

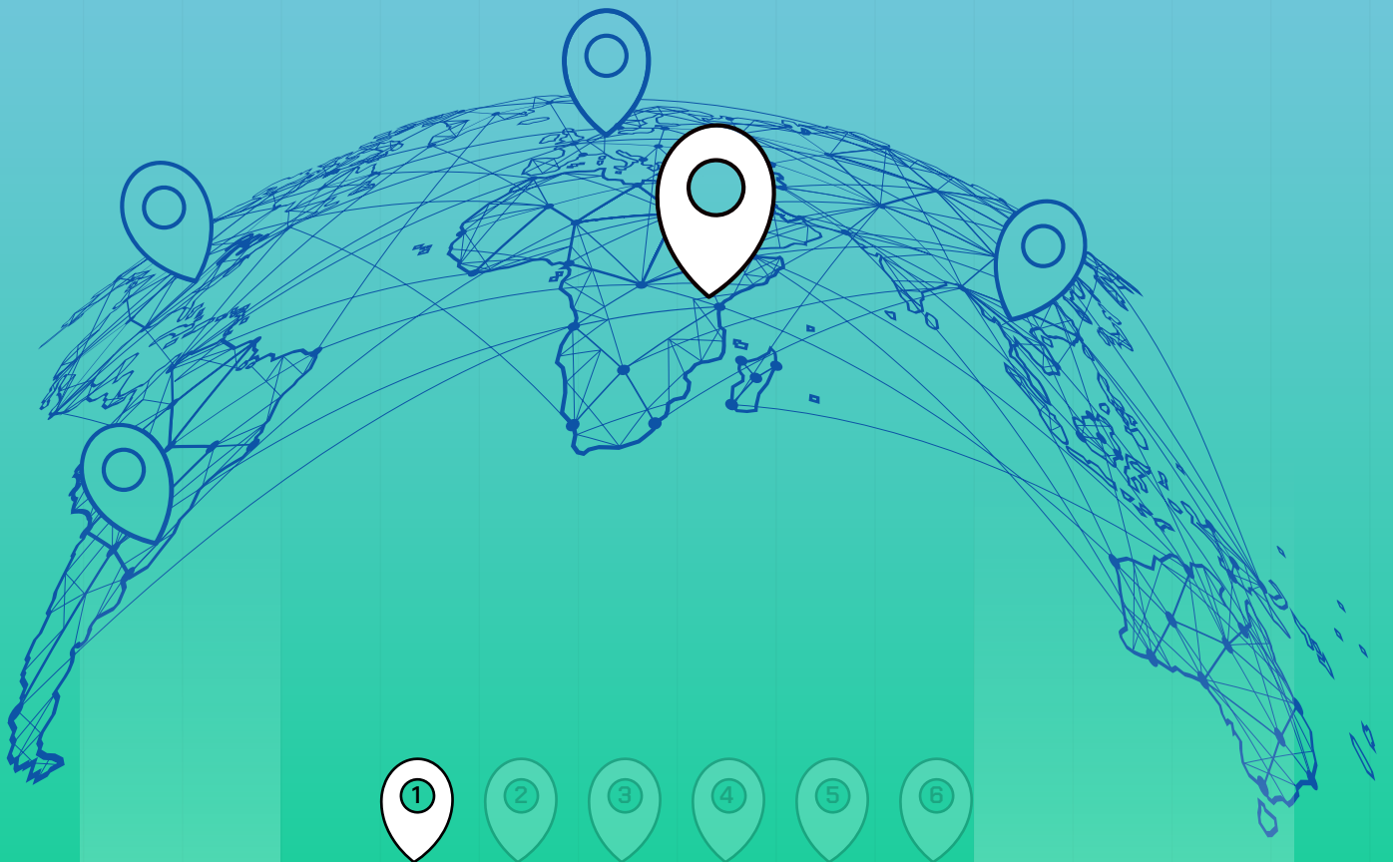
# upgrade democracy

Research Series: Reinhard Mohn Prize

## A tapestry of actors, attitudes, and impact

### Countering disinformation in Africa

Juliet Nanfuka, Victor Kapiyo,  
Victor Mabutho, Wairagala Wakabi PhD



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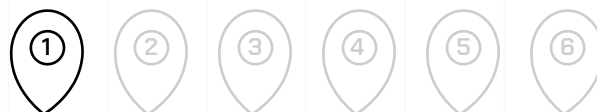
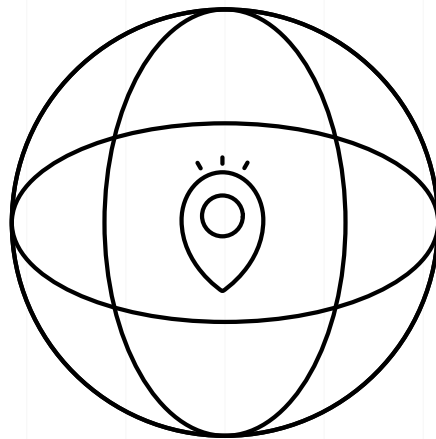
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# A tapestry of actors, attitudes, and impact

## Countering disinformation in Africa

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This report is part of an international research series on  
“Strengthening Democracy, Countering Disinformation.”

# Preface

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Dear Reader,

In today's digital world, countering disinformation has emerged as an essential endeavour to uphold democratic values worldwide. While there is a shared understanding that concerted efforts from various stakeholders and at different levels are needed to address this issue, we still lack a comprehensive understanding of the strategies and initiatives in place, let alone their impact and how to accurately measure it.

As part of the **Reinhard Mohn Prize** – 'Strengthening Democracy, Countering Disinformation', we sought to illuminate the way forward by identifying exemplary models and innovative approaches to countering disinformation around the world. Our goal was to gain insight into the where, how, and why of disinformation, and to respond accordingly. Across the globe, there are countless successful and impactful examples of individuals, initiatives, and organisations dedicated to countering disinformation. Our aim was to learn from them and empower us all to learn from each other.

This series of six reports covering Africa, Asia-Pacific, Europe, North and Latin America, and a global overview of government responses to disinformation, consolidates our findings in the hope of providing you not just with key insights, but also with actionable recommendations. These reports couldn't be clearer: We can all learn from each other. From the technology enhanced fact-checking approaches of **Chequeado** (Argentina) or **Aos Fatos** (Brazil), to the community-driven debunking of **JamiiCheck** (Tanzania) or the rapid response mechanism at **Real411** (South Africa), to the thought-provoking media literacy trainings by **Fact Shala** (India) and **Mafindo** (Indonesia) – there is so much knowledge out there that we could write entire books about it.

We invite you to explore, learn, and be inspired. Because there is hope for a healthier information ecosystem thanks to the efforts of everyone we encountered.

Finally, we would like to express our deepest gratitude to the outstanding authors of these reports, as well as to all the experts who participated in our workshops in Nairobi, Bangkok, Buenos Aires, Washington D.C., and Brussels. It is your expertise and your dedication to strengthening democracy – regardless of the challenges faced – that have made this series so insightful and special.

Our warmest,



Cathleen Berger



Charlotte Freihse

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# In Brief: Four case studies, 17 elections, and many, many protagonists.

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In 2024, 64 countries will be head to the polls, meaning at least 49 percent of all people in the world will be exercising their civic right to vote. Notably, 17 African countries are among those slated to hold elections in 2024. In recent years, disinformation has emerged as a clear and present threat especially during election seasons. Researchers have noted that the continent's upcoming polls will take place "in conditions of fast-moving digital developments that need further anticipatory analysis as well as joint responses to counter threats [posed by disinformation] to democracy, peace, and security."<sup>1</sup>

Disinformation is rampant on social media platforms whose parent companies have not made significant investments in content moderation, especially for non-English content such as African languages. As a result, "the most fragile countries end up using the least safe version of the platform: one with little to no content moderation."<sup>2</sup> This has created a power dynamic between platforms, states, and protagonists trying to address disinformation.

The present research aimed to generate evidence on the successes and pitfalls of initiatives that are working to counter misinformation and create an understanding of the current disinformation landscape specific to elections; the tactics used in disinformation; and the protagonists pushing back against disinformation. It took a case study approach to assessing the situation in the **Democratic Republic of Congo** (DR Congo), **Ethiopia**, **Kenya**, and **South Africa**. Also, it identified the protagonists in the pushback against disinformation and the tactics used in pushing back; assessed the role of disinformation in past and upcoming elections; and highlighted the pushback strategies against disinformation.

The research found that in authoritarian states, governments are restricting media practices and press freedom.<sup>3</sup> Many countries across Africa are burdened low levels of public trust in the traditional media despite the role it should be playing in dismantling disinformation. As a result, many African citizens rely on social media for news, which enables disinformation to thrive in countries such as **Ethiopia** and **DR Congo**, where press freedom rankings remain low.<sup>4</sup> In **Ethiopia**, disinformation ranges from pro-government sites claiming to pro-

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1 Research ICT Africa. *Data for Democracy Action: Countering disinformation in African elections through open access to data and journalism as a public good*. 2023. <https://researchictafrica.net/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Datafordemocracyaction.pdf>.

2 Carnegie Endowment. *It's Time to Revisit the Framing of Internet Shutdowns in Africa*. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/11/21/it-s-time-to-revisit-framing-of-internet-shutdowns-in-africa-pub-88406>.

3 Tandfonline. *Examining journalists organizational trust pursuant to predictive variables in the Ethiopian media industry: The case study of Amhara Media Corporation*. [www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23311886.2022.2068271](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23311886.2022.2068271).

4 RSF. *Press Freedom Index*. 2022. <https://rsf.org/en/index?year=2022>.

mote independent fact-checking to opponents sharing doctored content of alleged attacks,<sup>5</sup> while in the **DR Congo**, political instability has created an environment where disinformation and hate speech can flourish.

Another challenge is the fact that some platforms are not doing enough to fight disinformation or moderate harmful content. Although they derive financial benefit from the region, some do not seem to invest appropriately in human resources and/or respect national laws regarding content. Further, some have run election-related adverts containing patent disinformation while making it expensive <sup>6</sup> and cumbersome for African researchers to gain access to data on political advertising, which would be crucial to tackling disinformation in Africa. Moreover, the lack of effective disinformation countermeasures, coupled with insufficient skills to detect misinformation and disinformation generated by sophisticated Artificial Intelligence (AI), poses a significant challenge. On the upside, some platforms have supported efforts by civil society, media, and governments to create awareness about online disinformation and how to report it.

The study highlights the need for more symbiotic approaches where different protagonists such as multi-stakeholder coalitions that include state, civil society, platforms, technologists that collaboratively reinforce truth and debunk disinformation in their respective countries. **Kenya's** National Coalition on Freedom of Expression and Content Moderation (FECOMO) brings together more than 20 state, civil society, and media entities to ensure that content moderation protects freedom of expression while tackling harmful content. In **South Africa**, the Electoral Commission, ahead of its 2024 election, entered a Framework of Cooperation with social media platforms Google, Meta and TikTok, and the non-profit Media Monitoring Africa (MMA), to curb disinformation. A related initiative is the Real411 run by the MMA, whose Digital Complaints Committee (DCC) receives complaints on disinformation and hate speech from the public and makes public the outcomes of its investigations of such complaints.

Despite such efforts, this study notes that more needs to be done to adequately tackle disinformation on social media, especially in a year when 17 countries in Africa are heading to the polls. There is also a need for increased public deliberation and interdisciplinary cooperation. Through the pooling of expertise and resources, stakeholders can devise tailored strategies to combat disinformation effectively, particularly in diverse African contexts characterised by varying levels of digital literacy, media freedom, and democratic credentials.

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5 France 24. *Ethiopia's warring sides locked in disinformation battle*. 2021. [www.france24.com/en/live-news/20211222-ethiopia-s-warring-sides-locked-in-disinformation-battle](http://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20211222-ethiopia-s-warring-sides-locked-in-disinformation-battle).

6 The Higher Education. *Shifting landscapes of social media data for research*. [www.timeshighereducation.com/campus/shifting-landscapes-social-media-data-research](http://www.timeshighereducation.com/campus/shifting-landscapes-social-media-data-research).

# 1 Disinformation, internet access, and the media in Africa

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Disinformation is the deliberate dissemination of false or misleading information to deceive, mislead, manipulate, or confuse individuals or groups. Disinformation is increasingly being spread by state and non-state actors, affecting a broad range of human rights, undermining responses to public policies and amplifying tensions in times of emergency, elections or armed conflict.<sup>7</sup> Disinformation has grown exponentially across the world and including in Africa, where the spectrum of its adverse effects on fundamental rights, civic participation and public safety is not fully known, nor are there well-coordinated, multi-stakeholder efforts to tackle these effects.

Disinformation erodes trust in democratic institutions and the media, hijacks political discourse, hampers citizens' ability to make informed decisions, and affects the right of citizens to hold individual opinions without interference. Research<sup>8</sup> has shown that disinformation is undermining the safety of human rights defenders (HRDs), hampering free expression, encouraging self-censorship, and handing autocratic governments an excuse to crack down on legitimate expression by critics and dissenters and to muzzle an open and free internet.

The emergence of disinformation reflects growing internet access in Africa. According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), Africa's internet usage has been steadily increasing, with approximately 40 percent of the population having access to the internet as of 2022. Comparatively, 83 percent of the population of the Americas and 89 percent of Europe's population access the internet. Thus, Africa's internet access and penetration remains below the global average of 68 percent.<sup>9</sup>

Further, increased access to the internet has coincided with the liberalisation and growth of the media sector in many countries, shown in the proliferation of private radio stations and television channels and less reliance on state-run media. Whereas the shift from monopolistic to pluralistic media positively impacted electoral coverage, concerns regarding media ownership concentration and the influence of political actors and governments on the media remain. In addition, journalists and media enterprises in the continent continue to face threats, intimidation, censorship, attacks and restrictions on their rights and freedoms. These developments have impeded the ability of the media to operate independently and to effectively cover electoral processes where their watchdog function is most vital.

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7 United Nations. *Countering Disinformation*. 2022. [www.un.org/en/countering-disinformation](http://www.un.org/en/countering-disinformation).

8 CIPESA. *Disinformation Pathways and Effects: Case Studies from Five African Countries*. 2022. <https://cipesa.org/2022/06/new-report-disinformation-pathways-and-effects-on-democracy-and-human-rights-in-africa>.

9 Statista. *Internet penetration rate in Africa as of June 2022, compared to the global average*. [www.statista.com/statistics/1176654/internet-penetration-rate-africa-compared-to-global-average](http://www.statista.com/statistics/1176654/internet-penetration-rate-africa-compared-to-global-average).

Notably, the private media sector in the region faces challenges such as commercial pressure from the viability of their current business models; political pressure including threats from states to withdraw their licenses or pull advertisements; competition from online news sources and content creators on social media; and in professionalism, as some media houses lack sufficiently trained staff to conduct editorial gatekeeping. As a result, some private media sacrifice their editorial independence and instead publish and disseminate partisan and disinformation content online and offline. Accordingly, the intersection of the two – media and digitalisation – has reshaped how information is accessed, disseminated, and consumed across the continent.

At a workshop hosted by Bertelsmann Stiftung and the Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA) on June 13 – 14, 2023, in Nairobi, Kenya, various experts noted that various initiatives exist to tackle disinformation in Africa – including fact-checking, debunking, prebunking, public reporting portals, media and digital literacy initiatives, and tracking of disinformation laws. In addition, there are entities that conduct research into the nature and effects of disinformation and train media and civic actors to understand and fight disinformation. However, numerous challenges remain. Fact-checking initiatives still have a low reach, media houses and journalists have limited capacity for fact-checking, and the various protagonists working to tackle disinformation do not cooperate sufficiently. Moreover, there is a shortage of resources, tools, and data, and a deficiency in multi-method disinformation research by protagonists working to tackle the vice.

In order to meaningfully tackle disinformation on the African continent, it is crucial to develop a keen understanding of the disinformation ecosystem in the various countries. Also, it is important to assess the perception of its relationship with the media, its instigators and agents, tactics used, and its forms and pathways.

## 1.1 Aim of the research

This research aimed to generate evidence on the successes and pitfalls of initiatives that are combating misinformation and disinformation, through a series of country case studies, namely of the Democratic Republic of Congo (**DR Congo**), **Ethiopia**, **Kenya**, and **South Africa**. Specifically, the aim was to create an understanding of the current disinformation landscape specifically in the context of elections; identify the protagonists involved in the pushback against disinformation and the tactics used in pushing back; understand the role of disinformation in past or upcoming elections; and illustrate the pushback strategies against disinformation.

## 1.2 Methodology

The study employed a range of data collection methods including desk research, key informant interviews (KIIs), and an online survey of journalists, fact-checkers, social media network analysts, disinformation researchers, and human rights defenders. The online survey was conducted to map initiatives involved in disinformation work in the countries under review as they relate to elections. This exercise involved a landscape mapping of initiatives geared towards countering disinformation, towards understanding the impact of disinformation on democracy and the protection of human rights, and towards building resilience and digital literacy.



The survey also inquired into the reach and consistency of the initiatives, and their positioning in the anti-disinformation ecosystem, such as how their outputs or services were taken up by the media and other protagonists. A desk review of relevant literature was conducted to complement the survey.

The focus countries (**DR Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya, and South Africa**) were selected based on various considerations. One was to get a comparative view of developments in disinformation in authoritarian and democratic countries. Another was to understand the situation of disinformation in different 'crisis moments', such as elections and civil strife. Importantly, while the number of focus countries studied is low, an attempt was made to draw comparisons with other countries in the region.

## 2 Country contexts

Across the DR Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya and South Africa, the disinformation ecosystem bears as many similarities as it does differences. This is despite varying levels of internet access, democratic credentials and digital rights-related practices.

Country	DR Congo	Ethiopia	Kenya	South Africa
<b>Population</b>	75 million	122 million	53 million	60.6 million
<b>Social Media users on dominant platforms as of 2022 – 2023</b> (Figures from Data Reportal <sup>10</sup> )	Facebook: 102 000 X (formerly known as Twitter): 33 500 Instagram: 104 700 LinkedIn: 160 000 YouTube figures unavailable	Facebook: 6 m. X: 91 000 Instagram: 612 000 LinkedIn: 870 000 YouTube figures unavailable	Facebook: 9.25 m. X: 1.9 m. Instagram: 2.2 m. LinkedIn: 3.5 m. Snapchat: 2.45 m. YouTube: 9.44 m.	Facebook: 22.1 m. X: 3.6 m. YouTube: 25.8 m. Instagram: 5.6 m. LinkedIn: 11 m.
<b>Quality of Democracy Rating (2020)<sup>11</sup></b>	Moderate Autocracy	Hybrid Regime	Hybrid Regime	Deficient Democracy
<b>World Press Freedom Index Ranking (2023)<sup>12</sup></b>	124/180	130/180	116/180	25/180
<b>Internet Freedom Scores (2022)<sup>13</sup></b>	Undocumented	Not Free	Partly Free	Free

Table 1: Overview Social Media Use, Democracy Rating, Press Freedom and Internet Freedom

The **DR Congo** is rated as a moderate autocracy and scored 124/180 in the press freedom index. The country held elections at the end of 2023, with Felix Tshisekedi being sworn into office on January 20, 2024 for a second term in a disputed election.<sup>14</sup> As shown in Table 1 below, only 23 percent of the population has access to the internet. The long-running conflict in the north-eastern region of the country between government forces and various armed groups has created fertile ground for disinformation and hate speech to flourish. This is further complicated by the tense relationship the country has with its neighbours **Uganda** and **Rwanda**.

10 Data Reportal. 2023: <https://datareportal.com/reports/>. South Africa: <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-south-africa>. DR Congo: <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-democratic-republic-of-the-congo>. Ethiopia: <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-ethiopia>. Kenya: <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-kenya>.

11 Democracy Matrix. [www.democracymatrix.com/ranking](http://www.democracymatrix.com/ranking).

12 RSF. *World Press Freedom Index 2023*. <https://rsf.org/en/index>.

13 Freedom House. *Freedom in the Net 2022*. <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-net/scores>.

14 *DRC President Tshisekedi sworn in for new term before huge crowd*. [www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/news/east-africa/tshisekedi-sworn-in-for-new-term-before-huge-crowd-4498094](http://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/news/east-africa/tshisekedi-sworn-in-for-new-term-before-huge-crowd-4498094).

There are more than 600 radio stations, 571 print media, and 177 television channels listed across **DR Congo's** 26 provinces. Some media channels are owned by non-governmental organisations, religious groups, and individuals.<sup>15</sup> The private media is largely owned by politicians whose outlets are geared towards promoting their influence and consolidation of political power. Further, the national radio and TV broadcasters lack independence, and are vulnerable to pressure from local authorities, militiamen, religious groups, and politicians.<sup>16</sup> Also, in the North Kivu region, journalists are caught between pursuing the interests of the M23 rebels and those of the loyalist forces.<sup>17</sup>

There are also several unregulated online news sites<sup>18</sup> that disseminate content through social media and play a vital role in the pursuit of reconciliation between communities. Many [people] prefer information circulated through social networks, but it is unreliable as the sources are often not credible.<sup>19</sup> Some journalists are known to receive money to report or cover events in a long-established corrupt practice known as *coupage* which facilitates the dissemination of disinformation narratives even in mainstream media.<sup>20</sup> The absence of adequate legal structures to guide programming content has created a gap that media houses exploit to deliver programming that is deemed most profitable, which again could enable the dissemination of disinformation.<sup>21</sup>

**Ethiopia** is rated as a hybrid regime and ranks 130/180 in the press freedom index. Also, internet freedom in **Ethiopia** is rated as 'not free'. In 2018, the Ethiopian government under the leadership of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed made unprecedented political and economic reforms following the resignation of Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn. The new administration freed thousands of prisoners announced measures to liberalise the telecom, aviation, and transportation sectors, and dropped charges against many opposition leaders, bloggers, and activists. It also reconnected mobile and broadband internet services that had been cut off since 2016, and unblocked more than 200 websites, blogs, and news sites that had been inaccessible for over a decade.<sup>22</sup> Also, a new media law aimed at safeguarding the rights and security of journalists was introduced in 2021. This law also granted authorisation to opposition media outlets that had been operating in the diaspora to establish and operate within **Ethiopia**.

However, these developments have regressed again following the resurgence of conflict in the Tigray region, where disinformation has flourished and been exploited as a divisive tool.<sup>23</sup>

15 UNICEF. *Radio at the heart of communities*. 2022. [www.unicef.org/drcongo/en/stories/radio-heart-communities](http://www.unicef.org/drcongo/en/stories/radio-heart-communities).

16 *Democratic Republic of Congo*. <https://rsf.org/en/country/democratic-republic-congo>.

17 Africa. *The new disinformation and propaganda laboratory*. <https://rsf.org/en/classement/2023/africa>.

18 Media Landscapes. *DR Congo 2020*. <https://medialandscapes.org/country/democratic-republic-of-the-congo>.

19 Ibid.

20 CIPESA. *Growing the Capacity of Journalists and Advocates to Tackle Electoral Disinformation in Congo*. <https://cipesa.org/2023/12/growing-the-capacity-of-journalists-and-advocates-to-tackle-electoral-disinformation-in-congo>.

21 Media legislation. Media Landscapes. *DRC*. <https://medialandscapes.org/country/democratic-republic-of-the-congo/policies/media-legislation>.

22 CIPESA. 2018. *The Reforms Ethiopia Needs to Advance Internet Freedom*. <https://cipesa.org/wp-content/files/briefs/Reforming-Internet-Freedom-in-Ethiopia-Links.pdf>.

23 ReliefWeb. *Ethiopia: Disinformation Campaign Targeting Aid Agencies – Conflict and Hunger: Social Media Monitoring*. 2022. <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-disinformation-campaign-targeting-aid-agencies-conflict-and-hunger-social-media-monitoring-november-2022>.

According to Reporters without Borders (RSF), the Tigray war has led to a wave of journalist arrests and encouraged intense propaganda by federal authorities, such as the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). The government resorted to blocking the internet in the Tigray and Oromia regions for prolonged periods of time, which has further fuelled disinformation. Despite internet shutdowns in the country, YouTube and Facebook are the preferred platforms for content consumption, while Facebook is less trusted by online audiences.<sup>24</sup> Audiences do recognise that false information is widespread, and platforms like Telegram, websites and YouTube are more trusted as content sources due to a perceived bias in the media's reporting.<sup>25</sup> With elections looming in 2026, it is necessary to understand how such disinformation manifests both in closed platforms such as WhatsApp, closed social media groups, and more publicly accessible social media platforms.

Neighbouring **Kenya** held general elections in August 2022. The country is rated as a hybrid regime and ranked 116/180 in the press freedom index. Internet freedom in **Kenya** is rated as 'partly free'. Despite a more open press and internet space, the country has a booming disinformation industry, fuelled by political, economic and personal interests, with many actors including politicians, content creators, and citizens churning out hate speech and disinformation on social media platforms. During the 2022 election period, disinformation and hate speech were circulated widely<sup>26</sup> as social media personalities and ordinary citizens on various sides of the political divide coordinated and shared false and hateful content.

Politicians often bankroll influencers with large followings on the platforms to recruit and coordinate micro-influencers who develop common disinformation and hate narratives and push hashtags, which often end up trending on social media. **Kenya's** National Coalition and Integration Commission (NCIC), set up to address discrimination based on ethnicity or race and to promote tolerance and understanding of diversity in addition to dealing with hate speech, ethnic contempt, and disinformation, provides a useful case study.

Meanwhile, trust in the Kenyan media has been declining, particularly around election coverage. Survey findings released in January 2022 revealed a 12 percent drop in trust in the media, marking the second consecutive year in which a 12 percent drop was registered. This equated to a 23 percent rating of public trust in the media. The survey indicated that television had the highest trust rating (69 percent), radio (68 percent) while online news websites had the lowest rating at 56 percent. The drop has been attributed to the narrative that the media sided with the government in the run-up to the 2022 elections, which affected its credibility and triggered targeted attacks online.<sup>27</sup> This has led to calls for training to curb media propagation of disinformation during polls.

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24 Internews. *Ethiopian Digital Media 2023*. [https://internews.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Ethiopian-Digital-Media-IEA\\_edited-Final-SinglePage.pdf](https://internews.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Ethiopian-Digital-Media-IEA_edited-Final-SinglePage.pdf).

25 Ibid.

26 CIPESA. *Smell The Coffee Kenya, Disinformation Is Brewing!*. 2023. <https://cipesa.org/2023/06/smell-the-coffee-kenya-disinformation-is-brewing>.

27 African Digital Democracy Observatory. *Trust in news holds steady in Africa as report shows global decline*. <https://disinfo.africa/trust-in-news-holds-steady-in-africa-as-reuters-digital-news-report-shows-global-decline-443e76a81a1c>.

**South Africa** scored and ranked highest in various ratings. Considered a deficient democracy, it ranks 25/180 on the press freedom index, and internet freedom in the country is rated as free. Amendments to the Film and Publications Amendment Act have been criticised for enabling the Films and Publications Board to regulate and censor online content.<sup>28</sup> Still, the country has a robust media landscape with a well-established state-owned broadcaster, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), which runs TV and radio networks that operate in multiple languages. The country's private media sector is thriving, with enterprises such as the South African owned broadcasting service, MultiChoice having a presence in various African countries.<sup>29</sup> However, these now face competition from online platforms and streaming sites.<sup>30</sup>

A 2022 study by Edelman in South Africa found that 78 percent of respondents in the country were anxious about false information or 'fake news' being weaponised. Results also indicated that respondents viewed the media as a dividing force in society.<sup>31</sup> Disinformation campaigns in the country have also increased the incidence of xenophobic attacks targeting foreign nationals from **Zimbabwe, Nigeria, and DR Congo**.<sup>32</sup> In response to the growing disinformation in **South Africa**, several stakeholders collaborated to develop various initiatives to tackle disinformation, especially ahead of the 2024 national and provincial elections. One promising initiative is **Real411**, a portal developed by **Media Monitoring Africa (MMA)** that the Electoral Commission (IEC) has adopted for reporting elections-related disinformation. The IEC has also partnered with Google, Meta, and TikTok to curb disinformation.<sup>33</sup> Such multi-stakeholder approaches involving state and non-state cooperation are rare in other parts of the continent.

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28 Freedom of the Net 2022. South Africa. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/south-africa/freedom-net/2022>.

29 South Africa media guide [www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-14094861](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-14094861).

30 Media In South Africa: 2023 And Beyond. [www.meltwater.com/en/blog/media-in-south-africa](http://www.meltwater.com/en/blog/media-in-south-africa).

31 Edelman. Edelman Trust Barometer 2022 South Africa Launch. [www.africa.edelman.com/research/edelman-trust-barometer-2022-south-africa-launch](http://www.africa.edelman.com/research/edelman-trust-barometer-2022-south-africa-launch). Full report here: [www.africa.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss536/files/2022-03/2022%20Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer\\_S.%20Africa%20Report.pdf](http://www.africa.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss536/files/2022-03/2022%20Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer_S.%20Africa%20Report.pdf).

32 #FakeNews and lies are amplified on social media [www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-12-05-fakenews-and-lies-are-amplified-on-social-media](http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-12-05-fakenews-and-lies-are-amplified-on-social-media).

33 Electoral Commission of South Africa. Electoral Commission partners with social media giants to combat disinformation in 2024 National and Provincial Elections. 2023. [www.elections.org.za/content/About-Us/News/Electoral-Commission-partners-with-social-media-giants-to-combat-disinformation-in-2024-National-and-Provincial-Elections](http://www.elections.org.za/content/About-Us/News/Electoral-Commission-partners-with-social-media-giants-to-combat-disinformation-in-2024-National-and-Provincial-Elections).

## 3 Navigating complex in-country disinformation terrains

### 3.1 Democratic Republic of Congo

Despite rampant conflicts in some regions of the country, the DR Congo held two elections, in December 2018 and in December 2023. The 2018 election had been postponed for two years from December 2016, when they were due. Felix Tshisekedi was elected president in 2018, succeeding Joseph Kabila who had ruled the country for 18 years. The 2018 elections were marred by irregularities and were criticised by observers, including the powerful Congolese Catholic Council of Bishops<sup>34</sup> who stated that the results did not match those of their observation mission. Nevertheless, the 2019 inauguration of president Tshisekedi was the first peaceful transfer of power in the country's history. He also won the December 2023 elections by a landslide and started his second term in January 2024.<sup>35</sup>

Much of the political turbulence and armed conflict that has dogged **DR Congo** for decades has stemmed from the unwillingness of leaders to relinquish power, unchecked corruption, a central government that lacks control over large areas of its territory, and the proliferation of armed groups such as M23 in areas where the central government is absent. Politicians, armed groups, and their allies exploit these social and economic challenges to stoke tensions by manipulating public opinion to generate support for their extremist political views or groups, and channel public anger to promote hate speech and disinformation that further escalate the ethnic and regional conflicts.<sup>36</sup>

The 2023 pre-electoral environment in **DR Congo** was fraught with arbitrary arrests and detentions of politicians affiliated to the opposition, violence, and politically motivated killings. Linked to these developments was a net increase of fake media outlets operated by fake accounts, which further exacerbated tensions in the country. Moreover, with the resurgence of hostilities and armed conflict in the eastern part of the country, there has been a significant growth in divisive online content.<sup>37</sup>

Divisive narratives have typically been fuelled by political actors, the media fraternity, bloggers, and social media influencers – the latter two attracted by the lucrative nature of disinformation as fuelled by politicians. However, in the case of DR Congo, neighbouring states Uganda and Rwanda which border the conflict regions in the East have also been involved in

34 DR Congo's Catholic Church says its election tally shows different winner. [www.france24.com/en/20190110-dr-congo-catholic-church-election-tally-different-winner-tshisekedi-fayulu](http://www.france24.com/en/20190110-dr-congo-catholic-church-election-tally-different-winner-tshisekedi-fayulu).

35 2023 Democratic Republic of the Congo general election. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2023\\_Democratic\\_Republic\\_of\\_the\\_Congo\\_general\\_election](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2023_Democratic_Republic_of_the_Congo_general_election).

36 CIPESA. *Growing the Capacity of Journalists and Advocates to Tackle Electoral Disinformation in Congo*. <https://cipesa.org/2023/12/growing-the-capacity-of-journalists-and-advocates-to-tackle-electoral-disinformation-in-congo/>.

37 Ibid.

disinformation with allegations of actors in the two countries fuelling false narratives related to the armed conflict.

**Disinformation Anchors:** Use of social media platforms to mobilise support along ethnic lines, to discredit rival candidates and parties, to try and disenfranchise voters, and in some cases promote violence against minority groups or political opponents.

### 3.2 Ethiopia

Since the constitution of the **Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia** (FDRE) was enacted in 1995, the country has held six general elections: in 1995, 2000, 2005, 2010, 2015, and 2021. During the first five elections, the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) party held sway, clinching the majority of seats in both the House of People’s Representatives and regional state councils. The sixth general election was held on June 21, 2021 after being postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The Prosperity Party won the election.

During the 2021 elections, media outlets actively delivered real-time updates throughout the pre-election campaign, on voting days, and in the follow-up to the election process. Civil society organisations played a limited role in addressing election-related disinformation, primarily focusing on voter education to bridge information gaps.<sup>38</sup> Further, elections pertaining to the formation of new regional states within the former South Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples Region have been held recently. However, given their relatively localised significance against the backdrop of broader armed conflict in the country, these elections did not exhibit any noteworthy disinformation trends. Disinformation within the media landscape is predominantly associated with the ongoing conflicts unfolding in the Amhara and Oromia regional states, where insurgent groups are clashing with government armed forces, sparking the dissemination of false and misleading narratives.

Many Ethiopians rely on the diaspora community for information, and this reliance has been exploited by some actors who have used their positions as news sources to disseminate disinformation. For example, certain opposition media outlets based in the diaspora were found to be circulating misleading and inaccurate information, one of these being US-based Kello Media. The entity released a manipulated audio clip purportedly featuring Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed stating that he would “rather die” than leave office.<sup>39</sup> He is falsely portrayed as stating that the ruling Prosperity Party would not relinquish power even if it lost the election.

It was later revealed that the audio had been fabricated by splicing together various segments

38 *Analysis: Ahead of elections, voter education outreach needs a closer look as voters remain unaware of civil societies’ role.* <https://addisstandard.com/analysis-ahead-of-elections-voter-education-outreach-needs-a-closer-look-as-voters-remain-unaware-of-civil-societies-role/>.

39 *Ethiopia elections: The misinformation circulating online.* [www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-57511739](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-57511739).



from previous speeches delivered by the Prime Minister.<sup>40</sup> The BBC's Amharic language service analysed the audio and identified distinct jumps, as well as variations in volume and audio quality, which strongly suggested that it had been manipulated.<sup>41</sup> The traction gained from the audio clip, which was widely circulated on social media platforms, prompted immediate responses from the Prime Minister's Office and his Prosperity Party, both denouncing the audio as fake and emphasising the need for vigilance against such disinformation campaigns, particularly during the election period.

In recent years, fact-checking platforms like **HaqCheck** and **Ethiopia Check**,<sup>42</sup> both established between 2019 and 2021, have emerged and are working to debunk false claims linked to the instability in the country and the elections. Looking ahead, the next general election isn't scheduled until 2026, and yet there have already been some instances of disinformation directly linked to this future electoral event.

**Disinformation Anchors:** Elections-related disinformation in Ethiopia has revolved around fabricated documents, false claims about election results, manipulated media content, and misleading information about polling stations, ballot boxes, and the electoral process in general. Conflict-related disinformation is rampant.

### 3.3 Kenya

Kenya's disinformation landscape might be the most developed of the four countries under study. Early instances of hate speech and disinformation contributed to the 2007 post-election violence.<sup>43</sup> During the August 2022 elections, social media posts stoked the "highly volatile political landscape".<sup>44</sup> Various disinformation campaigns were observed during the 2022 elections, such as the use of fake accounts impersonating media outlets and government officials to spread false claims disguised as news and authoritative statements. Also, manipulated front pages / covers of mainstream newspapers and edited graphics forced clarifications from real publishers.

Some campaigns also pushed "zoning" narratives to discourage competitors from campaigning in certain stronghold regions. Female candidates faced an outsized amount of gendered at-

40 Analysis: Ahead of elections, voter education outreach needs a closer look as voters remain unaware of civil societies' role <https://addisstandard.com/analysis-ahead-of-elections-voter-education-outreach-needs-a-closer-look-as-voters-remain-unaware-of-civil-societies-role/>.

41 Ethiopia elections: The misinformation circulating online. [www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-57511739](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-57511739).

42 DW Akademie. Case Study: EthioCheck Lab. <https://akademie.dw.com/en/case-study-ethiocheck-lab/a-56630006>.

43 Thomson Reuters Foundation. Online disinformation stokes tensions as Kenya elections near. [www.context.news/digital-rights/online-disinformation-stokes-tensions-as-kenya-elections-near](http://www.context.news/digital-rights/online-disinformation-stokes-tensions-as-kenya-elections-near).

44 Mozilla Foundation. New Research: Disinformation on TikTok Gaslights Political Tensions Ahead of Kenya's 2022 Elections. <https://foundation.mozilla.org/en/blog/new-research-disinformation-on-tiktok-gaslights-political-tensions-ahead-of-kenyas-2022-elections/>.



tacks and misogyny questioning their qualifications.<sup>45</sup> And while major platforms such as Facebook and X improved their content moderation, some of the campaigns shifted their focus to encrypted apps like WhatsApp and Telegram, where monitoring is less robust. Disinformation actors used tactics such as coded language referencing indigenous terms to evade automated hate speech detection systems on Facebook and Twitter. Moreover, video-centric platforms such as TikTok and Instagram were targeted to avoid text analysis while satirical content was leveraged due to its capacity to convey subliminal messaging.

The mainstream media practiced active fact-checking and debunking of false claims to counter disinformation. Media houses like *The Star* published<sup>46</sup> real-time myth-busting articles and ran fact-checking segments on primetime news. Others such as the *Daily Nation*, *The Standard*, and **Africa Check** also set up dedicated fact-checking units to debunk viral disinformation in real-time during election periods.

The National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC) partnered<sup>47</sup> with social media platforms to swiftly detect and remove problematic election-related content. Facebook established an operations centre to streamline this. Fact-checking, social media monitoring, peace campaigns, legal aid, and advocacy were some of the key civil society responses to counter election disinformation in **Kenya**. Fact-checking organisations like **Africa Check**,<sup>48</sup> **PesaCheck**,<sup>49</sup> **Fumbua**<sup>50</sup> and **iVerify**<sup>51</sup> worked to verify claims and debunk viral 'fake news'. Amnesty International monitored<sup>52</sup> and called out disinformation and human rights violations stemming from disinformation campaigns. In addition, Amnesty International Kenya, Fumbua Kenya, **KICTANet**, **SDGs Kenya Forum** and **ARTICLE 19 East Africa** actively documented and exposed disinformation actors and narratives around the elections.

Further, groups like **Uwiano Platform for Peace** provided counter-narratives and issued early warnings about hate speech hotspots through their "Let Peace Win" campaigns<sup>53</sup>, while initiatives by groups like **Internews**, **Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR)**, **FECOMO**, and **DW Akademie** enhanced the capacity of reporters and bloggers to counter fake news.<sup>54</sup> These organisations trained citizen journalists to report accurately and counter fake news within their communities. Citizens also actively countered disinformation, with Kenyan citizens on X routinely calling out and rebutting false claims made on social media during the election peri-

45 African Feminism. 2023. <https://africanfeminism.com/women-politicians-in-kenya-building-a-feminist-internet-for-digital-advocacy/>.

46 Kenya election 2022: Deputy President Ruto fact-checked. [www.the-star.co.ke/news/2022-07-28-kenya-election-2022-deputy-president-ruto-fact-checked/](http://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2022-07-28-kenya-election-2022-deputy-president-ruto-fact-checked/).

47 Kenya orders Meta's Facebook to tackle hate speech or face suspension. [www.reuters.com/world/africa/kenyas-cohesion-watchdog-gives-meta-7-days-comply-with-regulations-2022-07-29/](http://www.reuters.com/world/africa/kenyas-cohesion-watchdog-gives-meta-7-days-comply-with-regulations-2022-07-29/).

48 Fact-checks. <https://africacheck.org/fact-checks>.

49 PesaCheck. <https://pesacheck.org/>.

50 Fumbua. <https://fumbua.ke/>.

51 iVerify. <https://www.iverify.or.ke/>. (Last accessed on February 22, 2024).

52 Post Poll Statement on Disinformation in the 2022 Kenyan General Elections. [www.amnestykenya.org/post-poll-statement-on-disinformation-in-the-2022-kenyan-general-elections](http://www.amnestykenya.org/post-poll-statement-on-disinformation-in-the-2022-kenyan-general-elections).

53 UWIANO Platform Launches Let Peace Win Campaign to Promote Peaceful Elections. <https://reliefweb.int/report/kenya/uwiano-platform-launches-let-peace-win-campaign-promote-peaceful-elections>.

54 DW Akademie. <https://akademie.dw.com/en/dw-akademie-in-kenya/a-18558628>.

od, under the hashtag #KOT (Kenyans on Twitter).

The Media Council of Kenya, Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) and civil society launched the **iVerify**<sup>55</sup> initiative to certify accurate election-related information. iVerify is a digital public good and is a fact-checking product of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) used to identify false information and prevent and mitigate its spread.<sup>56</sup> The iVerify approach aims to accelerate fact-checking to keep pace with the rapid evolution of disinformation. Its use of open source, AI, data mining, crowdsourcing and multi-stakeholder partnerships that include Crowdtangle, Meedan, and the UN demonstrate innovative thinking in the fight against disinformation.

Despite these efforts, disinformation has remained rife in **Kenya**. More disinformation actors have emerged as key perpetrators, and they cover a broad spectrum of society including political actors, political party influencers, and public relations operatives. However, there is limited new evidence of disinformation narratives aligned with foreign influence operations, which points to more internally driven amplification and manipulation. Yet foreign actors such as Cambridge Analytica<sup>57</sup> have previously been reported to have interfered with election narratives in **Kenya**. Given the country's current political and social environment, tackling the root causes of disinformation will be critical for the country ahead of its next general election, which is scheduled for August 2027.

**Disinformation Anchors:** Common topics and tactics that emerged during the 2022 elections included the propagation/dissemination of fake opinion polls on political actors and their actions, and fake election results, doctored photos and videos; exaggerated (exaggerations of ethnic persecution, use of bots (mimicking real accounts of government bodies and political candidates) to amplify false narratives e.g. false allegations of candidate misconduct, “Keyboard warriors”<sup>58</sup> – influencers for hire (bloggers, communication specialists, journalists, vloggers and digital experts being paid to help craft and spread narratives – sometimes misleading messages to incite hate speech against opponents).<sup>59</sup> Disinformation campaigns sought to discredit candidates, exacerbate ethnic divisions, undermine electoral bodies, and incite violence if results were challenged. They also exploited narratives related to gender, sexism, political affiliation, and religion.

55 iVerify. <https://www.iverify.or.ke/>. (Last accessed on February 22, 2024).

56 UNDP. *Iverify*. [www.undp.org/digital/iverify](http://www.undp.org/digital/iverify).

57 The Elephant. [www.theelephant.info/analysis/2019/08/09/cambridge-analytica-and-the-2017-elections-why-has-the-kenyan-media-remained-silent/](http://www.theelephant.info/analysis/2019/08/09/cambridge-analytica-and-the-2017-elections-why-has-the-kenyan-media-remained-silent/).

58 Rest of World. “Disinformation influencers” for hire, only \$15 a day. <https://restofworld.org/2021/kenya-disinformation-bbi-judiciary/>.

59 Media Innovation Network. *How social media influencers shaped Kenya's 2022 General Election*. <https://mediainnovationnetwork.org/2022/08/29/how-social-media-influencers-shaped-kenyas-2022-general-election>.

### 3.4 South Africa

South Africa most recently held general elections in 2019 and local government elections in 2021. The upcoming 2024 elections are likely to be the most crucial vote since the 1994 elections which saw Nelson Mandela become president.<sup>60</sup> Analysts predict that the current governing political party, the African National Congress (ANC), will lose its majority of the vote.

Disinformation in the country became widespread with the 2019 election and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>61</sup> Prior to the pandemic, there had been little state-initiated effort to address disinformation as it was not as prevalent. Due to rampant disinformation relating to COVID-19 and vaccines, the government saw it necessary to initiate a national campaign against targeted disinformation on COVID-19 and vaccines. Prior to the pandemic, London-based Bell Pottinger was in 2017 found to have stirred up racial tensions and narratives of “economic apartheid” in South Africa. The idea was to detract attention from the scandal relating surrounding the wealthy and controversial Gupta family, who stood accused of benefiting financially from their close links to South Africa’s then president, Jacob Zuma.<sup>62</sup> Some of the [economic apartheid] narratives [stirred up by Bell Pottinger] have since persisted.

In 2021, major social media platforms TikTok, Google, Facebook, and X, partnered with the South Africa’s Electoral Commission (IEC) and **Media Monitoring Africa (MMA)** to combat fake news ahead of the local government elections. The IEC and MMA stated that they would use **Real411**,<sup>63</sup> an online public complaints platform initiative run by the MMA, to fight against disinformation in the lead-up to the elections and beyond<sup>64</sup>. Real411 provides a platform for the public to report digital grievances including disinformation, hate speech, incitement, and harassment. This ensures that online content is assessed and addressed in an independent, open, transparent, and accountable manner under South African law. Further, the Rael411 includes a Digital Complaints Committee (DCC) that receives complaints from the public. Outcomes of complaints are made publicly accessible.

The **Real411** platform was instrumental in identifying and combating elections-related disinformation in the 2019 national elections and the 2021 local elections.<sup>65</sup> In June 2023, the IEC declared Real411 as the official platform for reporting elections-related disinformation for the upcoming 2024 elections.<sup>66</sup> The platform was also endorsed by the South African National Edi-

60 The African Studies Centre Leiden. 2019. [www.ascleiden.nl/content/ascl-blogs/jan-bart-gewald-harry-wels/crucial-elections-south-africa](http://www.ascleiden.nl/content/ascl-blogs/jan-bart-gewald-harry-wels/crucial-elections-south-africa).

61 *Freedom of the Net* 2022. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/south-africa/freedom-net/2022>.

62 The Guardian. *Bell Pottinger faces sanction over claims it stirred racial tension in South Africa*. <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2017/aug/24/bell-pottinger-south-africa-claims-pr>.

63 Real 411. [www.real411.org.za](http://www.real411.org.za).

64 *Social media platforms in South Africa join anti-disinformation campaign ahead of elections*. [www.news.cn/english/africa/2021-10/20/c\\_1310257418.htm](http://www.news.cn/english/africa/2021-10/20/c_1310257418.htm).

65 *About the Real411 and the Digital Disinformation Complaints Process*. <https://elections.real411.org.za/about>.

66 *Electoral Commission partners with social media giants to combat disinformation in 2024 National and Provincial Elections*. [www.elections.org.za/pw/News-And-Media/News-List/News/News-Article/Electoral-Commission-partners-with-social-media-giants-to-combat-disinformation-in-2024-National-and-Provincial-Elections?a=AISDGvpz75ps1usOfX7oimHCQG6/AToNAzCQK374oSg=](http://www.elections.org.za/pw/News-And-Media/News-List/News/News-Article/Electoral-Commission-partners-with-social-media-giants-to-combat-disinformation-in-2024-National-and-Provincial-Elections?a=AISDGvpz75ps1usOfX7oimHCQG6/AToNAzCQK374oSg=). *Multi-stakeholder partnership to combat disinformation in the 2021 Municipal Elections*. [www.elections.org.za/pw/News-And-Media/News-List/News/News-Article/Multi-stakeholder-partnership-to-combat-disinformation-in-the-2021-Municipal-Elections?a=AISDGvpz75ps1usOfX7oih70YawZQIKYo3E057MA+6E=](http://www.elections.org.za/pw/News-And-Media/News-List/News/News-Article/Multi-stakeholder-partnership-to-combat-disinformation-in-the-2021-Municipal-Elections?a=AISDGvpz75ps1usOfX7oih70YawZQIKYo3E057MA+6E=).

tors Forum<sup>67</sup> as an important tool in ensuring the credibility of news and information, especially given that newsrooms are struggling with expenses in a shifting media viability landscape.

Another initiative is the **Sikhaba iCovid-19 campaign**, a collaborative venture between the National Department of Health, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), Innovation Edge, the DG Murray Trust, and Ilifa Labantwana. Designed to provide factual information about COVID-19, the campaign was a daily show that specifically unpacked COVID-19-related information. It was delivered in all 11 official South African languages across 15 SABC radio stations. The shows were sponsored by the Solidarity Fund, ELMA Philanthropies, and the Millennium Trust. While it may have been initiated by the government, the campaign owes its success to its multi-stakeholder approach.

**Disinformation Anchors:** Real411 found that during the lead-up to the elections, people wanted to report not only disinformation but also cases of incitement and hate speech. Narratives that fuel xenophobia, vaccine hesitancy or anti-vax sentiment – the latter two during the COVID-19 pandemic – were also prominent in South Africa’s disinformation ecosystem.

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67 Sanef Welcomes the Launch of the Real411 Platform. <https://sanef.org.za/sanef-welcomes-the-launch-of-the-real411-platform/>.

## 4 Protagonists in the pushback against disinformation

Actively countering false online narratives is still a nascent phenomenon in many African countries. However, recent elections have seen a surge in media and civil society initiatives dedicated to countering election-related disinformation. Social media platforms have in some cases teamed up for initiatives to tackle disinformation, resulting in coalitions that include government, civil society, media and fact-checking entities. However, the platforms' efforts often appear half-hearted, especially in the wake of shrinking access to data for Africans due to platforms drastically reducing access or increasing charges for access.<sup>68</sup>

This study identified various protagonists involved in fighting disinformation spanning seven distinct segments. These include country-specific protagonists, multi-country initiatives, pan-African protagonists, international protagonists, media, individuals and coalitions as shown in Table 2 below. Respondents to a survey carried out as part of this study highlighted both the rudimentary and sophisticated tactics used in identifying and pushing back against disinformation. It was noted that most of the respondents rely on basic and moderate methods despite the increasing sophistication with which disinformation is generated and disseminated.

Further, these diverse protagonists hold very specific roles and functions to meet the needs of their audiences. Country-specific actors hold a prominent position within their jurisdictions and are essential to identifying and addressing disinformation within their specific borders. Their work is often complemented by multi-country initiatives that also look into similar patterns.

Similarly, the pan-African and international protagonists have more capability and are more sophisticated in their approaches to tackling disinformation. For example, they have access to larger data sets, have more expertise, and in some instances access to platforms that they can influence to take positive action. Notably, DFR Lab's report was instrumental in identifying election-related online Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour ahead of **Uganda's** January 2021 general election, which led Facebook and X to take down several accounts linked to state actors.<sup>69</sup> **Uganda's** government retaliated by blocking access to Facebook in the country since January 2021 (to date).<sup>70</sup>

The media are also a key protagonist in efforts to push back against disinformation. This is due to their roles as fact-checkers, promoters of digital literacy, and disseminators of disinformation – both deliberately and unknowingly. Moreover, national anti-disinformation coalitions are emerging as essential entities. They are forging alliances aimed at countering disinformation, acting as pressure groups, and upholding information integrity in various spheres.

68 CIPESA. *CIPESA Joins Call Urging Content Platforms to Share Data with African Elections Researchers*. 2023. <https://cipesa.org/2023/12/cipesa-joins-call-urging-content-platforms-to-share-data-with-african-elections-researchers>.

69 CIPESA. *Uganda's 2021 Election: A Textbook Case of Disruption to Democracy and Digital Networks in Authoritarian Countries*. <https://cipesa.org/2021/01/ugandas-2021-election-a-textbook-case-of-disruption-to-democracy-and-digital-networks-in-authoritarian-countries/>.

70 *Facebook to remain shut as govt talks with tech giant stall*. [www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/facebook-to-remain-shut-as-govt-talks-with-tech-giant-stall-3912172](http://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/facebook-to-remain-shut-as-govt-talks-with-tech-giant-stall-3912172).

<b>Country-specific</b> Initiatives focussed on a specific country	<b>Multi-Country</b> Initiatives working across select countries
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 211 Check (South Sudan)</li> <li>• Association des Blogueurs de Guinée (Guinea-Conakry)</li> <li>• ADISI (Cameroon)</li> <li>• Beam Reports (Sudan)</li> <li>• Build Up (Kenya)</li> <li>• Blo Goma (DR Congo)</li> <li>• CARD (Ethiopia)</li> <li>• Centre for Human Rights, University of Pretoria (Running a project in Zimbabwe)</li> <li>• Congo-Check (DR Congo)</li> <li>• Digital Access (Cameroon)</li> <li>• Ebuteli (DR Congo)</li> <li>• Ethiopia Check</li> <li>• FasoCheck (Burkina Faso)</li> <li>• Gender Tech Initiative, Uganda</li> <li>• Goma Actif (DR Congo)</li> <li>• Habari RDC (DR Congo)</li> <li>• Iverify (Liberia)</li> <li>• Media Monitoring Africa (South Africa)</li> <li>• Nouveaux Droits de l'homme, PROTEGE-QV, (Cameroon)</li> <li>• Real411 (South Africa)</li> <li>• Studio Kalangou (Niger)</li> <li>• Cameroon Media Education Association (EDUK-MEDIA)</li> <li>• Uganda Debunk Initiative</li> <li>• Zimfact (Zimbabwe)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) – West Africa</li> <li>• Code for Africa, East Africa</li> <li>• Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA)</li> <li>• Dubawa – West Africa</li> <li>• Pollicy</li> <li>• Réseau des Défenseurs des Droits Humains en Afrique Centrale (REDHAC) – Central Africa</li> <li>• African Institute of Investigative Journalism</li> <li>• Jamlab</li> <li>• Mersa Media institute</li> <li>• Canal France International (French media development agency)</li> <li>• Africa Uncensored</li> </ul> <p><b>Anti-Disinformation Coalitions</b> Trans- and international alliances</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• National Coalition on Freedom of Expression and Content Moderation (FECOMO)</li> <li>• African Fact-Checking Alliance (AFCA)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Africa Region</b> Transnational initiatives</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Code for Africa</li> <li>• Africa Check</li> <li>• Tri Facts</li> <li>• AU-EU D4D Hub</li> <li>• PesaCheck</li> </ul>	<p><b>International</b> Initiatives operating beyond the region</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab)</li> <li>• Code For All</li> </ul>

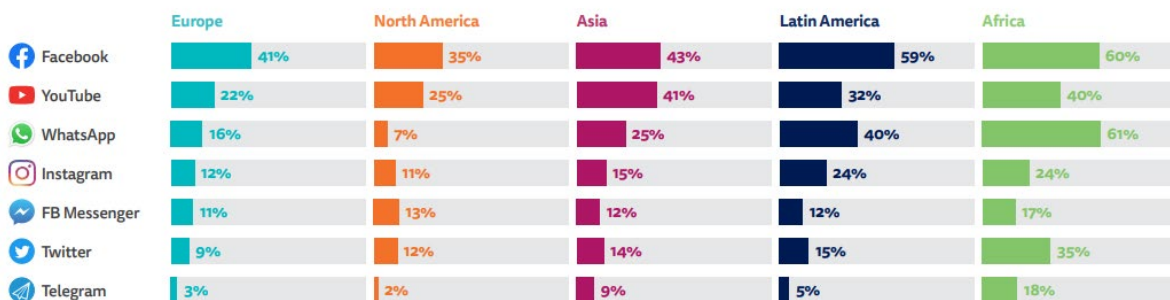
Table 2: Current landscape of key anti-disinformation protagonists in Africa

## 5 The problem with social media platforms and their disproportionate power

### Growing influence of social media

Increasingly, social media platforms have been gaining popularity as sources of news and information, not only in Africa but across the globe. As shown in the chart below, Facebook and WhatsApp are used for news by at least 60 percent of the Africans surveyed in the 2022 edition<sup>71</sup> of the Reuters Institute Digital News Report. This usage is being driven by new media and online news platforms coupled with active citizen journalists and content creators publishing diverse and contextually relevant content in local languages which are distributed on social media. Consequently, platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp, X (formerly known as Twitter), and Telegram have become primary sources of news and information and are relied upon by many users in Africa as compared to legacy media.

PROPORTION THAT USED EACH SOCIAL NETWORK FOR NEWS IN THE LAST WEEK – SELECTED REGIONS



Source: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (2021)<sup>72</sup>

However, of concern is the disruption of the current media landscape as “news is increasingly detached from journalism, albeit coloured by local factors.”<sup>73</sup> According to the Reuters report, there is a link between fears of online misinformation and the widespread use of social media. The concern is shared across all regions across the world with more than half (54 percent) of respondents noting that they worry about being able to tell the difference between what is real and fake on the internet when it comes to news. However, people who say they mainly use social media as a source of news are more worried (61 percent) than people who do not use it at all (48 percent).

71 Reuters Institute for the study of Journalism. *Digital News Report 2022*. <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2022>.

72 Reuters Institute for the study of Journalism. *Digital News Report 2021*. [https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2021-06/Digital\\_News\\_Report\\_2021\\_FINAL.pdf](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2021-06/Digital_News_Report_2021_FINAL.pdf).

73 Tandfonline. *Making News Outside Legacy Media*. [www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23743670.2021.2046397](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23743670.2021.2046397).



## Gaps in content moderation

The inadequacy of the measures undertaken by social media platforms and social networking sites in moderating illegal, harmful or offensive content has increasingly been questioned. In Ethiopia for instance, social media companies have been accused of not doing enough to moderate such content, which has gone on to cause real-world harm, such as encouraging killings.<sup>74</sup> Put plainly, platforms such as Facebook and X are accused of deploying minuscule resources and measures in content moderation in Africa, relative to their investments in the United States and Europe.

Despite having been identified as being the location of disinformation campaigns, platforms continue to derive financial benefit from political advertising that spreads disinformation. Political microtargeting heightens the risk of disinformation. Platforms are being used to circumvent national laws, as they operate outside the regulation of most countries. For example, Facebook and X continued to run political advertising in **Kenya**<sup>75</sup> even though the local electoral laws ban campaigning on polling day.<sup>76</sup> In 2021, X ran paid advertisements in Kenya related to hashtags that were pushing disinformation narratives, including #Justice-4Sale and #AnarchistJudges.<sup>77</sup>

A study respondent pointed out that while social media platforms have pledged to filter out harmful content to protect the millions who actively use their platforms, their efforts remain minimal as the spread of disinformation remains present.

*“The main problem is that platforms are not taking down harmful content, even after they are alerted. Even if they do, it will already be too late. Identifying disinformation in Africa is hindered by several challenges, including linguistic diversity, limited access to technology, low digital literacy, political interference, the rapid spread of false information, and a lack of funding.”* – Study Respondent

Other key concerns about content moderation in Africa include the platforms’ limited understanding of cultural contexts on the continent, their lack of cultural sensitivity, along with labour rights violations, bias and discrimination of algorithms, non-applicability of / non-compliance with local laws, and lack of transparency and accountability in content moderation, all of which have an impact on freedom of expression and civic participation.<sup>78</sup>

Ahead of the numerous elections set to take place in 2024, there is also concern about AI-assisted influence operations could be deployed to interfere with the upcoming electoral processes. Examples include the use of “language models to write news articles, personal-

74 Crisis Group. *What Facebook Does (and Doesn't) Have to Do with Ethiopia's Ethnic Violence*. 2023. [www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/ethiopia/what-facebook-does-and-doesnt-have-do-ethiopias-ethnic-violence](https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/ethiopia/what-facebook-does-and-doesnt-have-do-ethiopias-ethnic-violence).

75 CIPIT. *Contextualising political advertising policy to political micro-targeting in Kenyan elections*. 2023. [https://cipit.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Political-Advertising\\_compressed.pdf](https://cipit.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Political-Advertising_compressed.pdf).

76 Rest of World. *Facebook and Instagram ran ads violating Kenyan election law, new report reveals*. 2022. <https://restofworld.org/2022/facebook-instagram-ads-kenya-election/>.

77 “Rest of World, Disinformation influencers” for hire, only \$15 a day. <https://restofworld.org/2021/kenya-disinformation-bbi-judiciary/>.

78 CIPESA. *Introducing the Tech Accountability Fund and a Call for Proposals*. <https://cipesa.org/2024/01/introducing-the-tech-accountability-fund-and-a-call-for-proposals/>.



ised propaganda or phishing emails to specific targets, falsify public opinion on social media or public comment systems, and even persuade targets via one-on-one chats.”<sup>79</sup>

Given that most protagonists in the region lack the technical expertise to identify sophisticated disinformation such as that generated using AI, it is feared that a lot of election-related disinformation could go unnoticed and unchallenged during 2024, especially in electoral contexts where digital literacy rates are low, and content regulation and moderation is ineffective. AI tools could facilitate the cheap and easy generation of large volumes of disinformation which could be harder to detect and respond to. Also, manipulated media including viral deep fakes could profoundly undermine access to impartial and pluralistic information, and thus affect electoral integrity and potentially fuel election-related violence.

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79 Law Fare. *Finding Language Models in Influence Operations*. [www.lawfaremedia.org/article/finding-language-models-in-influence-operations](http://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/finding-language-models-in-influence-operations).

## 6 Conclusions and future directions for Africa

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As technology has evolved, so have the behaviours and methods of users in interacting with them. The misappropriation of technology for uses other than their intended use has seen the proliferation of practices that threaten a free, fair, and open internet. Consequently, the proliferation of disinformation aimed at distorting the truth not only undermines civic participation and good governance, but also profoundly impacts the role of the media in society.

To navigate the future of efforts aimed at addressing disinformation, the following have emerged as key trends that could influence the extent to which significant change can be achieved in addressing disinformation in Africa.

- Despite a growing awareness of online disinformation, people continue to rely on social media platforms as sources of news, often at the expense of traditional media outlets. This shift has led to a decline in trust in the mainstream media, which is further exacerbated by the exploits of fake accounts masquerading as legitimate sources.
- While there are a growing number of protagonists pushing back against disinformation, including the media, there remains a notable expectation that the state should support the pushback against disinformation. This has been observed in both South Africa and Ethiopia, despite the two being at opposite ends of the democracy spectrum. In other words, regardless of the political circumstances, state intervention against disinformation is expected and required – even in instances where state actors themselves are also culpable in actively disseminating disinformation.
- The emergence of multi-stakeholder coalitions dedicated to addressing disinformation. As useful platforms for collaboration and joint action by anti-disinformation protagonists, such coalitions are likely to facilitate a sharing of skills and expertise and promote awareness, detection of disinformation, and rapid dissemination of factual information in response to disinformation campaigns. In DR Congo, where the Catholic Church wields considerable influence, both among the public and in the political sphere,<sup>80</sup> it could play a critical role in addressing disinformation.<sup>81</sup>
- The increasing use of sophisticated techniques like deepfake technology, strategically timed disinformation campaigns, and the deceptive use of old/false content presented as breaking news has created a need for upskilling among protagonists involved in disinformation work. Currently, most protagonists at country level are relying on less-than-adequate tools which are unsuitable for the sophisticated disinformation tactics and campaigns they are grappling with.

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80 Le Monde. 'Democracy in the DRC owes a lot to the Church'. [www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/01/31/democracy-in-the-drc-owes-a-lot-to-the-church\\_6013850\\_4.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/01/31/democracy-in-the-drc-owes-a-lot-to-the-church_6013850_4.html).

81 DW Akademie. *Catholic Church recklessly meddling in DRC politics*. [www.dw.com/en/opinion-catholic-churches-meddling-in-drc-politics-reckless-and-dangerous/a-46974956](http://www.dw.com/en/opinion-catholic-churches-meddling-in-drc-politics-reckless-and-dangerous/a-46974956).

- Although disinformation campaigns target local concerns and take advantage of issues such as regional conflicts, ethnic and social tensions, and election processes, foreign actors have emerged as key agents fuelling false narratives that deepen existing social and political divisions. Some actors are in neighbouring countries, some are in the diaspora, and others are public relations firms outside Africa.
- Resurfacing narratives from past disinformation campaigns persist in current discussions, as evidenced in South Africa where narratives initially introduced by London-based Bell-Pottinger in 2017 continue to linger in public discourse.
- Limited action by platforms despite their promises of intervention remain a key challenge. Also, limited access to data for researchers; continued monetisation of data e.g. for political microtargeting; increasing sophistication of disinformation tactics and campaigns; and inadequate content moderation, including a dearth of local-language moderators.
- Some countries lack comprehensive legal frameworks to effectively counter disinformation, posing challenges in combating its spread and instead restricting freedom of expression, media, and access to information.
- While there are efforts aimed at fact-checking as a key tool in tackling disinformation, there remains a need for more investment to improve effectiveness. Amplification and use of verified information has not been adequately enhanced or aptly used in redress mechanisms.
- While efforts are being made for the public to report disinformation, effort to have more public deliberation on disinformation remains insufficient. This leaves the population susceptible to manipulation. South Africa's Real411 could be a useful model for intervention reporting in other countries.
- The platforms' tendency to restrict access to data remains a concern, especially given the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) in disinformation practices. Limited knowledge on how AI manifests or even how to keep up with it threatens disinformation efforts – particularly in African contexts where digital literacy remains low in comparison with other regions of the world.

## 7 Each stakeholder has a role to play: Key recommendations

This report has several recommendations for the various stakeholder groups. Given the complex and interconnected nature of the disinformation phenomenon, it is important to point out that coordination and cooperation between multiple stakeholders is crucial to all anti-disinformation efforts. While each stakeholder group may focus on distinct roles, interests, and responsibilities, collaboration is essential for effective problem-solving and achieving meaningful outcomes. With this in mind, the authors of this report recommend:

- **Promote multi-stakeholder engagement:** Invest in more collaborative efforts dedicated to addressing disinformation through joint initiatives by governments, civil society organisations, tech companies, and media to jointly combat disinformation, including through shared strategies, guidelines, and response mechanisms. Further, more businesses on the continent need to play an active role in addressing disinformation, including through supporting anti-disinformation initiatives that combat disinformation and promoting fact-based information.
- **Seize regulatory opportunities:** An active multistakeholder community can support the development of progressive regulatory regimes that strike/acknowledge the necessary balance between freedom of expression and access to information. There is also a need to review and update existing legal frameworks that address disinformation, including the online dissemination of false information. New proposals from the UNESCO Guidelines for the Governance of Digital Platforms could serve as a foundation of best practices to be considered.
- **Build media & information literacy:** Media & information literacy efforts need to be pursued to educate the public about the consistently evolving nature of disinformation and the need to rely on more than one source of information. The promotion of critical thinking as a tool in media literacy needs to be encouraged across more stakeholder groups, including in education, civil society, media, government, and the private sector.

### Media

- **Enhance trust in media:** Media outlets need to prioritise accurate and unbiased reporting, especially during election periods, to rebuild public trust. To facilitate this, novel and innovative methods or systems for media accountability and self-regulation need to be developed to ensure ethical journalism practices, especially in an age where the definition of a media outlet is increasingly blurry. Media outlets should focus on transparency, accuracy, and accountability to rebuild public trust and also encourage media literacy initiatives that inform the public about the importance of reliable journalism.

### Civil Society

- **Hold platforms accountable:** African protagonists need to put more pressure on the platforms, including demanding more transparency in their algorithms and content moderation policies through increased access to data.

## Governments

- **Promote public reporting:** More governments need to establish accessible channels for the public to report disinformation, including transparent and traceable actions [subsequently] taken to address the cases reported.
- **Initiate discourse on disinformation:** State-initiated opportunities for broader public engagement and awareness can enhance public critical thinking on disinformation. Such engagements enhance trust in governance and encourage a culture of reporting disinformation rather than spreading it.

## Platforms

- **Be responsive to local concerns:** Platforms need to partner with local stakeholders to pursue more continuous and collaborative efforts, ones that address and are more responsive to local concerns (e. g. local issues, regional conflicts, political and social tensions). These efforts should not necessarily be present only during periods of elections but can persist as ongoing, long-term initiatives. Meanwhile, platforms need to invest in tools that can better detect local languages, as well as train more moderators that are proficient in local languages.

## Fact-Checking Community

- **Promote skills development:** As technology has evolved, so has the need for more advanced skills to tackle disinformation and to identify fake accounts that generate or popularise false narratives. Further, continuous training and resources for fact-checkers, journalists, researchers and online activists to effectively counter sophisticated disinformation techniques need to be developed in partnership with academia.

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# Annex: African countries going to the polls in 2024

## African countries going to the polls in 2024

\*Dates as of February 7, 2024, subject to change

Country	Election <sup>82</sup>	Election Date	History of Network Disruption
Botswana	National Assembly	October	No
Burkina Faso	Presidential	July <sup>83</sup>	Yes
Chad	Presidential, National Assembly & Municipal Councils	By October 2024	Yes
Comoros	Presidential & Governors (First Round) President & Governors (Second Round)	Held January 14, 2024 <sup>84</sup> February 25	No
Ghana	President & National Assembly	December 7	No
Ethiopia	Presidential	TBD	Yes
Madagascar	National Assembly	May	No
Malawi	National Assembly & Local	May	Yes
Mali	Presidential	February 4 <sup>85</sup> (Postponed)	Yes
Mauritius	National Assembly	December 31 <sup>86</sup>	No
Mozambique	Presidential, National Assembly & Provincial	October 9 <sup>87</sup>	No
Namibia	President & National Assembly	November <sup>88</sup>	No

82 EISA African Election Calendar 2024. [www.eisa.org/election-calendar](http://www.eisa.org/election-calendar).

83 Africa Center. *Africa's 2024 Elections: Challenges and Opportunities to Regain Democratic Momentum*. 2024. <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/2024-elections/>.

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Country	Election	Election Date	History of Network Disruption
Rwanda	Presidential & Chamber Of Deputies (2/3) Chamber Of Deputies (1/3)	July 15 <sup>89</sup> July 16	No
Senegal	Presidential	February 25 (Postponed)	Yes
South Africa	National Assembly & Provincial Legislatures	May – August	No
South Sudan	Presidential, National Assembly & Local	October – November	Yes
Tunisia	Presidential, National Council of Regions & Districts	November 24	Yes

89 Africa News. *Rwanda: presidential election set for July 15, 2024*. 2023. [www.africanews.com/2023/12/13/rwanda-presidential-election-set-for-july-15-2024/](https://www.africanews.com/2023/12/13/rwanda-presidential-election-set-for-july-15-2024/).

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