

Considerations for African Democrats about AI

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Acknowledgements

I am grateful to have had input from Mark Gaffley, Hanani Hlomani, David Mastey, Liz Orembo, Andrew Rens, Araba Sey, and Charmaine Smith.

Key points

- ❖ Advancing the democratic policy agenda of social and economic justice requires not only technical audits of computer code and the algorithms of any one product or programme, but sophisticated social critique of assumptions and worldviews that both explicitly and implicitly inform the computer code, algorithms and their organisational settings.
- ❖ While national comprehensive data protections laws and baseline privacy protections have merit, encryption needs to be treated as a key pillar of African democracy.
- ❖ Even so, the root cause of democratic under-performance in Africa is sociological, not technological. Therefore, new technical solutions will not fix it.
- ❖ The persistence of social and global inequalities underscores why African regulatory petitioning must occur at the continental level, and why there must be a sizable African presence in all the venues that discuss democratic governance of AI.

1 Introduction

Democracy in African countries is on two opposing trajectories, advancing in some countries, regressing for others, with a range of contentions underway in local settings. AI is being recruited in service of both trajectories. First and foremost, there have been some noteworthy recent developments in African democratisation. For example, in South Africa supporters of Jacob Zuma accepted the outcome of the African National Congress's 2018 party conference; the 2022 Somali election resulted in a peaceful transfer of power; and the courts in Lesotho and the Central African Republic rejected unconstitutional attempts to amend constitutions. These examples show that African peoples are doing the hard work to practise democracy. This hard work is supported by public opinion surveys that indicate a strong demand for democracy (Mattes, 2019).

Conversely, authoritarians have become further entrenched and de-democratisation has also taken place. A series of military coups in the Sahel region and a civil war in Sudan have undermined the prospects of democracy in those regions. A low-intensity civil war has erupted in the Tigray region after local officials held an election in defiance of the democratically elected Ethiopian government, which has been accused of human rights violations and ethnic cleansing. In Uganda, the government is persecuting the LGBTQIA+ community, marking them for both social death and state executions, in a cynical quest to prop up a failing autocracy with fundamentalist Christianity. The monarchy in eSwatini has aggressively repressed the democratic movement, leading to violent protests and a crackdown by security forces.

States are purchasing AI-products and AI-military systems to further these repressive aims. For example, Bakratyar TB2 drones have been purchased by several African states. At least 15 countries have drone capabilities (Kurpershoek, Muñoz Valdez & Zwijnenburg, 2021), many of which have been deployed against domestic rebellions. Ethiopia's Turkish-made TB-2 drones have been used in Tigray, killing more than 300 civilians in the first 16 months of that conflict according to media reports (Bearak, Kelly, & Lee 2022). The Uganda police have confirmed that their national CCTV system has licence plate readers and facial recognition systems (Anon, 2020). These systems are being deployed against political dissents (Kafeero, 2020). (For more on the use of facial recognition technology, see Allen, 2020). Similar capabilities have been procured and deployed by

Zimbabwe (Africa Defence Forum 2023). Studies show that influence has been commodified and traded in African digital spaces (Allen, le Roux, & Beti, 2023; Timcke, 2022; Timcke et al. 2023).

Notwithstanding the positives, overall de-democratisation trends outweigh democratisation. (For a holistic assessment that supports this conclusion, review Cheeseman & Garbe, 2020). Africanists are right to sound the alarm about de-democratisation as “more Africans live under fully or partially authoritarian states today than at most points in the last two decades” (Campbell & Quinn, 2021). The development and use of AI requires huge capital investments, demands significant energy resources, and routinely involves extractive data practices and exploitative labour practices. This harkens to the experience with globalisation wherein capital sought to take advantage of easily exploited labour in the Global South. These developments ultimately strained democracy in the Global South (see Kaldor, 2008).

To make sense of recent trends around how AI products and systems are shaping the prospects and practices of African politics, a wide lens is required. Analysis of what AI is and how it could impact the exercise of African democracy must consider the nature of the particular product, its institutional and social affordances, the policy space and regulatory environment, as well as global dynamics, as each of these comes to shape how AI is deployed and used in any particular setting. The purpose of this report is to give African democrats a contextual and political understanding of AI and technology, especially those that are not working in the fields of science, technology and innovation policy.

2 How to think about AI and democracy

As the various ‘competitive authoritarian regimes’ in Africa well illustrate, elections are insufficient to sustain democracy. Depending on the circumstances, this could be because elections are often constrained and crosscut by legal and institutional frameworks that protect the interests of the most powerful and the incumbents. Or it could be because the opinions and worldview of senior state managers and policymakers oftentimes align with the most powerful stakeholders in the society, resulting in preferential policy choices that cater to those groups. Increasing isolation between constituents and policymakers and leaders can erode the legitimacy of representation. These conditions are by no means unique to Africa, but rather they are part of a global trend wherein “authoritarian leaders are using the language of democracy in an attempt to conceal the abusive systems through which they cling to power” (Smeltzer, 2023).

For these reasons, democracy is best understood as a dynamic system in which holding elections to form governments is but one part. There is value in adopting a broader understanding of democracy as a form of social organisation that respects the rights and freedoms of its citizens while also reflecting the majority’s will (and that of their elected representatives, which may or may not align) and preferences on pressing questions of the day. At the same time there may be some utility in recognising that the main goal of democracy is not to create consensus. Rather, it is to periodically make binding decisions that settle differences about what direction a government must take to address the priorities of the government and/or wider society. In short, partisanship is an inevitable component of democratic life.

Democracy is not universally accepted in Africa. Some ethno-nationalist groups reject democracy as an allegedly non-African form of governance imposed by Western powers and assert that,

whatever the impetus, this form of government therefore cannot meet the needs or sociopolitical worldviews of African peoples. These groups prefer other forms of governance that emphasise tradition, identity, militarism, or religion. There are also pessimists who argue that African societies are not yet ready for democracy as they have not yet reached a particular developmental stage required to maintain this political system. And finally there are developmental authoritarians who argue that democracy detracts from economic growth, which they rank higher in need and urgency.¹ Authoritarians and other detractors of democracy in Africa pose a challenge to democratic consolidation and the development of the continent.

The text box summarises prior reviews of trends in African electoral democracy from credible organisations and networks, some of which address issues around technology (Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2016; Sanusi & Nassuna, 2017; Campbell & Quinn, 2021; Abebe, Hudson, & Towriss, 2022; Afrobarometer, 2023).

Prior observations about emerging trends in African electoral democracy

According to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, in 2016:

- ❖ Authoritarians mimicking formal democratic mechanisms, i.e. competitive authoritarian regimes;
- ❖ While ethnic affiliation still matters, demographic change with new cohorts of voters has introduced new heuristics for casting ballots;
- ❖ Executive term extension occurs when there are weak parties;
- ❖ Corporate media are taking on a 'watchdog' role;
- ❖ Election management bodies work in very charged environments; and
- ❖ Regional organisations are eager and willing to promote democracy, but can receive near-to-impossible requests by fellow democrats.

And, the South African Institute of International Affairs found, in 2017:

- ❖ Alterations to constitutions and term limits;
- ❖ Tampering with the electoral calendar;
- ❖ Harassment and intimidation of opposition candidates; and
- ❖ Low voter turnout.

The Council for Foreign Relations reported, in 2021:

- ❖ Gradual gains for authoritarians;
- ❖ Geographic clustering is evident in democratic stability and backsliding;
- ❖ Younger voters use platforms to engage in politics;
- ❖ COVID-19 was used as a pretext to silence the media and civil society;
- ❖ Foreign influences are becoming starker and more visible; and

¹ The difficulty with developmental authoritarian regimes is that their self-reported economic data is untrustworthy as it does not match third-party academic tests. For more on this systematic overestimation and evaluation techniques, see Martínez (2022).

- ❖ Developmental authoritarianism is a competing system of government for those who see democracy as an impediment to development.

According to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, in 2022:

- ❖ The East African Stabilisation Force may help bring peace to the Democratic Republic of the Congo;
- ❖ Indications that West African countries are resisting inputs from regional bodies;
- ❖ While resisted by judiciaries, constitutional revisions remain on the agenda of some ruling parties; and
- ❖ Russia's invasion of Ukraine has altered strategic relationships with major powers, if even more established African democracies have condemned the invasion.

The Afrobarometer indicated, in 2023:

- ❖ When compared to other systems of government, most Africans prefer democracy and endorse its norms, institutions, and practices;
- ❖ Notwithstanding the demand for democracy, Africans are not satisfied with the current performance of democratic states; and
- ❖ Young Africans are softening towards using the military to address gridlock in national politics.

The already complex democracy landscape is made even more murky with the introduction of complex new technologies such as AI. The term 'AI' has roots in post-war era computational research and development. AI research gained renewed attention in the 2000s and 2010s when advances in deep learning became feasible – mainly due to the availability of large amounts of human-generated data on the Internet and networked devices. These advances enabled widespread applications such as voice assistants, recommendation systems, and automated driver assistance.² Concurrently the term 'AI' is used over-broadly in ways that obscure and exaggerate a range of data-centric techniques that usually require resources which only a few companies possess. Relatedly, on the topic of 'open' AI, David Gray Widder and colleagues write about language and obscurity. They “find that the terms 'open' and 'open source' are used in confusing and diverse ways, often constituting more aspiration or marketing than technical descriptor, and frequently blending concepts from both open source software and open science” (Gray Widder, West, & Whittaker 2023, p. 2.). These techniques are often shielded from validation and scrutiny by trade secrecy (Burrell, 2016). Concurrently, a good portion of AI systems rely upon poorly paid human labour located in the Global South. Josh Dzieza's investigations show that “as the technology becomes ubiquitous, a vast tasker underclass is emerging” (Dzieza, 2023). For example, heavily exploited Keynan clickworkers were sub-contracted to categorise and train some generative AI models (Perrigo, 2023).

² As a form of 'machine learning', 'deep learning' refers to a computer model's ability to 'optimise' for predictions while training on data by updating the weights in a complex set of statistical calculations that work through multiple layers.

These comments are not meant to imply that the term ‘AI’ has absolutely no utility in Africa or that it and its associated practices are inherently anti-democratic. Rather they are raised to emphasise that AI is not one ‘thing’. It is more accurate to understand it as a set of practices associated with historical data and human labelling mixed with weighted statistical analysis. Human labour creates those inputs and humans with power decide what to do with the outputs. As with any set of practices around power, its distribution and instruments matter for the quality of democratic life. Given the amount of capital invested in AI research and product development, it is wise to pay attention to how this investment is introducing new and amplifying existing social and global inequalities, all of which work to place more strain on democratic systems (for the extensive argument and evidence of this point, see Timcke, 2021).

3 Friction points for AI and African democracy

Listed below are a series of AI-related issues that are or will likely have an impact on the prospects of African democracy. The dynamics of these conditions are more clear in some areas than others, and at times they may be congruent with what is happening elsewhere in the world. The problems and issues described below are not inevitable or fixed, but rather anticipated outcomes given current conditions across the continent.

3.1 Platform injustices and multinational Big Tech firms

It is well known that, because Big Tech firms commodify their users’ data for advertisers, data brokerage, and to train AI models, they are reluctant to voluntarily alter or even reveal their recommendation algorithms lest these actions decrease engagement (Jordan, 2019). The internal disincentives to undertake adequate content management (and the consequences of failure to do so) introduce a series of ‘platform injustices’ like ethical concerns, algorithmic harms, and societal oppression.

Platform injustices stem from the design and operation of contemporary platforms including but not limited to the attention economy, automated advertising systems, external manipulators, company spending priorities, knowledge deficits and misinformation, state and self-censorship, and flaws in platforms’ policies. Platform injustices cater to oppressive government actors as well as bad-faith content creators who can profit from pursuing hostile, malicious business models.

While many platform injustices go beyond the intentional design of platforms, African experiences with platform injustices are often overlooked or marginalised due to current power dynamics in the international system. The same can be true of users based in Africa and other places in the majority world. Partly due to colonialism and its aftermath, local institutions lack the capability to effectively regulate Big Tech. Treaties, international agreements and economic diplomacy by major majors can also exert pressures that discourage state-sponsored research in platform injustices and subsequent efforts to curb them. The result is that people in the Majority World experience disproportionate harm from platforms. This is a theme that will be revisited in this paper. And finally, also due to the distribution of power in the international system, it is rare for alternative solutions and governance models that have been advanced in the Majority World to gain traction in international bodies.

There are good reasons to think that current and future uses of AI will exacerbate platform injustices and engender new challenges. For example, predictive automated decision-making AI tools are trained on user data, thereby creating financial incentives for data surveillance by Big Tech companies on social media and in other domains (Timcke, 2021). Ordinary AI-powered products already require significant data surveillance; corporate incentives will normalise AI injustices. Put differently, AI products will amplify and accelerate corporate (and state) surveillance in the form of monitoring, data mining, assessing, and even inferring (i.e., profiling) further information about a person. Without significant and coordinated regulation of these activities at the global level, existing corporate business models will ensure that AI is not leveraged as a democratising force, or produce public good/s for all.

Concurrently, governments scapegoat Big Tech platforms for government weaknesses, especially the consequences which stem from their prior refusal to regulate markets. Certainly, platform companies have considerable clout through their moderation practices and platform architecture. But to attribute all social ills to these entities is a flawed understanding of the root causes of social problems.

3.2 Media freedom and misinformation

Media freedom is a necessary concomitant of freedom of expression, a thread in the woven tapestry in which democratic institutional culture guided by the rule of law is kept honest through the watchful eye of the fourth estate (Rens, Adams & Timcke 2023). In this orthodoxy, states have obligations to ensure that restrictions to constituents' rights of expression are duly justified, at the minimal level, and adhere to the rule of law. Relatedly, j. Siguru Wahutu is correct to note that "scholarship on fake news points to the fact that fake news might also emanate from mainstream media" (Wahutu, 2019). In effect, certain kinds of misinformation are a by-product from the exercise of media freedom.

Addressing misinformation is difficult in part because suppression can inadvertently amplify a message or idea among audiences who have not heard it before and are sensitive to the implications of media or state censorship. Without knowing the specifics or harm of the misinformation campaign, new incidental secondary audiences can view de-platforming as undue suppression of thought (Timcke, Orembo & Hlomani, 2023). Another difficulty arises because misinformation practices involve the development and cultivation of credulous audiences before mainstream fact-checkers become aware of the misinformation, and who are largely unknown to them. Big Tech platforms propose that AI content moderation can address these kinds of issues through their internal policy and calibration of their proprietary systems. Even so, as currently designed, these automated systems generate several major platform injustices.

3.3 Generative AI and bias

Generative AI applications have encouraged considerable attention among people who are curious about the wider impacts that new kinds of software may have on social and working life. While generative AI promises to be a 'conversational companion' that can answer follow-up questions, challenge incorrect premises, and reject inappropriate requests, there are many good reasons to be wary of these promises by AI developers. A more realistic appraisal of generative language models would consider how historical inequalities are embedded into databases and other sources of information from which these models develop.

Despite being presented as neutral, generative language models necessarily reflect the values of groups that wield the most social power in the societies in which those LLMs are developed. “The literature suggests that LLMs [large language models] exhibit bias involving race, gender, religion, and political orientation”, according to recent research (Motoki, Neto & Rodrigues 2023; for a deeper engagement with the engineering theory on this topic see Bender et al., 2021). This pattern also holds for cultures, with ChatGPT reflecting US values (Cao et al, 2023). Meta’s computer scientists recently found that “existing LLMs are still far from being perfect in terms of their grasp of factual knowledge” (Sun et al., 2023). In summary, much like other types of AI products, bias is a factor that may likely have downstream effects on the quality of democratic life. This may be the case when considering issues involving representation and identity, and how these factor into presumptions about who ‘belongs’ to society and who can make claims on society.

3.4 Tech dependency and the geopolitics of decoupling

Prospects for AI and democracy are not only influenced by national factors, but also by regional and global dynamics. It goes without saying that the prerogatives held by the African Union, European Union, China, and the United States (among others) vary considerably and may greatly affect the development and governance of AI in Africa. A country deciding to pursue a close trade relationship with one of those external entities, or to design their laws and regulations in a way that is congruent with a particular global power, may have long-lasting consequences. For example, Christopher Mutsvangwa, once a high-ranking Zimbabwean state official and former ambassador to China, has announced that Chinese headquartered technology companies will be contracted to “spearhead an AI revolution in Zimbabwe” (quoted in Ngwenya. 2021). In return for being this ‘spearhead’, the Zimbabwean state provided CloudWalk, a Chinese headquartered technology company, with their citizens’ biometric data as training data for AI systems (Hawkins, 2018). As Motolani Agbebi summarises, “decades on from their expansion into the African market, Chinese technology companies permeate almost all layers of Africa’s telecommunications technologies, from undersea cables, satellites, and backbone infrastructure to applications and platforms for individual consumers. This dominance draws African countries further into China’s technological sphere of influence” (Agbebi, 2022).

There are aspirations in Africa to create a qualified technological autarky in advanced semiconductors and national computing power, a motivation that also emerges in data sovereignty-national computing discourse (Abdullahi, 2023). The materials required to manufacture semiconductors (including silica sand and quartz which Africa has in abundance, for example) are essential for the development of AI products and systems (Mungadze, 2020). Nevertheless, given the scarcity of rare earth elements, the prevailing global intellectual property regime, and the limited number of corporations who are capable of producing these kinds of computer chips, only a few countries have the advanced industrial base to manufacture AI systems. These global powers are themselves reliant on global trade to acquire raw materials and fabricated sub-components.

This is one reason why the manufacturing of semiconductors has contributed to geopolitical tensions. Consider how over the past two years the United States has begun to pursue a neo-mercantilist technology policy course as an extension of their national security policy; a policy course that anticipates a dispute between the United States and China over Taiwan, which is a major source of advanced chips. Indeed, “how African countries navigate the international

political economy of AI, a dynamic complex interwoven with multiple competing interests, will be key to meeting the aspirations found in Agenda 2063.” Furthermore, “whether we wish it or not, Africans will be drawn wholeheartedly into geopolitical contests. And the bargaining with major powers will often be bilateral, behind the scenes, and likely to undermine pan-African solidarity if the work to keep these continental coalitions together does not continue” (Timcke, 2023). The point is not to single out one global power, but rather to draw attention to how ‘the scramble for AI’ has geopolitical dimensions that will push and pull African countries in the coming years (Agrawal, 2023; also see Timcke, 2017). Like with other policy areas, African democrats will have to think about how to simultaneously pursue democracy locally and in the international system around the topic of AI.

3.5 Neocolonial data collection relationships

Without adequate guardrails that encourage corporate and state actors to adhere to existing privacy protection legislation, data collection agreements stand to reproduce aspects of scientific racism associated with the colonial experience during the 19th and 20th centuries (see Dubow, 1995), while courting detrimental effects for the Global Black World more broadly. Neo-colonial data relationships are not the sole province of – or defining feature of – any one major. These are by-products of equal exchange in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Accordingly, care should be taken that data collection agreements between the Africa governments and foreign third-parties do not inadvertently result in circumstances where historically oppressed people become experimental subjects for identification technologies by more powerful global powers (Romaniuk & Burgers, 2018).

3.6 Data sovereignty and national computing

Data sovereignty is a concept that aims to protect local interests from neocolonial influences. One extrapolation of the concept asserts that the state has the legal authority to require entities to store data within the national borders, based on the rights of citizens to privacy and the potential for local economic development. For some, the concept also appeals to essentialist notions of identity and culture that are threatened by unequal exchange (e.g. Munyaradzi & van Stam, 2020).

Moreover, data sovereignty enables the state to hold accountable those who are responsible for data security, storage standards, and legal compliance in case of data breaches or misuse (Hlomani, 2022). However, while sometimes conflated with data localisation, data sovereignty does not necessarily require it. The African Union in the Data Policy Framework (2023) highlights that data localisation is dependent on technological, educational and legal capacities that may not be readily available to some African states, or impose costs that outweigh the anticipated benefits. According to the African Union, data sovereignty can also be exercised by states setting conditions for cross-border data transfer which permits storage outside a country provided the conditions are met by the recipient country, for example legal protection of personal data.

However, a country’s ability to remain ‘sovereign’ as it relates to data is also contingent upon its computing capabilities in areas such as data storage, data transmission speeds, and other forms of computational capacity. That said, national computing is a development priority for many African states and expressions can be found in industrial policy proposals. Nevertheless, evaluating the fit between infrastructure investment and institutional direction in industrial policy requires updating long-standing assumptions about the antagonism between public and private

investment. The state is the key agent in making marketplaces, which are the venues for creating private prosperity. Notwithstanding other drawbacks, strategic assertions of democratic self-determination may be one way to address data and AI injustices.

3.7 AI surveillance and state security

Fourteen African countries are currently using AI surveillance in some form, whether for smart city, facial recognition, and/or smart policing activities.³ There is also extensive evidence that state security forces use AI tools on battlefields (Allen & Okpali, 2022). Keeping in mind how state security forces have been used by governments to target minority communities, political opponents, and journalists, it is wise to consider the role of AI surveillance in state-civilian relations. The implications – or threats – of military-grade AI surveillance being deployed against the citizenry under the pretext of counter-terrorism and crime prevention operations are acute and may jeopardise established freedoms, rights, and participation in politics. There may be value in African democrats encouraging a coordinated campaign to introduce regulations to impose strict, narrow usages of military-grade AI surveillance products.

The well of data created and collected by AI systems also creates the possibility of excessive government interference. Indeed, many African citizens lack effective protection from their state's intrusive monitoring of their digital devices and information sources. With AI products creating and synthesising more data, African democrats must be cautious about how they use and interface with these systems to avoid attracting unwanted attention from authorities. National comprehensive data protection laws and baseline privacy protections have merit because they could significantly limit how much information corporations can collect and store, thereby limiting what the government can request. Keeping in mind how the topics covered in this paper can aggregate and reinforces one another, Cory Doctorow (2023) projects that “the toxic mix of corporate greed, mass surveillance, data localization, and monopolisation in payment processing, internet service providers, and mobile operating systems has finally put the Great Firewall [is...] in reach of every government”. This is why encryption needs to be treated as a key pillar of African democracy (also see CIPESA, 2021).

4 Conclusion and suggestions for a future research agenda

There are calls for shared governance of AI (for an overview see Gasser & Virgilio, 2017). Some of these calls seek to exploit knowledge asymmetries that exist because many legislators across the world misunderstand what Big Tech firms are capable of doing and the basic concepts behind their business models. Only a selective number of states are currently capable of sufficiently regulating Big Tech, and only then when they work as a collective as the EU's *Digital Services Act* illustrates. Meanwhile, Big Tech regards governments as obstacles to innovation and profit maximising. Even if some of the inaction on platform justices stems from the regulatory capture that set in as neoliberal governments viewed themselves more as state managers than elected representatives, Big Tech and governments do not have the same knowledge about platform

³ The [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#) has an online tracker for AI surveillance, covering what specific types of AI surveillance governments are deploying and which countries and companies are supplying this technology.

injustices and are opponents in the regulatory space. Put succinctly, Big Tech does not want collaboration if it comes with constraints, and governments are not capable of informed collaboration. *Political dynamics like these partially explain and justify why African regulatory petitioning must occur at the continental level, and why there must be a sizable African presence in all the venues that discuss AI governance.*

Questions about the effects of AI-powered platforms on – and leveraged bias of AI in – allocating benefits in African democracies are important, but they do not capture the whole picture. Too often freedom is sought *in or through* the market, rather than *from* the market. African democrats stand to gain much from pursuing a research agenda that examines the manner of the business of AI. These questions can help focus attention on issues of legitimacy, democratic performance, and how markets can shape democratic life:

- ❖ What does it mean for democracy if a few multinational Big Tech corporations effectively control the direction and pace of economic investment?
- ❖ What if those corporations are effectively immune to democratic subordination or regulation in Africa?
- ❖ What if the enthusiasm for AI is concentrated among elite segments of society (for example, AI is a preoccupation of industrial policymakers and other stakeholders as a new territory for commercial exploitation); is this democracy?
- ❖ What does it mean if the majority of workers end up working in precarious, emotionally scarring, and potentially degrading jobs due to the threat of computation? (see Anna & Musambi, 2023).
- ❖ What if management can crush a labour strike by using AI?
- ❖ What if a state can target citizens due to AI-assisted dragnet surveillance?

These are core considerations of political economy that should also drive the research attention of African democrats.

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