land allocation procedures, independent oversight bodies, and anti-corruption frameworks to ensure accountability. Capacity building within government agencies and traditional institutions is crucial for effective implementation and service delivery. To address productivity challenges and environmental degradation, extension services should incorporate traditional agricultural knowledge alongside modern practices. This pluralistic approach respects indigenous expertise and supports sustainable land use, fostering innovation grounded in local ecological contexts. Establishing mechanisms for longitudinal monitoring of land reform outcomes will provide critical data to adapt policies over time. Participatory monitoring involving communities can enhance transparency and responsiveness; ensuring reforms remain aligned with beneficiary needs and humanistic principles.

6.3. Broader implications for Zimbabwe and postcolonial Africa

Zimbabwe's experience offers valuable lessons for the broader postcolonial African landscape where land reform remains a pivotal yet unresolved issue. The persistence of colonial-era land inequalities and the legacies of dispossession demand that land reform initiatives transcend purely economic rationales. Embedding African epistemologies such as Ubuntu into policy design underscores the necessity of re-centring collective identities, cultural values and historical justice as integral to agrarian transformation. Furthermore, the challenges highlighted by elite capture and marginalisation resonate widely across African nations. This call for deliberate democratisation of land governance that ensures marginalised voices are heard and empowered. The participatory governance pillar within the humanistic land-nexus framework could serve as a blueprint for building more equitable and accountable land institutions continent-wide. Sustainable livelihoods, anchored in ecological stewardship and communal resilience, emerge as another critical dimension. Zimbabwe's agrarian crisis reveals the dangers of neglecting systemic support, reinforcing the need for integrated rural development strategies that combine access to land with extension services, credit and markets. Such approaches should harmonise modern agricultural techniques with indigenous knowledge systems to foster sustainability.

Ultimately, Zimbabwe's land reform saga reflects broader struggles over sovereignty, identity and development in the postcolonial world. Land is not merely soil to be allocated or capital to be traded, it is a living nexus of human relationships, memory and dignity. Recognising this complexity demands moving beyond reductive neoliberal paradigms toward humanistic approaches grounded in African political thought and epistemologies. The vision articulated through Sam Moyo's scholarship and Ubuntu philosophy offers a hopeful trajectory, one where land reform becomes a means of healing historical wounds, fostering social cohesion and building sustainable futures. Achieving this will require political will, inclusive institutions and genuine dialogue among all stakeholders. As Zimbabwe and other African nations continue navigating their agrarian futures, embracing a humanistic land-nexus framework can inspire more just, resilient and culturally rooted transformations that restore not only land, but the very humanity that it sustains.

7. Conclusion

The land question occupies a central place in socio-political discourse, academic scholarship and policy debates across Zimbabwe and the broader African continent. Colonial land dispossession created entrenched structural inequalities that persist to this day, framing land reform as a critical issue of justice and development. However, despite decades of intervention, mainstream paradigms of land reform remain largely rooted in Eurocentric frameworks emphasising economic productivity, private property rights and market liberalisation. These dominant models frequently fail to account for the cultural, spiritual and ontological dimensions of land that are fundamental to many African societies. This literature review critically examined dominant land reform paradigms and their limitations, highlighting the growing call for alternative frameworks that position land at the nexus of humanity and justice. Central to this critique is the political thought of Sam Moyo, whose scholarship champions a humanistic and culturally grounded approach to land reform. The review further situates Zimbabwe's land reform experience within broader African comparative perspectives and identifies key epistemological gaps in land discourse.

It is in this context that land reform in Zimbabwe remains a deeply complex, historically fraught and politically charged process. This study has demonstrated that conventional neoliberal paradigms, with their narrow focus on market efficiency and commodification, have been insufficient in addressing the multifaceted challenges confronting land reform. Instead, the integration of Sam Moyo's political thought and African epistemologies such as Ubuntu into a humanistic land-nexus framework, provides a richer, more culturally grounded understanding of land reform as a profoundly social, political and spiritual endeavour. The thematic analysis underscored critical gaps in Zimbabwe's FTLRP, elite capture, marginalisation of vulnerable groups (women and youth), inadequate state support and neglect of land's spiritual and cultural significance. These gaps resulted in unintended outcomes such as reduced agricultural productivity, social tensions and erosion of communal identities. By centring land as a human right tied intrinsically to dignity, identity and justice, this study contributes to reframing land reform beyond mere redistribution. The humanistic framework emphasises reparative justice, participatory governance, cultural legitimacy and sustainable livelihoods, dimensions essential for transformative agrarian change.

8. Recommendations

Constitutional and legal reforms: Enshrine secure land tenure as a constitutional human right that protects communal and restitutionary claims, explicitly prioritising women, youth and marginalised groups. Laws must reflect African moral economies and communal landholding systems, safeguarding against elite expropriation.

Inclusive and transparent governance: Reform land governance to enhance accountability, mitigate elite capture and institutionalise inclusive participation. Empower traditional authorities as custodians within clear mandates that respect human rights, gender equality and youth inclusion. Mechanisms for grievance redress and conflict mediation should be strengthened at community levels.

Cultural and spiritual integration: Develop policies that recognise land's sacredness and social value by incorporating cultural impact assessments and custodial consultations in land allocation and management processes. Preservation of ritual sites and traditional land-use practices should be prioritised to restore community cohesion and identity.

Comprehensive support systems: Invest in robust agricultural extension services that combine modern technology with indigenous knowledge, access to inputs, credit facilities, infrastructure and market linkages. Tailored training and capacity building for beneficiaries, especially women and youth, will enhance productivity and resilience.

Multi-level coordination and adaptive policy: Promote collaboration across local, regional and national government tiers, with flexible policy frameworks that can adapt through participatory feedback and monitoring. Establish platforms for ongoing dialogue among stakeholders to negotiate land reform challenges dynamically.

Epistemic pluralism and knowledge co-production: Foster epistemological diversity by promoting partnerships between policymakers, academics and indigenous custodians. This approach will decolonise land reform discourse, enabling policies that are more culturally resonant and socially just.

In conclusion, this study provides a departure point for future research which should adopt longitudinal designs to assess the long-term socio-economic and cultural impacts of land reform framed within a humanistic nexus. Research exploring the evolving roles of traditional authorities, women and youth in land governance will enrich understanding of power dynamics and social transformation. Further interdisciplinary inquiry combining political theory, anthropology and environmental science can deepen insights into sustainable

agrarian development rooted in African values. By embedding land reform within African ontologies and political thought, this study advocates a paradigm shift toward justice-centred, culturally legitimate and participatory agrarian transformation. Zimbabwe's land question, emblematic of wider postcolonial struggles, thus, demands holistic approaches that restore not only land, but the very humanity intertwined with it.

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The Cost Ineffectiveness of Armed Conflicts in Africa, 2000–2025

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Abstract

From around 2013, the number of armed conflicts in Africa increased to such an extent that over three quarters of the continent's population were less secure in 2023 than they were a decade earlier. After reviewing the types of armed conflict, this article explains the main costs which they incur and then assesses the effectiveness of major armed conflicts on the continent between 2000 and mid-2025. Expressed in cost effectiveness terms, the resort to armed conflict to deal with differences and disputes during this time was very high in cost and very low in effectiveness. An attempt is then made to answer the following two questions: Why do countries persist with military approaches to meet security objectives? Are there more cost-effective alternatives available? The evidence is clear that the range of activities falling under the umbrella of peacebuilding are far more cost effective than armed conflict. A support structure would be required to organise and oversee their use and might involve the establishment of government ministries of peacebuilding.

1. Introduction

Armed conflicts, also known as wars and "organised violence", can be categorised in various ways. The long-established Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) devised four categories—wars between states, civil wars, extra-state (between a state and a non-state group based outside the state's territory) and internationalised internal conflicts where a state and/or its opponents receive support from other government(s) and where foreign fighters are involved. The Stockholm International Peace Institute (SIPRI) used UCDP data in defining an armed conflict as being where one of the parties was the state, for the issue to be control of government and/or territory and for there to at least 25 battle deaths (both combatants and civilians caught up in fighting) in a year.

More recently, the Human Security Centre (2005) identified three categories, in line with revised UCDP categorisations:

- State-based conflicts, in which the state is one of the parties involved
- Non-state conflicts, also known as "communal violence", which involve parties other than the state
- One-sided violence against civilians carried out by states and/or non-state actors.

Most recently, the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) has measured "political violence", which covers violence against civilians, battles, explosions/remote violence and excessive force against protesters and mob violence.

Armed conflicts can also be categorised according to their intensity in any year. SIPRI defines a low intensity conflict (LIC) as having between 25 and 999 battle deaths in a year, high intensity conflicts (HIC) as having between 1000 and 9999 and major armed conflicts as having more than 10 000. A conflict can move between intensity categories depending on the number of deaths occurring in any year.

Based on the Human Security Centre categorisation, Harris and Hove (2019) summarised the experience of armed conflicts for the period 1946–2011 as follows:

- Worldwide, the number of state-based conflicts peaked in the early 1990s, then declined to an average of 30 to 40 such conflicts in any year, the vast majority being low intensity and concentrated in peripheral areas. In Africa, there were 22 state-based conflicts in seventeen countries during 2011, which resulted in 6 600 deaths.
- Non-state conflicts increased between 1989 and 2011; these often ended within a year and resulted in under 6 000 battle deaths across sub-Saharan Africa in 2011.
- From 2002, there was a downward trend in one-sided violence in sub-Saharan Africa, with less than 1 000 deaths per annum in total in 2010 and 2011.

From 2013 onwards, owing largely to violence associated with jihadist groups allied to Islamic State, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of wars and in battle casualties worldwide, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. The 2024 Ibrahim Index of African Governance, which identifies "security and the rule of law" as one of its four pillars of governance, reports a deterioration in security and safety between 2014 and 2023 across 54 African countries based on five indicators:

- Absence of armed conflict
- Absence of violence against civilians
- Absence of forced migration
- Absence of human trafficking and forced labour
- Absence of crime
- Public perception of security and safety

The principal cause of the deterioration was an increase in the number of armed conflicts over the decade, particularly those involving one-sided violence against civilians, and worsening public perception of security and safety. As a result, the populations of 43 countries (which contained 78 per cent of the continent's population) were less secure in 2023 than they were ten years earlier.

Table 1 summarises the armed conflicts in Africa in 2024 which resulted in 25 or more battle deaths. Several countries, it should be noted, were host to multiple conflicts and/or conflicts of different types; hence the difference between the number of conflicts and the number of countries. All the countries, except Sudan, were in sub-Saharan Africa. The 28 state-based conflicts occurring in seventeen countries resulted in over 16 000 deaths in total, an average of 590 per conflict, while the average number of fatalities for non-state and one-sided conflicts were 82 and 453, respectively.

Table 1: Armed conflicts in Africa, 2024

Conflict Type	Number of Conflicts	Number of Countries	Number of Fatalities
State-based	28	17	16 545
Non-state	37	16	3 039
One-sided	26	16	11 787

Sources: UCDP databases; Davies et al. 2025

Using UCDP data, the SIPRI Yearbook 2025 reported that 21 of sub-Saharan Africa's 49 states had an active armed conflict in 2024. Of these, two (Sudan and Ethiopia) were major armed conflicts, eight were high intensity and eleven were low intensity. Almost all were internationalised in that they involved external state actors and/or transnational activities of armed groups and criminal networks.

Given this background, the overall aim of the current article is to assess the costs of civil wars in Africa and their effectiveness in meeting the objectives of the parties involved. It is important to distinguish between security expenditure and the costs of armed conflict, which leads to a general discussion of the former.

2. Determining an appropriate level of security expenditure

This section concentrates on financing security during times of war and peace. In brief, a state can meet its defence budget from domestic sources (taxation, borrowing, diversion from other government expenditure categories) and from foreign sources (exports, foreign aid and borrowing and reduced imports). Its non-state opponents may be funded from informal taxation, selling its natural resources and financial contributions from outside supporters.

It is an often-quoted mantra that government policies and programmes should be based on evidence as to their effectiveness. A valuable tool in identifying whether a policy or programme option should be followed is cost effectiveness analysis (CEA). The more widely known cost benefit analysis involves comparing the monetary values of the costs incurred by a programme or project compared with the estimated monetary value of its benefits. Costs are normally easy to estimate, however, the benefits may be intangibles such as saved lives and time which, although clearly beneficial, do not have straightforward market values. In such cases, CEA can be used to estimate, for example, the cost of saving a life using alternative safety interventions. The intervention which saves a life for the least cost would have a strong case for being chosen, others being equal. The standard text on CEA is Levin and Mc Ewan (2001).

The reasoning underlying CEA can be used when considering the various ways of meeting security needs. A traditional approach will emphasise a high level of military capability which, it is assumed, will act as a deterrent to attack from external or internal forces. The cost is readily measurable by the budget allocation to the military and related security sector categories, however, the benefit in terms of enhanced security is difficult to estimate.

There are two considerations in assessing the appropriate level of military expenditure for a country. First, the security challenges faced by any country must be rationally assessed. If there are no such challenges, then any military spending would be irrational in economic terms, which at least partially explains why there are some 25 countries which survive—and often thrive—without a military. Many of these are small island countries, however, there are larger countries as well which often rank highly on various international indexes, including Costa Rica, Iceland, Panama and Mauritius. More generally, there may be differing perceptions of the degree of security challenges faced by a country and there may be different levels of willingness to accept risks, that is, what level does a perceived risk have to reach before a country responds by increasing its military capabilities?

Second, there must be a rational assessment of whether military spending is the most cost effective of way of meeting security concerns if these were assessed to be significant. It cannot be assumed that high military expenditures will deter internal or external aggressors. In a neglected, but significant study, Collier and Hoeffler (2002) found that levels of military expenditures had no significant effect on the involvement in wars of 161 counties between 1960 and 1990. That is, low levels of military expenditure did not encourage involvement in wars, and high levels did not discourage them. Unless there has been a dramatic change in this respect since 1990—and there is no obvious reason to expect such a change—then the general effectiveness of the military as a deterrent is open to question.

Another aspect of budgetary allocations concerns the security philosophy of the country. Will it, for example, emphasise military forces as being for defence purposes only or will these also have an offensive capability? It should be noted that distinguishing between defensive and offensive weapons can be difficult. Will it focus on sophisticated weapons or will it rather have large numbers of men in uniform? More broadly, will a country use soft power aimed at building friendships with its neighbours and so reduce the likelihood of attack, or will it rely on military power to act as a deterrent? In short, what security philosophy will it adopt? A key question here is whether preparing for war is seen as the best way of achieving peace? The answer will be influenced by a country's security context.

Another relevant consideration concerns trade-offs between military expenditure and other government expenditures. Such trade-offs can be difficult to identify, however, the pressure on European countries to increase their military expenditures following the Russian invasion of Ukraine has highlighted them. In February 2025, for example, the British prime minister announced that the UK's military expenditure will increase to 2.6 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by 2027 and that the additional 13.4 bn British pounds per annum would be funded by reducing foreign aid from 0.5 to 0.3 per cent of Gross National Income from 2027 (House of Commons Library 2025).

To summarise, the appropriate level of military expenditure should, like any other government expenditure category, be based on a rational assessment which weighs up perceived need and the perceived cost effectiveness of the military in meeting that need. Its cost effectiveness ratio can be compared with those of alternative ways of building security. Rules of thumb such as spending a certain percentage of GDP on its military have no basis in logic, since they take no account of a country's security needs or the most cost-effective ways of meeting these needs.

3. The costs of armed conflicts

In this section, focus is placed on the resource costs of armed conflicts as opposed to the financing of national security considered above, although the two can intersect at times. Four major cost groups can be identified. First, there are the costs of repairing and replacing various forms of capital which have been run down, damaged or destroyed because of war. These forms of capital can be human, physical, social and environmental. Some can be repaired or replaced quickly, but others will take many years; some, like human lives, can never be repaired or replaced. Second, there is the cost of lost output. Some of this loss, like the extraction of mineral resources, may be delayed rather than permanently lost, however, some are time specific and are not recoverable. Third, there are the opportunity costs of the increased military expenditure, both immediately and in the longer term when domestic and foreign debts incurred to pay for war have to be repaid. Finally, there are several ongoing costs which may be incurred in the long term.

When the extent and magnitudes of these costs are considered, it is obvious that prevention of war will always be preferable to recovery after war. Here are the main components of these cost groups:

1. Costs of repairing and replacing various forms of capital
   - Human capital – death and wounds, physical and psychological, to combatants and non-combatants from violence and displacement
   - Physical capital – destruction, damage and deterioration due to non-maintenance of public and private assets
   - Social capital – damage to established interpersonal, societal and commercial norms and procedures
   - Natural capital – damage to the natural environment
2. Lost output
   - Temporary – delayed until armed conflict comes to an end
   - Permanent – time specific and not recoverable
3. Losses from changes in government expenditure
   - Additional military expenditure due to the armed conflict
   - Reduced allocative inefficiency as resources are diverted to the armed conflict
   - Costs of servicing war debt reduces financial resources for other government expenditure allocation
4. Ongoing costs following the end of armed conflict
   - Ongoing care of wounded and traumatised former combatants and civilians
   - Intergenerational transfer of physical and mental trauma with negative effects on future productivity and output
   - Minefields and unexploded ordinances deter agricultural activity
   - Entrenchment of violence and criminality as ways of behaviour, resulting in higher costs of violence prevention and containment

Estimating these costs is complex. The Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP) provides annual estimates of the economic impact of violence which it defines as 'the expenditure and economic effect related to the preventing, containing and dealing with the consequences of violence' (IEP 2025: 44). The total economic impact of violence is the sum of direct costs (the immediate consequences of violence for victims, perpetrators and public systems), indirect costs (the longer term costs which occur after violence such as reduced output as a result of physical and psychological loss and damage) and a multiplier effect (the economic benefits which would occur by diverting expenditure from violence-related activities into more productive activities). The global economic impact of violence for 2024 was estimated to be US$19.97 trillion (11.6 per cent of global GDP), of which 45 per cent was made up by military expenditure.

The IEP identifies three 'domains'—violence containment, interpersonal and self-inflicted violence and armed conflict. The armed conflict domain has increased far more rapidly than the other two since 2013 and includes the following categories:

- Direct costs of deaths from internal and external armed conflict (10 per cent of the total impact in 2024)
- GDP losses due to the armed conflict (51 per cent)
- Costs associated with refugees and IDPs (39 per cent)

In regional terms, the economic impact on sub-Saharan Africa was US$648.65 billion in 2024, by far the lowest of the eight regions (IEP 2025). Leaving the multiplier effect aside, 21.5 per cent was attributed to the armed conflict domain, 27.4 per cent to violent crime, homicide and suicide, 28.8 per cent to internal and private security and 18.6 per cent to military expenditure; the last two are in the violence containment domain. The IEP estimates for sub-Saharan Africa show that lost output and violence containment are far more costly than the direct costs of an armed conflict. Alternative estimates by Hoeffler (2017; 2018) also found that the human costs of civil wars were small by comparison with lost output and peacetime homicides, intimate partner violence (IPV) and non-fatal child abuse. This follows from the fact that most civil wars are concentrated in terms of time and location, whereas IPV and child abuse occur daily and throughout all countries.

In his classic book Breaking the conflict trap, Paul Collier (2003) estimated that a typical civil war lasted for seven years and resulted in a reduction of around 2.2 percentage points in economic growth compared to pre-war. This resulted in a 30 per cent increase in the numbers of people in absolute poverty. These outcomes persisted long after the end of the war and added to two other factors making a return to civil war more likely—a legacy of division and bitterness and an entrenchment of violence and criminality. That the costs of armed conflicts are very high and long lasting is beyond doubt. We now examine their effectiveness in the African context.

4. The effectiveness of armed conflicts in Africa

Based on data from a range of sources, Table 2 provides a summary of armed conflicts which occurred on the continent from 2000 to mid-2025 with a view to assessing the extent to which they result in victories for one side. It should be noted that there is a degree of subjectivity and interpretation in the categorisations. There was considerable variation in experiences between countries (several countries, as Table 1 showed, had multiple armed conflicts in any year) and within countries, with fluctuations in the intensity of most of these conflicts over time.

Table 2: Armed conflicts in Africa, 2000 to mid-2025

Country	Main Type of Conflict	Year Began	Main Parties Involved	Main Motivation	Status, Mid-2025
Burkina Faso	State-based	2019	Government security forces, various jihadist groups, ethnic groups	To establish an Islamic state	Ongoing
Cameroon	State-based	2017	Anglophone separatist militias, government security forces	Separatist push from English-speaking regions stemming from cultural marginalisation by the Francophone-dominated government	Ongoing, following the breakdown of a national dialogue
Central African Republic	Non-state	2012	Coalition of primarily Muslim groups, coalition of Christian groups	Intercommunal conflicts, including competition for natural resources	Ongoing, despite United Nations (UN) peacekeeping interventions
Chad	State-based	2003	Government security forces, Boko Haram and various community forces	Identity-based rivalries over land and political power	Ongoing, following the collapse of a peace agreement
Democratic Republic of the Congo	State-based	2004	Government security forces, M23 militant groups backed by Rwandan government	Competition for natural resources with strong ethnic foundations	Ongoing, despite peace agreement between the national government and the Congo River Alliance
Ethiopia	State-based	2020–2022 (Tigray)	Ethiopian government forces, Tigray People's Liberation Front	Separatism, federal versus regional power struggle	Ended by a negotiated peace agreement brokered by the African Union
Côte d'Ivoire	State-based	2002-11	Muslim north versus Christian south	Power struggle between supporters of incumbent president and opposition leader	Peace agreement in 2011 established the Dialogue, Truth and Reconciliation Commission
Libya	State-based	2011–2020	Two competing governments, one based in the west and the other in the east	Political rivalry followed by the collapse of the Gaddafi regime	Negotiated peace agreement led by the UN
Mali	State-based	2012	Government security forces, French military forces, the JF-G5Sf network jihadist groups, various self-defence groups	A mix of dissatisfaction with government performance, separatism/secession and a push for an Islamic state	Ongoing. A peace agreement was signed in 2018, but has been weakly implemented
Mozambique	State-based	2017	Ansar al-Sunna Islamic state group, national government forces, SADC peacekeepers	Separatism/secession. Creation of an Islamic state	Ongoing
Niger	Sahel insurgency spillover	2015	National army, French and US forces, Islamist groups (Boko Haram)	Regional jihadist movement from Mali/Burkina Faso	Ongoing

Country	Main Type of Conflict	Year Began	Main Parties Involved	Main Motivation	Status, Mid-2025
Nigeria	Multiple conflicts	2009	National defence forces, Boko Haram and other Jihadist groups, local armed groups	Separatism, inter-communal violence based on competition for and other resources	Ongoing. Government-Boko-Haram talks inconclusive
Somalia	Somali civil war (Al-Shabaab insurgency)	2012	National defence forces, African Union peacekeepers, al-Shabab insurgents, local armed groups	Competition for natural resources, with jihadist foundations	Ongoing
South Sudan	Post-independence civil war	2013-18	Political power struggle	Power struggle with ethnic tensions	Ended with a peace agreement in 2018, although tensions remain
Sudan	Darfur conflict, Blue Nile and South Kordofan insurgencies	2019	National security forces versus, the Rapid Support Forces, with the latter supported by the United Arab Emirates	Power struggle following the failure of democratic transition	Ongoing. Massive displacement of people, atrocities, starvation

Of the fifteen countries documented in Table 2, the main conflicts in four came to an end (Ethiopia, Cote d'Ivoire, Libya and South Sudan) after an average period of six years, although peace in most of these countries remains fragile and tenuous. Each ended because of a negotiated peace agreement, rather than a clear military victory. The other eleven were continuing during 2025 and have an average life span of 12 years; no such wars have lasted less than six years.

The vast majority were predominantly state-based conflicts involving competition for power between a government and one or more opponents. Since 2013, the opponents in eight countries have been Islamic groups aspiring to set up states based on Islamic principles. In addition, many state-based conflicts hosted fighting between non-state groups and some also had high levels of one-sided violence where civilians were targeted by both government and non-state groups.

In summary, over the past 25 years, armed conflict has not proven an effective way of wrestling power from governments in Africa nor has it led to clear military victories by governments. The best that can be said for armed conflict is that it may act as a precursor to a negotiated peace settlement; however, such settlements have not resulted in three quarters of the cases.

This finding holds more generally. After reviewing US military interventions aimed at bringing about regime change, Denison (2020: 3) found that these 'rarely succeed regardless of the strategy utilized and ... often produce unintended consequences, such as humanitarian crises and weaker internal security within the targeted state'. A similar conclusion was reached by Toft and Kushi (2023), using the comprehensive Military Intervention Project database. In terms of sustainable peace, Watts et al. (2017) found that more than a third of wars, once ended, recommenced within five years, which is consistent with earlier estimates that about half of civil wars recommence within ten years (Collier 2003; World Bank 2011).

Taking a longer-term perspective, the IEP suggests that clear military victories and peace agreements have become less common since the 1970s. In their words:

> *Fewer violent conflicts now end with a peace deal or clear victory. Since the 1970s, the percentage of conflicts that end with a clear victory has dropped from 49 per cent, to nine per cent, while the proportion of conflicts ending in peace agreements has fallen from 23 to four per cent (IEP 2025: 60).*

The previous sections have demonstrated that armed conflicts in Africa since 2000, have been both costly and largely ineffective in achieving their objectives. The following section strives to answer the following two questions—why do countries persist in emphasising military approaches to security objectives? and are there more cost-effective ways of meeting these objectives?

5. Alternative approaches to security

Before examining these two questions, it is important to provide two clarifications. The first is the crucial distinction made in the discipline of peace studies between conflict and violence. Conflict refers to differences in needs or interests between two or more parties, which can be individuals, groups or nations. Conflicts are inevitable and occur incessantly and are dealt with by three main approaches. First, the more

powerful party—and power can be physical, psychological, political, economic or military—can force the weaker party to concede. Second, the party with the strongest rights—typically enshrined in law—can win over the party with lesser rights. Third, the parties can engage in "collaborative conflict resolution" via dialogue to try to find a mutually-satisfying solution to the conflict. The key point here is that the parties involved in a conflict have choices concerning the approach they will use, although there may well be conflicts over this choice. The use of force or violence, whether real or threatened, is not inevitable.

Second, there is an overwhelming emphasis on preparing for—and being willing to use—force as the main tool of violence containment. The IEP (2025) estimates that in 2023–2024, the direct costs of military expenditure as a way of violence containment were US$4517 billion compared with only US$15- and US$8 billion for peacebuilding and peacekeeping, respectively. In addition, less is being spent on peacebuilding and peacekeeping than in the past; the US$23 billion in 2023–2024 represents a decline in real terms of 26 per cent from the US$64 billion spent in 2008.

The first question is why focus is continually placed on military approaches to meet security objectives? One explanation is a widespread and persistent belief that military approaches are effective, despite the overwhelming evidence that this is not the case. The evidence on African wars since 2000 presented above, can be supplemented by the meticulous and pathbreaking research by Chenoweth and Stephan (2011) (see also Stephan and Chenoweth 2008) who investigated the relative effectiveness of 323 violent and nonviolent campaigns between 1900 and 2006. The campaigns concerned big issues—bringing about regime change, expelling foreign occupiers or secession. They found that 53 per cent of nonviolent campaigns were successful compared with 26 per cent of violent campaigns. For sub-Saharan Africa, the respective proportions were 57- and 33 per cent. In addition, even where violent campaigns were successful, the human costs were high and the subsequent conditions were far more oppressive than occurred in contexts where the change had come about via nonviolent means.

Of course, even if such knowledge became widely known and accepted, it is by no means certain that a significant shift towards nonviolent ways of dealing with conflicts would come about. Vested interests within the military and from those who profit from the arms trade could be expected to strongly resist any reduction in their power and influence.

The second question is whether there are non-military approaches which meet security needs more cost effectively? If there are, it would be rational to reallocate resources away from the military and towards these alternatives. In fact, peacebuilding provides such an approach. Peacebuilding is an umbrella term and has been variously defined. The United Nations Peacebuilding Commission (2025) speaks of the long-term process of building the foundations of sustainable peace:

> *Peacebuilding aims to reduce the risk of lapsing or relapsing into conflict by strengthening national capacities at all levels for conflict management, and to lay the foundation for sustainable peace and development. It is a complex, long-term process of creating the necessary conditions for sustainable peace. Peacebuilding measures address core issues that affect the functioning of society and the State and seek to enhance the capacity of the State to effectively and legitimately carry out its core functions.*

The definition used by the Kroc Institute of International Peace Studies (2025) focusses on transforming relationships:

> *Peacebuilding is the creation and nurturing of constructive relationships across ethnic, religious, class, and racial boundaries. Peacebuilders seek to resolve social inequities and transform structural conditions that generate deadly conflict. This work spans the entire conflict cycle and includes conflict prevention, conflict management, conflict resolution and transformation, and post-conflict reconciliation.*

Despite the breadth of peacebuilding activities, these are without question far less costly than budget allocations to the military, let alone the costs of armed conflicts. Dietrich Fischer (2006, 6) referred to 'The negligible costs of war-prevention' [by mediation and the like]. Assessing their effectiveness is both under-researched and highly complex and means that governments lack the objective evidence to guide their allocations towards peacebuilding as opposed to other expenditure categories. The same applies to the decision-making by foreign donors as to where their aid can be best applied. One of the few studies on the returns to investments in peacebuilding (IEP 2016) drew on the experience of peacebuilding in Rwanda between 1995 and 2014 to produce a global model. The study found that an expenditure of US$1 on peacebuilding would bring returns of US$16 to the global economy, mostly in terms of reduced costs in terms of battle deaths and population displacement—and these are only two of the costs of armed conflict presented earlier. This very high cost-effectiveness ratio of peacebuilding of 16:1 indicates that far greater expenditure on peacebuilding is worthwhile, both in the budgetary expenditure allocations by governments and in the priorities of foreign donors.

The experience of Costa Rica, which abolished its military in 1948 and has broadly followed a peacebuilding approach thereafter, provides a valuable case study. Table 3 compares its rankings with five of its central American neighbours on three well-known indicators

of well-being—the Human Development Index (HDI), the Global Peace Index and the World Happiness Index. Costa Rica has far higher rankings than its neighbours, the only exception being its HDI ranking when compared with Panama (which also abolished its army in 1990, following the invasion by US forces). Harris (2004) has discussed the interplay between military expenditure and well-being in Central America and its possible relevance to African countries, while Abarca and Ramirez-Varas (2025) have estimated the size of the peace dividend which followed from Costa Rica's decision to abolish its military. Following careful statistical analysis of fifteen Latin American countries, the latter found that:

> *Prior to 1950, Costa Rica [had] the fourth lowest GDP per capita growth [out of 15 Latin American; after the abolition of the army and subsequent economic reforms, the country became the second-best country in this indicator. The country's GDP per capita … grew from 1.42% from 1920 to 1949 [and] increased to 2.28% during 1950-2010 … the second largest positive increase in this indicator in Latin American (Abarca and Ramirez-Varas 2025: 835).*

Table 3: Rankings of six Central American countries on indicators of well being

	Military expenditure (% of central government expenditure) 2023	HDI rank, 2023	GPI rank, 2023	WHI rank, 2023
Costa Rica	0	62	54	6
El Salvador	3.8	132	104	37
Guatemala	2.7	137	108	44
Honduras	5.8	139	=124	63
Nicaragua	1.9	123	111	47
Panama	0	59	84	41

Sources: SIPRI 2025; UNDP 2025; IEP 2025; Helliwell et al 2025.

6. Conclusion

This article has presented evidence which suggests that the costs of trying to achieve security by military means are far greater, and its likely effectiveness far lower, than by using various peacebuilding measures. In other words, if you want peace, concentrate on peacebuilding. Logically, this would involve a reallocation of resources away from militaries and towards peacebuilding activities. An essential pre-requisite for such a reallocation would be a mandate from a clear majority of the population.

Assuming such a mandate was achieved, another issue is an appropriate support structure to oversee and promote peacebuilding. One possibility is to establish a government ministry with specific responsibility for the various tasks of peacebuilding (Harris 2011). These tasks would likely include educating citizens for peace in various education settings, training them in the ethos and skills of conflict resolution, promoting dialogue, building respectful and just relationships between ethnic groups and promoting the healing of those traumatised by past violence. Five countries—the Solomon Islands, Nepal, Costa Rica, Timor-Leste and Ethiopia—have such ministries which were set up with varying aims according to the context and needs of the country (Irene 2024).

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Media coverage of sidelined voices (youth, women, and persons with disabilities): Magnifying the political environment during Namibia's 2024 elections

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Abstract

The 2024 Namibian election cycle was marked by a series of intriguing dynamics that influenced the country's political landscape. Central to the 2024 electoral period is the political parties' manifestos, often regarded as the most important document in an election year. As the election date approached, the combination of delayed manifestos, unresolved party disputes, and a fragmented political landscape raised significant questions about the future of Namibia's democracy. Challenges experienced by the Electoral Commission of Namibia (ECN) on the 27 November 2024 resulted in President Nangolo Mbumba extending the election period. The ruling delivered on 28 February 2025 is expected to shape future electoral processes in Namibia. Following a closely contested election which saw the ruling party lose its majority by a large margin, and with analysts predicting loss of power for the party in the next election, what will the party do differently to ensure electoral victory in 2029? Will it be 'business as usual', or will there be an improvement in the material conditions of the ordinary person? This paper examines Namibia's 2024 elections coverage of young people, women, and people with disabilities, by looking at how different media houses covered issues related to the three categories. These three categories, which are often under-represented, and their issues underreported in the media, arguably helped shape the 2024 election results. Further, the paper interrogates different perspectives by looking at the political environment that underpinned political activities during Namibia's 2024 elections.

Keywords: Namibia elections; media coverage; marginalized groups; youth political participation; women in politics; electoral democracy

1. Introduction

Namibia is a dominant political party system with the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) traditionally enjoying popularity among the electorates, as is evident from its two-third majority in parliament since the 1995 general election. However, Namibia's economic growth has been stagnant since 2016, which can be attributed to problems in the extractive industries, drought, a decrease in global commodity prices and the Covid-19 pandemic that caused havoc around the globe. These challenges had huge implications for the material conditions of the ordinary Namibian citizens. Lack of economic growth has seen unemployment go up to record levels. According to the 2023 labour force survey by the Namibia Statistics Agency (NSA), overall unemployment stands at 37%, with unemployment among young people at 45%. Indeed, some critics put unemployment above the 50% mark (Kangumine 2025).

Poverty has consequently increased, causing many Namibians to face acute food insecurity, and cases of starvation resulting in death have been reported. These issues might have influenced the election results of 27 November 2024. SWAPO's electoral dominance had already fallen drastically after the 2019 elections, with the late Hage Geingob, the party presidential candidate in that election, winning only 56% of votes cast, the party's worst results since independence (Melber 2020).

Namibia's 2024 general elections were closely contested, with the three biggest daily newspapers, The Namibian, New Era and Namibian Sun, playing a crucial role in shaping political narrative and arguably the outcome. According to McQuail and Deuze (2020) the media have an obligation to provide inclusive coverage that reflects the diversity of society. The theory suggests that the voices of minority, marginalised and vulnerable members of society – such as the youth, women, and persons with disabilities – should be amplified. However, the Namibian press tended to focus its coverage on dominant political parties, their leaders, and campaign rallies, with sidelined groups

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often appearing only in peripheral discussions or as symbolic references in campaign promises. This imbalance reveals a gap between normative expectations and actual media performance.

McQuail's Democratic Participant Media Theory (McQuail and Deuze 2020) emphasises that media should create space for grassroots voices and enable marginalised communities to participate meaningfully in political debates. Yet during the 2024 elections, media coverage prioritised issues such as corruption and party conflicts while reporting less on issues affecting young people, women, and disabled people, like unemployment, gender-based violence and lack of inclusivity. Although media focus highlighted accountability and kept the nation informed, it simultaneously left the issues affecting marginalised groups unreported in an important election year.

In addition, these newspapers, especially New Era which is a state-owned publication, followed a particular narrative. Its coverage was focused on government achievements and policy promises, and highlighted issues affecting women, the youth, and people with disabilities only in the context of empowerment schemes and achievements. In a similar fashion, Namibian Sun frequently covered election manifestos but failed to provide policy analysis on issues affecting the marginalised groups.

2. Political context

Namibia's 2024 elections came at a pivotal time for the country as it grapples with several economic and societal challenges. As one of the few stable democracies in Africa since gaining independence on 21 March 1990, Namibia's electoral process has been characterised by free and fair elections under the supervision of the ECN. The ruling SWAPO party has dominated the political landscape, winning every election since independence. However, in recent years, there has been growing competition, particularly from opposition parties such as the Popular Democratic Movement (PDM), the Landless People's Movement (LPM), and new kids on the block, like Independent Patriots for Change (IPC) and Affirmative Repositioning (AR), signaling an increasingly dynamic political climate.

Societal issues, such as a high unemployment rate, healthcare challenges, inflation, and lack of serviced land and affordable housing, continue to burden the country's social fabric. While the government has made strides in addressing these challenges through policies and development programmes, many Namibians are calling for more inclusive growth and solutions to inequality. As the 2024 elections approached, these economic and social concerns were central issues, potentially influencing voter turnout and shifting electoral support. To shift the balance of power, political parties and candidates employed unique campaign strategies to effectively reach the electorate. This helped them communicate their manifestos and policy positions on key issues. In the era of digital communication, media coverage on issues affecting the electorate play a huge role in influencing voting behaviour, especially among young people, women, and people with disabilities.

2.1. Campaign preparation at party level

The preparedness of a party for the election often determines its performance in the election. Yet the period leading up to elections is often volatile for many political parties. While political parties with well-established institutions or structures tend to have a stable and consistent support base, those with high electoral volatility normally perform poorly. Therefore, during election periods in Namibia, political parties engage in strategic preparations and extensive campaigning to secure support.

The year 2024 was filled with many electoral processes at party level. This helped the various parties to be better prepared for the election and spread their message to the masses. For example, to effectively wage a successful political campaign, parties held internal elections to elect leaders, mobilised resources and strengthened their structures. Most political parties elected their parliamentary candidates at their Party Congress.

Political parties deployed various strategies to ensure that they were well prepared for the 2024 elections. Many campaigned door-to-door, presenting their policy positions on pressing issues. Newer parties, such as the AR and IPC, worked at strengthening their party's structures. For instance, during a press conference in April 2024, AR spokesperson George Kambala called on his fellow activists, supporters and sympathisers to formally join the party's Reorganisation, Institutionalisation and Formalisation (RIF) Programme, aimed at ensuring strong foundations in their pursuit of economic emancipation (Ngula 2024). The restructuring took place to better prepare the movement for its participation in the 2024 election.

2.2. Political parties' preparations

The process of preparing for an election often involves crafting a manifesto that outlines a party's policies, priorities, and goals. Campaign strategies typically focus on addressing issues that resonate with the electorate, such as economic development, social services, and employment. The manifesto, which is aimed at appealing to a broad voter demographic, is used to communicate the party's vision during rallies, media appearances, and community engagements. All party structures are geared towards coordinating activities, ensuring that the party's message reaches even the most remote communities.

Parties also engage in internal mobilisation, where they organise resources and set up campaign teams at the regional and local levels. At the party level, much effort is put into selecting and electing candidates who can best represent the party's interests in various constituencies. The election process often reflects internal power dynamics, with senior party leaders influencing key decisions.

Ahead of the elections, parties ramp up their activities, focusing on consolidating support in key regions. This phase often involves large rallies, door-to-door canvassing, and public engagements where candidates interact directly with constituents. The preparations are not without challenges, as parties must navigate logistical issues and manage their campaign finances effectively. Most parties, namely SWAPO, AR, UPM, RDP and LPM, expressed concern about a lack of financial muscle, with some asking the public for donations and arranging gala dinners to raise much needed funds.

2.3. Election campaign strategies

During the election period, political parties deploy different strategies to help them lure the electorate to their side. Each election cycle sees parties rallying their supporters by means of vigorous campaigns that utilise social media, community gatherings, and door-to-door visits, aiming at reaching a diverse population that is spread across urban and rural areas. In the era of digital communication, which is a cost-effective means of communication, political parties make use of social media to reach the electorate, especially young voters. In the last election, parties with the financial means to do so also arranged star rallies in all major towns and regions to reach a wider audience, while distributing free T-shirts and food.

At these rallies, political parties address issues that resonate with the electorate and provide a blueprint for how they propose to solve these issues once elected into power. For example, Namibia has been grappling with a high unemployment rate, healthcare, education, housing and land, and restorative justice for the Herero-Nama Genocide.

2.4. Campaign language

The election period is arguably the most sensitive period in any country's political landscape. It determines how a particular nation will forge ahead after the elections. An election period therefore reveals a country's level of democratic consolidation, as well as the level of maturity of the different political actors and their supporters. If not carefully managed, a country can degenerate into instability, war or division, all of which are expensive and difficult to address. It is therefore essential that peaceful interactions between rival supporters are ensured in order to maintain political stability during this time.

Language plays a critical role in Namibia's political sphere, and it can become a tool of division. In some instances, campaign rhetoric has drifted into divisive language, even bordering on hate speech, as politicians aim to consolidate their bases by appealing to specific ethnic or regional identities. While Namibian laws aim to curb hate speech, enforcement can be challenging, especially in the heat of campaigns. This tendency can fuel tribalism, racism and regionalism, where political parties capitalise on loyalty and historical grievances, sometimes at the expense of national unity. The use of divisive language not only alienates minority groups but also risks exacerbating existing identity biases, making it difficult for other groups to fully participate in the electoral process.

It is essential that all key stakeholders adhere to the code of conduct of the electoral process.

The Namibian government, through the electoral commission, plays a role in monitoring the conduct of the various political party campaigns, to ensure compliance with electoral regulations and to promote a fair and transparent election process. The Electoral Commission of Namibia (ECN) has a mandate to provide political parties with a code of conduct during elections, derived from the Electoral Act, 2014 (Act No. 5 of 2014). Section 154 of this Act empowers the ECN to draft, enforce, and ensure compliance with the Code of Conduct by political parties and candidates during elections. Section 154 stipulates that political parties should not engage in activities which may undermine the electoral process of the country. Such activities include violence and hate speech, amongst others. It is thus imperative for political actors, parties, or candidates to adhere to the Code of Conduct.

Most political parties officially started their campaigns in September 2024 and the Code of Conduct was signed on 8 November 2024. This meant that political parties or actors could not be held to account for events that happened earlier than that date, even though political actors participated in name-calling, with words such as 'foreigners', 'traitors' and 'unpatriotic' hurled at members and supporters of different political parties during this period.

Despite clear legislative frameworks guiding the conduct of political parties and stipulating how they should behave, unlawful conduct therefore still takes place. Some political leaders encourage their supporters to engage in activities which may undermine Namibia's democracy. In May 2024, SWAPO lawmaker Veiko Nekundi, while campaigning, told supporters that he would like to see the 'democratic' graves of IPC and PDM leaders after the elections. Nekundi also added that it was again time for 'Judas Iscariot' to be dealt with and 'put in his rightful place', referring to those who had left the SWAPO camp (Ndeyanale 2024b).

Another example of such misconduct occurred in early 2024, when Moses Ndjene slapped a SWAPO Party coordinator from Mix Settlement, an informal settlement near Windhoek, for lies that SWAPO had allegedly been telling over the years. Namibia Economic Freedom Fighters (NEFF) second in command Longinus Iipumbu thereupon announced that the party was giving Ndjene N$1 000 for doing the "right thing", and as "a sign of solidarity with Ndjene and a message to those who lie about development programmes" (Ndeyanale 2024a). Though denied by the NEFF, this act encourages political violence, which is against Namibia's democratic principles and the laws of the country.

In a similar incident, a SWAPO supporter was charged with attempted murder when he allegedly drove a car into an IPC rally held in a village near Outapi (Haidula 2024). Outapi is in the Omusati region, which has been regarded as a 'no-go area' for opposition parties for many years. Opposition leaders have been insulted and have had rocks thrown at them over the years, with the result that many have been hesitant to hold rallies in the region.

As the campaign trail heated up, skirmishes also took place between LPM and SWAPO supporters in the Khara and Hardap regions, where both parties were competing for dominance in the election. A SWAPO campaign vehicle was vandalised, SWAPO flags removed, and SWAPO venues in Mariental booked by the opposition to prevent their star rally taking place there (Shikololo 2024). On the other hand, LPM supporters accused SWAPO supporters of provocation.

A further contentious issue is the stance some political players take towards those they consider foreigners. On this matter, they have a clear policy position, vowing to deport such people back to their home countries if their party were to win the upcoming election. In their 2024 elections manifesto, the Republican Party of Namibia (RP) vowed to "chase away"Chinese nationals from Namibia. The National Democratic Party of Namibia (NDP) also had a similar stance towards foreigners who do not transfer skills to Namibians. IPC leader Dr. Panduleni Itula was labelled a "foreigner" and "British agent" by his political opponents for allegedly staying in Britain for an extended period after Namibia gained independence. Supporters of the different political parties call each other "sell-outs", and "unpatriotic citizens" because of choosing or aligning with a different party. This has led to tensions in the public arena, indicating a lack of political tolerance and maturity.

2.5. Political parties' manifesto launch

The most important document during the election year is arguably a party manifesto. It is a policy blueprint of how a political party plans to administer the affairs of a country and lead the nation to prosperity. In Namibia, party manifestos influence voting behavior only to an extent, however. This is attributed to the fact that Namibians have a poor reading culture (Matheus 2024). Many voters therefore tend to base their choices on party loyalty, history, identity, what they see on social media, or the messages they hear at rallies. On the other hand, younger, city-dwelling, and educated voters often pay closer attention to the specific policies and details laid out in party manifestos when voting (Matheus 2024). Furthermore, the privileged few and those with an interest in policy prefer to receive party manifestos on time to be able to assess which parties best speak to their needs, as well as having the best solutions for the country's problems.

Ahead of the watershed elections in November, political parties failed to release their manifestos on time, a move considered by some people in the public as undermining the electorate (Namibian Sun. 2024). Most of the political parties only released their policy blueprint in October 2024, with the, PDM being the first political party to give a glimpse of their policy position and their plans for Namibia, in late August of the same year.

Namibia faces a host of difficult socio-political and economic issues which a new administration would have to address when taking office on 21 March 2025. The country is dealing with a housing backlog of more than 300 000 units. Second, Namibia is one of the most

unequal societies in the world. It is generally understood that the country is yet to achieve economic freedom. This can be attributed to the means of production being owned by the minority white people as well as a few politically connected individuals. Unemployment is the highest since independence with government critics saying it has surpassed the 50 % mark. Corruption allegations and acute poverty reports make the front pages of newspapers almost every day. All this makes the ground fertile for opposition parties to inflict electoral defeat on the ruling party.

However, most opposition parties' manifestos lack practicability. They include general statements on how to create employment opportunities, solve housing problems, improve healthcare and education, and resolve the land issue, without a clear plan on how they will address issues facing the ordinary person. Left-leaning opposition parties such as AR, LPM and NEFF promised to deal with the land issue radically by means of a legislative framework, which included restricting "foreigners" from owning land and restoring ancestral land to their descendants. These policy positions, however, amount to a 'negative peace' that does not address the underlying issues.

2.6. Political parties' internal disputes

It has become the norm that during the election year most if not all political parties in Namibia experience internal problems. These problems range from factionalism to leadership and legal disputes, attributed to dissatisfaction with internal party politics. Since its formation, SWAPO has experienced internal disputes for various reasons. Party members have taken the party to court, and some have left the party to form their own political parties. This trend has birthed many political parties, like the Congress of Democracy (CoD), Rally for Democracy (RDP), All Peoples Party (APP), NEFF, AR, LPM and the Independent Patriot for Change (IPC).

The formation of these political parties has undermined SWAPO's electoral dominance in recent years. The former liberation movement lost two regions in the south of the country to the LPM, and it has also lost the two major municipalities of Walvis Bay and Windhoek to opposition parties, with former members of the party playing an instrumental role in these defeats.

SWAPO leadership succession issues also led to legal disputes in 2024. It is alleged that SWAPO acted illegally within its constitution when the party failed to call for an Extraordinary Congress in terms of Article 15(9), "which provide that an extraordinary congress shall be called by the central committee within three months of the vacancy occurring, to elect a new president to complete the unexpired terms of the former president" (The Namibian 2024), following the death of the party president, Dr. Hage Geingob, in February 2024. Instead, the party postponed the Extraordinary Congress to 2025. The failure to act according to its constitution has been questioned by Reinhold Shipwikineni and others (New Era 2024). The issue has left party members divided on the legitimacy of Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah as SWAPO presidential candidate, although reelection as Vice President of SWAPO in 2022 virtually guaranteed her candidacy.

At least seven political parties faced internal fighting in 2024 because of their alleged failure to follow or obey their own rules or alleged unconstitutional processes for electing leaders. Political parties such as SWAPO, IPC, RDP, SWANU, NUDO, PDM, RP, NEFF and Christian Democratic Voice Party (CDV), all faced leadership or legal disputes (See Figure 1 below). This led to political parties going to the polls heavily divided, which might have affected their electoral performance.

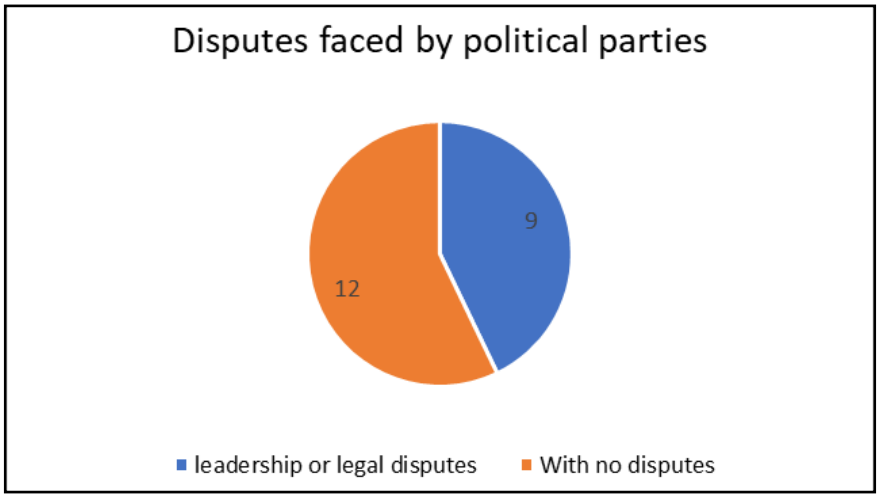

Figure 1: Disputes faced by political parties

An illustration of parties that faced internal challenges, due to issues such as congress-related disputes, legal battles, Leadership conflicts, and deregistration concerns. It highlights the prevalence and distribution of these issues among various political parties, offering insights into the dynamics and stability of Namibia's political landscape. This underscores the factors that may hamper a party from meaningfully participating in the elections to its full potential and achieve maximum support. (Source: Authors' own compilation)

In the past, delays in calling a congress have fueled internal tensions, as opposing factions accuse each other of trying to manipulate the process to retain or gain power. These internal challenges have occasionally led to the emergence of splinter groups or rival factions, which impact the party's cohesion and public image.

Opposition parties such as PDM, SWANU, the National Unity Democratic Organisation of Namibia (NUDO) and RDP also often have disputes around succession planning. Incumbent leaders may face challenges from emerging figures who advocate for a shift in policies or generational change, leading to public disagreements and factionalism. In some cases, these leadership battles result in splinter groups forming, as those who lose leadership contests choose to leave the party and form breakaway movements. Such internal conflicts can weaken parties, reduce voter confidence, and create difficulties in presenting a unified front during national elections. For instance, leading up to the 2024 elections, a faction within the NUDO, led by former sports administrator Barry Rukoro, joined forces with SWANU, a move which possibly weakened the NUDO.

3. Media analysis

The media play a critical role in informing the public about political candidates, policies, and the electoral process through effective and inclusive coverage. Media coverage on election issues influences the public's perceptions and subsequent voting behaviour because it is the link by which people learn about what is at stake. Media plays a very important role in a democratic country as to reshapes societies by spreading information to the electorate (Imran and Masood 2020). In a democratic country like Namibia, access to information is therefore a right.

In addition, media coverage serves as a watchdog, holding candidates accountable for their statements and actions. Investigative reporting can expose corruption, misconduct, or inconsistencies in a candidate's campaign, helping to maintain the integrity of the electoral process. Social media platforms have further amplified the impact of media coverage, allowing for real-time dissemination of information and wider public engagement. However, with the rise of misinformation, the media's role in fact-checking and providing accurate, unbiased content has become even more crucial to preserving the integrity of elections.

Media coverage is a powerful tool during elections, particularly for voter education and election campaign coverage, as it focuses on the parties' and candidates' manifestos. Political parties and candidates acknowledge the importance of media coverage during an election year, because it is a tool by which they sell their ideas and policies to the electorate, with the hope of being voted for in power. In 2019, the World Press Freedom Index declared Namibia to be the African country with the greatest press freedom as (Reporters Without Borders 2019, as cited by Keulder 2020). However, the question is whether the media are inclusive in their coverage on issues affecting young people, women, and people living with disabilities, especially during an important election year.

3.1. Media coverage of different political parties

The media serves as an important source of information on daily issues for most citizens (Zoizner et al. 2017, as cited by Remoortere 2023). It is the vehicle of information usually meant for particular demographics. Politicians and political parties compete with each other for votes, and their popularity translates their ideas and policies into power. While the competition for power takes place in the political arena, the media plays a big role. The media can be a tool used to shape a certain narrative, as the electorates are influenced by what they see in the media. Coverage of social issues, such as corruption, bad governance, and poor service delivery, along with the tonality of media coverage regarding political parties, affect individuals' voting preference.

In a democratic society, the elections are expected to be free and fair. This principle means all political parties should have a level playing field in terms of spreading their ideas to the public. If the ruling party receives more media attention, the elections will not be deemed to have been free and fair. According to Sheafer (2001) and (Strömbäck (2008), as cited by Remoortere (2023), studies show that citizens tend to vote for candidates they are familiar with through media exposure, because the exposure helps politicians build a public reputation, communicate policy, and engage with the electorate. Figure 2 illustrates newspaper coverage of three of the most prominent parties in the 2024 elections.

Political parties' media visibility therefore significantly affects public opinion and, by extension, politicians' popularity. However, not all politicians receive equal attention, as the media often favour those in influential positions or with incumbency advantages. This can be attributed to the fact that some media houses get funding from the government and could be forced to promote the ruling party's policies and work. In such cases, the media no longer operate as the fourth estate in that they are not independent entities but tools of the ruling

elites and those who fund them.

The 2024 Media Ombudsman Report noted that the ruling party, SWAPO, received more media coverage than other political parties. More media coverage for the ruling party in comparison to other parties gives SWAPO more visibility and a greater platform to promote its ideas, policies, and programmes, as well as its presidential candidate (De Swert and Van Aelst 2009, as cited by Remoortere (2023). In SWAPO's case, enhanced media visibility may be due to its status as the ruling party, which accords it greater media access to and influence on public opinion compared to opposition parties. This visibility may contribute to SWAPO's sustained political support, as media exposure consistently affects voters' perceptions and reinforces political dominance.

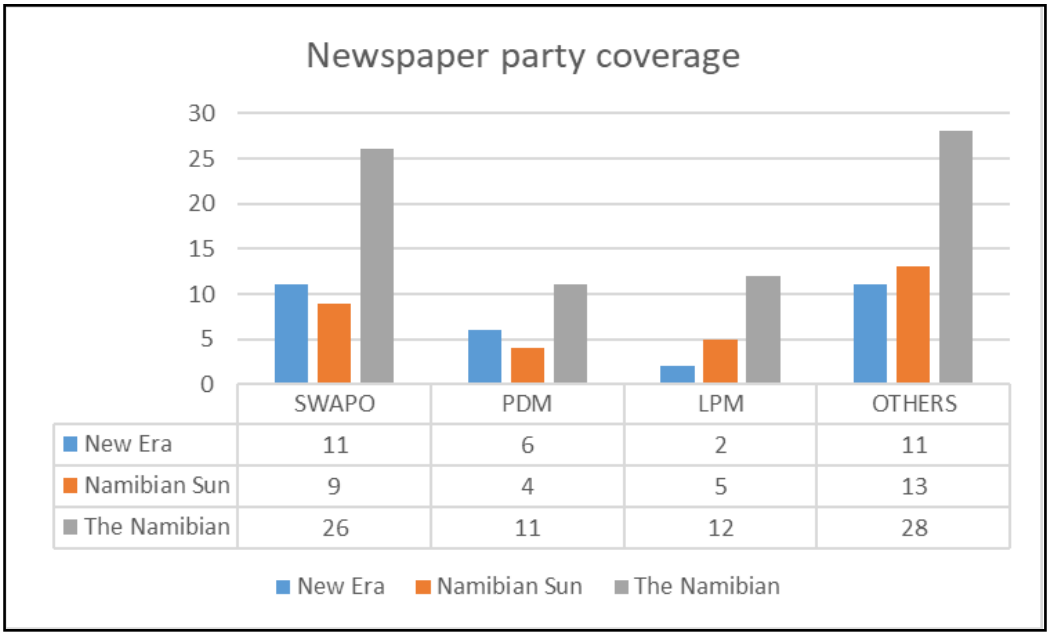

Figure 2: Newspaper party coverage

The chart shows that SWAPO got more media attention for the month of October 2024 compared to other parties. (Source: Authors' own compilation)

3.2. Media coverage of election issues pertaining to the youth, women, and people with disabilities

The Namibian 2024 elections, which took place on 27, 29 and 30 November 2024, saw a high turnout of registered voters. The country has been experiencing socio-economic issues for several years, which might have been the catalyst for 90% of 1. 6 million eligible voters to tun out. A large section of Namibian society that have particularly suffered hardship, including young people, women, and people living with disabilities, registered to vote. The distribution of registered voters among these groups is illustrated in Figure 3, and media coverage of issues pertaining to these groups is shown in Figure 4.

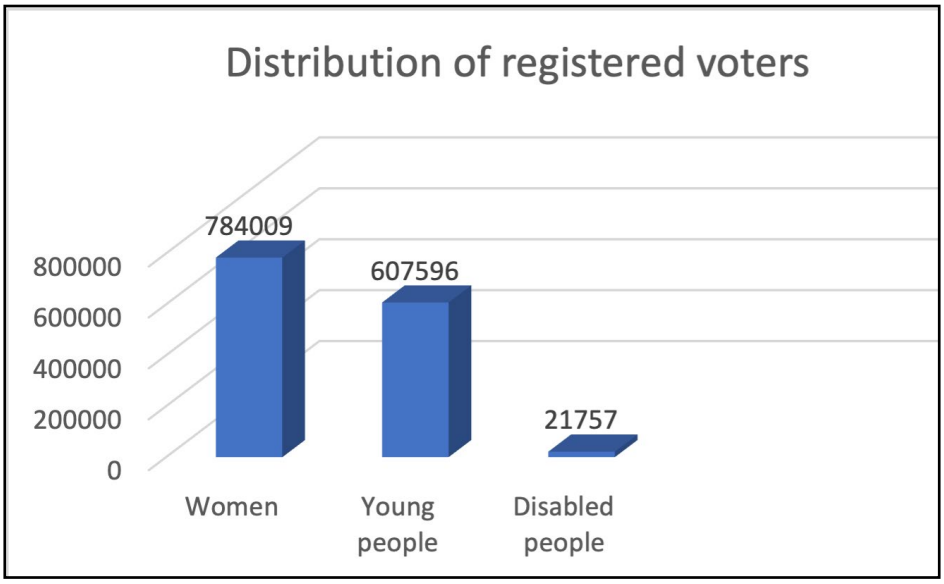

Figure 3: Distribution of registered voters

An illustration of the proportion of young people, women and people with disabilities, who are registered to vote in the upcoming elections, highlighting the engagement levels of this key demographic group in the electoral process. There is potential of double or tripling counting, as ECN did not aggregate the data accordingly. (Source: ECN social media page. Graph authors' own compilation)

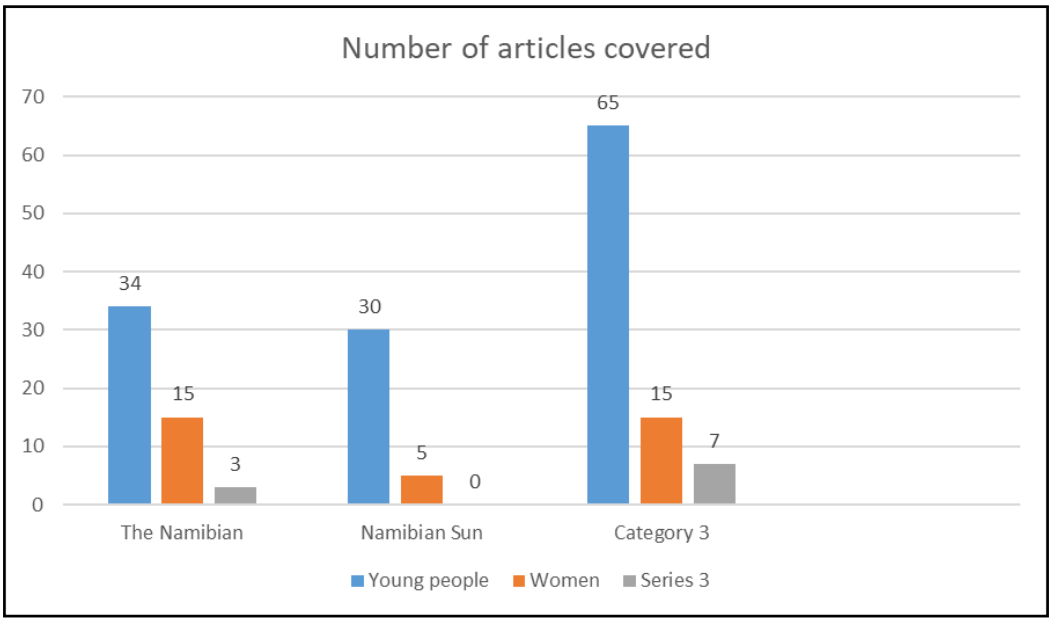

Figure 4: Number of newspaper articles covering specific categories of voters

This bar graph gives a graphical representation of how different newspapers covered issues pertaining to specific categories of voters. (Data for November not included.) (Source: Authors' own compilation).

3.3. Issues concerning young people

Recently, young people in Namibia have been at the receiving end of political incompetence and mismanagement of state resources. Politics is about numbers and young people have the numbers to single-handedly change the political trajectory of Namibia by exercising their democratic rights. An important pillar of democracy is the media, as they inform the voting-age electorate of issues the country is facing, and the policies different political parties are likely to employ in solving those issues, once given the mandate to rule.

Overall, the media outlets have covered issues affecting young people fairly. Articles printed in The Namibian, New Era and Namibian Sun focused mostly on issues such as unemployment among young people, youth empowerment, and youth involvement in politics, among other things. However, while local media outlets in Namibia do cover these issues, there is a general consensus in society that more

effort should be made to ensure that the youth are fully engaged in the electoral process, and to address the barriers they face to political participation. As a source of information, the media houses can play a big role in ensuring that young people are well informed ahead of elections, and that voter apathy among them is addressed.

3.4. Issues concerning women

Namibia is a patriarchal society that pushes women to the margins. However, over the years the country has made strides in addressing issues affecting women. Despite this, more effort is desired from the government to improve and elevate the position of women in society. The media coverage of women's issues mostly focuses on their leadership skills and personal attributes, which reinforce gender stereotypes rather than highlighting their political platforms and policy positions on key issues.

Discussions around gender-based violence (GBV), access to education, healthcare, and economic empowerment become secondary issues. This is despite activist groups leveraging the election period to demand policy changes and accountability from political leaders. Rural women's voices and perspectives from marginalised communities are often underrepresented, with coverage skewed towards urban narratives. Additionally, while social media have become a critical platform for amplifying women's issues, traditional media sometimes fail to adequately address systemic challenges faced by women.

Many women face challenges as heads of the home, providing for the family, and battling gender related violence. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) revealed that at least 32% of Namibian women have experienced physical violence from an intimate partner at some point in their lives (Gotlieb 2023). This social ill has the potential to undermine women's prospects and slow down government efforts to ensure an equal society. Media reporting during this period on the real impact of political decisions on women's lives would ensure more equitable and substantive discussions around these issues.

3.5. Issues affecting people with disabilities

People with disabilities have been ignored by society for a long time. Unsurprisingly, the media have therefore turned a blind eye, too. During the election year, the media were supposed to cover issues affecting different sections of society. However, people with disabilities have been consistently sidelined. Advocacy organisations, such as the National Federation of People with Disabilities in Namibia (NFPDN), have highlighted systematic barriers faced by persons with disabilities in accessing public institutions and in meaningfully participating in all sectors of society. While some media outlets report on commitments by political parties to address the inclusion of the disabled, coverage often lacks depth and sustained attention beyond campaign promises.

People with disabilities do not only face challenges from being excluded by the media, but political parties are also not inclusive. People with disabilities, or differently abled people', have limited resources at their disposal in making informed decisions ahead of elections. Many often must rely on secondary sources of information, as, for example, party manifestos are usually not available to people who are visually impaired, and political rallies do not take the hearing impaired into consideration. Only SWAPO went to the trouble of translating its manifesto into Braille, which "marks the first time ever in the country, that an election manifesto of any political party has been made available to people with visual impairments" (Hamalwa 2024). Other parties claimed that they did not have the funds to make their manifestos inclusive.

4. Discussion

In 2024, the political ground was very fertile for opposition parties to inflict electoral defeat on the ruling party. Several issues, such as unemployment among young people, the high cost of living, lack of service delivery (especially land and housing), limited economic opportunities, and pervasive gender-based violence (GBV), were considered likely to influence the outcome of Namibia's 2024 general elections.

However, as an information vehicle, the three major daily newspapers failed to adequately cover the issues affecting young people, women, and people with disabilities. The lack of coverage meant that this large demographic went to the polls arguably not well informed about issues facing the country. This fact likely affected meaningful democratic participation.

4.1. Election day

The Public Holidays Act, 1990, Section 1 (3), empowered the President to declare the day of the elections as a public holiday. President Nangolo Mbumba, Namibia's fourth president, signed a gazette and declared 27 November 2024 a public holiday for the purposes of the election of the President and Members of National Assembly under the Electoral Act, 2014 (Petersen 2024). According to the announcement, the polls were expected to open at 07h00 and close at 21h00.

On voting day, many registered voters across the country turned up to cast their votes. However, their expectations were disappointed as they were forced to endure long queues because of technical problems experienced by the ECN. Furthermore, some polling stations experienced ballot shortages despite the ECN printing extra ballot papers, and some polling stations opened late in the afternoon on the day of the elections (Ndeyanale et al. 2024). Critics accused the ECN of deliberately frustrating voters. NEFF second in command Kalimbo Ipumbu threatened "to burn down that ECN because of what he saw as a poorly organised election, adding that Namibians "cannot tolerate that nonsense" (Ndeyanale et al. 2024). The challenges experienced on 27 November 2024 resulted in President Mbumba extending the voting period to 29 and 30 November at selected polling stations, to give registered voters who did not manage to vote on 27 November a further opportunity to do so.

4.2. Election results

The 2024 Namibian general elections marked a significant shift in the country's political landscape. The ruling party retained power but with a significantly reduced majority, the worst electoral performance since independence. SWAPO Party presidential candidate Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah made history by becoming Namibia's first female president. Nandi-Ndaitwah secured 57.3% of the votes, slightly more than the 56% of President Hage Geingob in the 2019 elections. Despite her historic victory, SWAPO lost 12 seats in the National Assembly and secured only 51 seats overall (Shipale 2024).

The opposition underwent major transformation as well, as the PDM, which had been the second most popular party in the 2019 elections, was left licking its wounds as well. The party held 16 seats in the National Assembly but only managed to retain 5 seats after the recent (2024) elections. In contrast, IPC managed to secure 20 parliamentary seats, becoming the official opposition party (Shipale 2024). The general mood around the elections suggested an appetite for political change, with analysts predicting that if the ruling party does not change its approach to "bread and butter" issues affecting the electorate, the party could lose power in the 2029 elections.

4.3. Legal challenge

Following the closely contested and controversial elections of November 2024 and the decision of President Mbumba to extend the voting period, the IPC and the LPM approached the Electoral and Supreme Courts to have the National Assembly and Presidential elections nullified. The parties challenged the validity and constitutionality of President Mbumba's decision to extend voting by two days beyond the gazetted election date of 27 November 2024. In addition, the applicants claimed that technical errors, logistical issues and shortages of ballot papers led to voter suppression, violating the rights of individuals (Nashuuta 2025).

IPC President Dr. Panduleni Itula, the first applicant in the matter argued that "the election contravened Part 5 of the Electoral Act and the Namibian Constitution; it was tainted by serious illegalities; the verification tablets used were not authorised under the Act; ineligible voters were permitted to cast ballots; and Proclamation 34 of 2024 which extended the voting period was unlawful" (Namibia Superior Courts 2025).

The IPC and LPM legal challenge culminated in a Supreme Court decision to unanimously rule in favour of the defendants. A full bench of Supreme Court Judges, led by Chief Justice Peter Shivute, concluded that the presidential proclamation to extend voting was lawful as extension did not amount to establishing new polling dates and a new election, but was a continuation and completion of the election (Agence France Presse 2025).

The court ruling underscored the judiciary's role in upholding the rule of law, ensuring that the elections are conducted constitutionally. Despite the magnitude of the ruling, Namibians again lived up to their mantra of being peaceful as no confrontation or conflict was observed because of the court decision. Nevertheless, the ruling could set a precedent for future elections, should similar issues arise, as, unless there are mitigating circumstances, the same judgement will apply. The ruling could also negatively affect political parties' confidence in the judiciary system.

As a result of the ruling, several people called for the reform of Electoral Act No 5 to allow all election cases to be heard in the same court. At present, Section 168 of the Electoral Court Act of 2014 specifies that the Electoral Court hears any challenge mounted by a political party against the National Assembly elections, while, in terms of Articles 79 and 81 of the Namibian Constitution, the Supreme Court handles Presidential election challenges (NamibLII 2025). Legal analyst Yarukeekuro Ndorokaze proposes an amendment to the Electoral Act to ensure that all election-related disputes, whether presidential or parliamentary, are adjudicated in a single forum (Seibeb 2025). This is because the disputes regarding both the National Assembly election and the Presidential election were heard in separate courts despite being conducted on the same day, which can cause a 'legal conundrum' if the courts should pass different judgments.

To avoid this, "the Electoral Court has ordered that the Independent Patriots for Change's legal challenge of Namibia's 2024 National Assembly election should not proceed until the Supreme Court has decided a similar case about the 2024 presidential election" (Menges 2025). Judge Hannelie Prinsloo, judges Orben Sibeya and Esi Schimming-Chase noted "that the Supreme Court's decision on the legality of the proclamation would provide guidance to the Electoral Court and limit issues that would need to be decided in the IPC's National Assembly election challenge" (Menges 2025).

Namibia's 2024 general elections were marked by a host of challenges. The logistical shortcomings that the ECN experienced have eroded public trust. It will need to prove its ability to host free and fair elections by addressing the challenges of long queues, shortages of ballot papers and technical difficulties in future. It is essential that confidence is restored in the ECN to ensure the electoral integrity of future elections.

5. Conclusion

Despite young people, women, and people with disabilities being the largest registered demographic, and also the demographic facing some of the greatest challenges, their issues are underreported in the media. The media are the voice and ear of the public and without media coverage the public will be poorly informed, and their decision-making compromised ahead of an election. When a certain section of society is systematically excluded from politics, its problems become difficult to address. The lack of representation in the media perpetuates the marginalisation of these groups and undermines efforts to achieve equitable participation in Namibia's democratic processes.

Media houses should develop an approach of covering diverse perspectives to ensure fair coverage of marginalised groups. For example, the media should actively commit to inclusive reporting by adopting editorial guidelines that prioritise stories addressing the needs and voices of young people, women, and people with disabilities. Training journalists on gender-sensitive and disability-inclusive reporting could enhance their capacity to produce balanced coverage and reporting. Furthermore, collaboration with advocacy organisations holds the potential to provide media professionals with insights into the pressing issues these communities face.

In conclusion, the 2024 Namibian election cycle was defined by a complex interplay of factors, including the presence of a large population of young unemployed people, women, and people with disabilities. Despite the challenges facing Namibians, the elections represented an opportunity for political renewal, where both established parties and emerging opposition groups had to confront the growing dissatisfaction among voters and to find ways to unite the nation around practical solutions to its pressing problems. In 2024, Namibia stood at a crossroads, where the choices made by its political leaders determined the path forward for the nation's future. One trusts that, in the end, politicians will consider the hopes and aspirations of the electorate, and address problems, such as the catastrophic unemployment facing young people, as well as acute poverty and high inequality, in fact, all the challenges and social ills threatening the peace and stability of the "Namibian House". This is what the Namibian people deserve.

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