

STRENGTHENING ELECTORAL INTEGRITY, OBSERVATION ACCESS AND REGIONAL LEARNING IN THE EAST AND HORN OF AFRICA REGION

Lessons from Electoral Processes in Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania, Uganda, South Sudan and Ethiopia



Executive Summary

The East and Horn of Africa region has experienced a series of significant electoral events between 2024 and 2026 that have highlighted both progress and persistent challenges in democratic governance, election observation, and civic participation. These include general elections in Rwanda (July 2024), parliamentary elections in Burundi (June 2025), general elections in Tanzania (October 2025), general elections in Uganda (January 2026), the postponed elections in South Sudan originally scheduled for 2024, and Ethiopia's 2026 general elections.

Collectively, these electoral experiences reveal a growing need for stronger regional cooperation, improved access for citizen and regional election observation missions, greater transparency in accreditation processes, and sustained investment in peer-learning mechanisms among electoral stakeholders.

A key concern emerging from these electoral cycles is the limited opportunity for regional election observation and learning. E-HORN was unable to deploy observation or learning missions to Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania, and Uganda due to challenges related to accreditation and access. Similarly, the repeated postponement of elections in South Sudan has underscored the importance of sustained regional engagement in supporting democratic transitions and electoral preparedness. In contrast, the Ethiopia Learning Mission demonstrated the value of peer-learning exchanges, collaborative election observation, integrated situation rooms, media monitoring systems, and real-time electoral data management.

This policy brief urges regional institutions, governments, election management bodies, and international partners to strengthen electoral openness, support citizen observation, and institutionalize regional peer-learning as a pillar of democratic resilience in the East and Horn of Africa.

I. Regional Context

The period between **2024 and 2026** has been marked by diverse electoral experiences across the region but with interestingly similar challenges. The following are brief contexts from countries that have held electoral processes during the period in review.



Rwanda conducted its presidential and parliamentary elections on **15 July 2024** in a context marked by strong institutional stability, high voter mobilization, and continued socio-economic development. Incumbent President Paul Kagame secured another term in

office, while the elections also featured a female presidential candidate, an important milestone for women's political participation in the region. Although the electoral process was generally peaceful and orderly, concerns were raised by governance and human rights organizations regarding the competitiveness of the electoral environment, restrictions on opposition participation, and limitations affecting independent civic engagement and observation.

During the electoral period, several factors constrained opportunities

for local and regional election observation and learning missions. Opposition figures, including government critic and opposition leader Victoire Ingabire, remained excluded from electoral participation due to legal restrictions arising from previous convictions, while members of unregistered opposition movements and government critics reported surveillance, harassment, arrests, and limitations on their activities.

Although Rwanda remained largely secure and free from

election-related violence, the highly regulated operating environment restricted the space available for independent civic actors, media organizations, and observer groups. Continued economic growth and development contributed to overall stability, but public discourse on governance and electoral competition remained limited. The growing use of digital technologies in governance, voter communication, and public administration improved efficiency but was accompanied by concerns regarding online monitoring, digital surveillance, and self-censorship.



Regulatory requirements governing political parties, civil society organizations, accreditation processes, and media operations further constrained independent scrutiny of the electoral process.

These factors limited opportunities for regional organizations such as E-HORN to secure accreditation and deploy observation or learning missions, thereby reducing avenues for peer learning, independent assessment, and regional democratic accountability.

1.2 South Sudan: Delayed Democratic Transition



South Sudan, the world's youngest nation since gaining independence in 2011, has continued to navigate the complex challenges of state-building, peace implementation, and democratic transition. The country's first post-independence elections, initially scheduled for December 2024, were expected to mark a major milestone in its journey toward constitutional governance and citizen-led leadership. However, the elections were postponed to allow additional time for the implementation of key provisions of the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS), including constitution-making, security sector reforms, electoral preparations, and civic education^[1]. The postponement reflected the significant institutional, governance, and security challenges facing the country and underscored the importance of sustained regional and international support for South Sudan's democratic transition.

^[1] *Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), 2018; Transitional Government of National Unity and Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (RJMEC), Reports on the Extension of the Transitional Period, 2024.*

The environment leading to the postponement was characterized by delays in implementing the peace agreement, continued tensions among signatory parties, and localized insecurity arising from intercommunal violence, armed group activities, and conflict-related displacement in several states, including Jonglei, Upper Nile, and parts of the Greater Equatoria region. Severe economic pressures, including dependence on oil revenues, inflation, currency depreciation, disruptions to oil exports through Sudan, and funding shortfalls for electoral institutions, constrained preparations for credible elections[2].

Large-scale displacement, humanitarian needs, food insecurity, and limited civic awareness further complicated prospects for broad-based participation[3]. Weak telecommunications infrastructure, limited digital connectivity, and inadequate electoral technology systems hindered voter registration, information dissemination,

and election management planning. Legally, critical pre-election benchmarks remained incomplete, including the permanent constitution-making process, harmonization of electoral laws, reconstitution of key democratic institutions, and implementation of transitional security arrangements.

E-HORN and civil society partners in South Sudan actively sought to support electoral preparedness and democratic transition processes. Through participation in the South Sudan Country Forum, stakeholders resolved to establish a dedicated civil society platform to coordinate election-related engagement, review the existing electoral roadmap, and advocate for the development of an alternative roadmap that reflected the priorities and recommendations of civil society.

The Forum further committed to conducting consultations with political parties, electoral bodies, and civil society organizations, promoting citizen engagement

and transparency, advocating for electoral and administrative reforms, and engaging national and international stakeholders to foster accountability and credible elections. These initiatives demonstrated sustained efforts by E-HORN and its partners to contribute constructively to electoral preparedness, democratic governance, and the creation of conditions necessary for peaceful, inclusive, and credible elections in South Sudan.



1.3 BURUNDI: LIMITED REGIONAL OBSERVATION ACCESS

Burundi held its parliamentary and communal elections on 5 June 2025 against a backdrop of ongoing efforts to consolidate stability and strengthen democratic governance following years of political tension. The elections were viewed as an important milestone in shaping the country's governance trajectory and assessing progress in citizen participation, electoral administration, and political pluralism. While the electoral process proceeded peacefully in many parts of the country and recorded high voter turnout, it also attracted regional and international attention due to concerns regarding the inclusiveness of the electoral environment, the participation of opposition parties, the operating space for civil society and media actors, and the accessibility of the process to independent election observers.

During the 2025 legislative and communal elections, the operating environment was characterized by restrictions on opposition participation, civic engagement, and independent observation. Several opposition members and party representatives were arrested during and immediately after polling, including members of the Congrès National pour la Liberté (CNL) Burundi Bwa Bose, and Front for Democracy in Burundi (FRODEBU) parties who sought to report electoral irregularities[4].

Reports from multiple provinces also documented intimidation, threats, targeted violence, and the involvement of the ruling party's youth wing, the Imbonerakure[5], which was accused of exerting pressure on voters, expelling opposition representatives from polling stations, and creating a climate of fear. Persistent inflation, foreign currency shortages, fuel scarcity, and broader economic challenges heightened public frustration and constrained

[4] Human Rights Watch, Burundi Events of 2025; Amnesty International, Burundi: Restrictions on Civic Space and Political Participation, 2025.

[5] United Nations Human Rights Council, Reports of the Special Rapporteur on Burundi; International Crisis Group, Burundi's Political Environment Ahead of the 2025 Elections, 2025.

civic activities. Media censorship, restrictions on freedom of expression, and limited space for independent civil society reduced opportunities for citizen participation and public scrutiny, while digital communications remained vulnerable to monitoring and information control.

Regulatory and administrative barriers affected accreditation and access for observers, with reports that some accredited domestic observers,

including church-affiliated monitors, were denied entry to polling stations despite possessing the required documentation. These conditions limited transparency, weakened confidence in the electoral process, and contributed to the inability of regional networks such as E-HORN to deploy observation or learning missions, thereby reducing opportunities for independent assessment, peer learning, and regional democratic accountability.

1.4 TANZANIA: MISSED OPPORTUNITIES FOR REGIONAL LEARNING



Tanzania held its General Elections on **29 October 2025**, a significant democratic exercise through which citizens elected the President, Members of Parliament, and local government representatives. The elections took place amid heightened public interest in governance reforms, political participation, and the country's democratic trajectory under the administration of President Samia Suluhu Hassan. While the electoral process was expected to build on recent efforts to expand civic and political space, it was also marked by growing concerns regarding the participation of opposition parties, restrictions on civic actors, media freedoms, and the overall competitiveness of the electoral environment.

During the 2025 electoral period, the operating environment was marked by growing restrictions on opposition participation, civic engagement, and independent observation. Prominent opposition leader Tundu Lissu was arrested and charged with treason following his



"No Reforms, No Election" campaign, while other opposition officials, including John Mnyika and John Heche, were reportedly detained, and several critics were subjected to arrests, enforced disappearances, or intimidation[6].

Concerns over insecurity and heavy security deployments, particularly around opposition activities and election-related protests, contributed to a climate of fear among civil society actors and observers.

Rising living costs and youth unemployment continued to shape public expectations and electoral discourse, while increasing reliance on digital platforms was accompanied by concerns over surveillance, restrictions on online expression, cybercrime-related prosecutions, media limitations, and reports of internet disruptions[7]. Civic space was further constrained by administrative and regulatory measures affecting political parties, civil society organizations, public assemblies, and accreditation processes, reducing opportunities for independent scrutiny and regional engagement.

Collectively, these conditions created significant obstacles for both domestic and regional election observation initiatives, limiting the ability of organizations such as E-HORN to deploy observation or learning missions and restricting opportunities for peer learning, independent assessment, and regional democratic accountability.

[6] Reuters, "Tanzania Opposition Leader Tundu Lissu Charged with Treason," 2025; Amnesty International, *Tanzania: Crackdown on Opposition and Civic Space Ahead of Elections*, 2025.

[7] Freedom House, *Freedom on the Net: Tanzania, 2025*; Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA), *Digital Rights in Tanzania*, 2025.

1.5 UGANDA: CHALLENGES IN OBSERVATION ACCREDITATION

Uganda held its General Elections in January 2026 to elect the President, Members of Parliament, and local government representatives in a contest widely regarded as a significant test of the country's democratic trajectory. The electoral period unfolded in a tense and highly contested environment marked by the arrest, detention, and harassment of opposition leaders, activists, and civil society actors. Prominent opposition figure Kizza Besigye remained in detention on treason-related charges after being denied bail ahead of the elections. National Unity Platform (NUP) leader Robert Kyagulanyi reported restrictions on his movements and the harassment of his supporters, and later went into hiding following the disputed election results. Meanwhile, NUP Deputy President Muhammad Muwanga Kivumbi was arrested and subsequently faced terrorism-related charges[8].



The E-HORN Chairperson Sarah Bireete, was arrested and charged under the Data Protection and Privacy Act with "unlawfully obtaining or disclosing personal data". The state's prosecution alleged that she had accessed and shared the National Voters' Register (voter information controlled by the Electoral Commission) without authorization. Civil society

organizations also experienced regulatory challenges, with E-HORN member organizations such as ACFIM and CCG reportedly having their operating licenses suspended, limiting their ability to undertake election-related activities[9].

Economic pressures, including high youth unemployment and rising costs of living, shaped public discourse and voter expectations, while social tensions were amplified by concerns over political freedoms and citizen participation. The increasing use of digital technologies and social media expanded access to information but also heightened risks of misinformation, disinformation, online surveillance, and restrictions on digital expression, culminating into an internet shutdown from 13th January to 18th January 2026[10].

Regulatory and administrative measures affecting civil society operations, accreditation processes, and freedoms of association further constrained the environment for independent observation. Collectively, these factors created significant challenges for both local and regional election observers, contributing to the inability of E-HORN and other regional actors to deploy election observation or learning missions and limiting opportunities for peer learning, independent assessment, and regional democratic accountability.

[8] Human Rights Watch, Uganda Events of 2026; Reuters, Reports on Uganda's 2026 General Elections and Opposition Detentions, 2026.

[9] Amnesty International, Uganda: Arrest of Human Rights Defenders During the 2026 Electoral Period, 2026; National Coalition of Human Rights Defenders Uganda (NCHRD-U), Situation Updates, 2026.

[10] NetBlocks, Uganda Internet Disruptions During the 2026 Elections; Access Now, Election-Related Internet Shutdowns in Africa, 2026.

1.6 ETHIOPIA: A POSITIVE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Ethiopia's 2026 General Elections represented one of the most significant democratic exercises in the East and Horn of Africa, taking place in a complex environment shaped by ongoing reforms, security challenges, and efforts to strengthen electoral institutions. The elections,

administered by the National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE), attracted considerable attention from domestic, regional, and international stakeholders due to their importance in consolidating democratic governance in Africa's second-most populous country[11]. The electoral process also provided a valuable opportunity for regional peer learning, with E-HORN deploying a Learning Mission to examine electoral administration, citizen observation initiatives, election situation rooms, media monitoring mechanisms, stakeholder coordination structures, and the use of technology in election management.



The electoral environment was characterized by both progress and persistent challenges. Competition among political parties remained robust, although concerns were raised regarding the participation of some opposition groups, localized tensions, and insecurity in parts of the Amhara and Oromia regions, where conflict and instability affected aspects of political mobilization and electoral preparations[12].

Economic pressures, including inflation, currency reforms, unemployment, and the rising cost of living, influenced public expectations and campaign discourse. Ethiopia's diverse social landscape required continuous efforts to promote inclusion, peaceful coexistence, and participation among women, youth, persons with disabilities, and historically marginalized communities.

Technological innovations featured prominently in the electoral process, including digital voter registration systems, electronic results transmission mechanisms, real-time data management platforms, media monitoring tools, and integrated election situation rooms that enhanced transparency, incident tracking, and decision-making. At

the same time, stakeholders remained concerned about misinformation, disinformation, online hate speech, and information integrity risks on digital platforms.

Legally and institutionally, the elections benefited from reforms aimed at strengthening the independence of the National Election Board of Ethiopia, improving electoral dispute resolution mechanisms, and enhancing the regulatory framework governing elections, although challenges relating to implementation, stakeholder trust, and access in conflict-affected areas persisted.

In contrast to the other countries in the region, Ethiopia's 2026 electoral processes provided an opportunity for structured regional learning through a peer-learning mission hosted by national electoral stakeholders and civil society organizations.

The mission demonstrated the value of-

- Integrated election situation rooms
- Real-time observer reporting systems
- Collaborative civil society observation models
- Media monitoring and information integrity initiatives
- Data visualization and incident management platforms
- Stakeholder coordination mechanisms

While Ethiopia's 2026 General Elections provided valuable opportunities for regional learning and stakeholder engagement, E-HORN and its regional member organizations were not accredited to undertake a formal election observation mission. In addition, the Learning Mission delegation was not granted

permission to conduct field observation exercises at polling stations or directly observe voting and counting processes on Election Day.

Consequently, the mission's engagement was limited to interactions with electoral stakeholders, citizen observers, civil society organizations, election situation rooms, media monitors, and electoral management bodies. This contrasted with E-HORN's learning missions in Ghana and Kenya, where study teams were accredited and granted access to polling stations, enabling direct observation of voter identification, ballot issuance, voting procedures, counting processes, results transmission, and polling station management.

The Ethiopian experience therefore highlighted both the value of structured peer-learning engagements and the limitations that arise when observer accreditation and access to polling processes are restricted, underscoring the importance of transparent and inclusive observation frameworks in strengthening electoral accountability and regional democratic learning.



[11] National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE), Electoral Reform and Election Administration Reports, 2025–2026; International IDEA, Electoral Processes in Ethiopia, 2026.

[12] International Crisis Group, Ethiopia's Security Challenges and Electoral Environment, 2026; United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Ethiopia Situation Reports, 2026.

2. OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGES OF PHYSICAL DEPLOYMENT OF OBSERVERS AND LEARNING MISSIONS

The increasing restrictions on observer accreditation, limitations on access to electoral processes, and the inability to deploy physical observation and learning missions compelled E-HORN to adopt innovative approaches to electoral monitoring and information gathering. In response, E-HORN strengthened the use of a remote Election Situation Room (ESR) as both a mitigation measure and a complementary tool for election observation, analysis, and regional learning.

The ESR model enabled E-HORN to continue monitoring electoral processes in contexts where accreditation was denied, access to polling stations was restricted, or security and regulatory conditions prevented the deployment of observers.

Rather than relying solely on in-person observation, ESRs provided a structured platform for collecting, verifying, analysing, and disseminating electoral information from diverse and credible sources[13].

Through the ESR, E-HORN aggregated and triangulated information from local civil society partners, citizen observers, media monitoring initiatives, Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT), regional partner networks, and other election stakeholders. The system integrated election observation data, incident reporting mechanisms, conflict early warning systems, social media monitoring, information integrity and fact-checking processes, stakeholder engagement platforms,

communication channels, data visualization dashboards, and geographic information systems (GIS) mapping tools[14].

The multi-source approach enhanced the breadth and timeliness of electoral information available to E-HORN while facilitating real-time analysis, coordinated responses to emerging issues, and evidence-based reporting. Beyond addressing accreditation and access challenges, the ESRs evolved into an important complementary methodology for electoral observation, enabling broader regional collaboration, knowledge sharing, and continuous monitoring of electoral developments across the East and Horn of Africa region.

3. KEY POLICY CHALLENGES AND PROPOSALS

The regional electoral experiences reveal four major challenges requiring urgent policy attention.



3.1 Restrictive Access for Regional Observation

The inability of regional observer networks to obtain accreditation in several countries undermines opportunities for independent assessment, peer learning, transparency, and confidence building among electoral stakeholders. Election observation should be viewed as a constructive contribution to electoral integrity and democratic accountability rather than as a challenge to national sovereignty.

Regional observation missions are consistent with commitments undertaken by Member States under continental and regional governance frameworks, including the African Union's African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG), the AU Declaration on the Principles Governing Democratic Elections in Africa, and the African Union Election Observation and Monitoring Guidelines[15]. Similar obligations are reflected within Regional Economic Communities (RECs), including the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the East African Community (EAC), which encourage cooperation, peer learning, democratic governance, and citizen participation across member states.

The participation of regional civil society platforms in electoral

[13] Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa, *Election Situation Room Methodology and Best Practice Guidelines*; West Africa Election Observers Network, *Election Situation Room Practice Notes*, 2022–2025.

[14] Code for Africa, *Information Integrity and Election Monitoring Resources*; International Foundation for Electoral Systems, *Digital Election Monitoring Frameworks*, 2024.

platforms in electoral processes is further supported through institutional mechanisms such as the East African Civil Society Organizations Forum (EACSOF), the African Union's Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC), the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) NGO Forum, the Livingstone Formula, and the Maseru Conclusions, all of which recognize the role of civil

society in promoting democratic governance, human rights, and public accountability[16].

At the global level, principles contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation support independent observation as an important component of credible electoral processes. Governments should therefore facilitate timely accreditation and access for credible regional observer groups and learning missions, recognizing that such engagements enhance transparency, strengthen public confidence, promote the exchange of good practices, and contribute to the collective advancement of democracy across the continent.



3.2 Weak Regional Learning Mechanisms

Current opportunities for structured peer learning among electoral stakeholders remain limited and inconsistent across the East and Horn of Africa region. As a result, important innovations, good practices, and lessons emerging from electoral processes often remain confined within national borders, limiting their potential contribution to broader democratic development and electoral reform.

Strengthening regional learning mechanisms is consistent with the aspirations of the African Union's Agenda 2063, the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG), and the AU Declaration on the Principles Governing Elections in Africa, all of which encourage the sharing of experiences, promotion of democratic norms, and mutual accountability among Member States[17].

Similar commitments are reflected within Regional Economic Communities (RECs), including the East African Community (EAC) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), whose governance, peace, and integration frameworks emphasize regional cooperation, knowledge exchange, and collective responses to governance challenges.

The role of civil society and citizen-led knowledge sharing is further recognized through platforms and frameworks such as the African Union's Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC), the East African Civil Society Organizations Forum (EACSOF), the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) NGO Forum, the Livingstone Formula, and the Maseru Conclusions, which promote dialogue and collaboration between

state and non-state actors.

Globally, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 16 on Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation underscore the importance of information sharing, institutional learning, and cooperation in strengthening democratic governance.

Regional networks such as E-HORN therefore play a critical role in facilitating learning missions, peer exchanges, election situation rooms, comparative electoral assessments, and cross-border knowledge-sharing platforms that enable electoral stakeholders to adapt successful innovations, address common challenges, and strengthen electoral integrity across the continent.

[15] African Union, *African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance* (2007); AU Declaration on the Principles Governing Democratic Elections in Africa (2002); AU Election Observation and Monitoring Guidelines (2021).

[16] ⁵ African Union Economic, Social and Cultural Council Statutes; Livingstone Formula (2001); Maseru Conclusions (2005); East African Civil Society Organizations Forum Governance Framework.

[17] African Union, *Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want*; IGAD Governance Affairs Programme Framework; EAC Treaty, Articles on Cooperation and Governance.

3.3 Electoral Unpreparedness

The postponement of elections in South Sudan demonstrates the importance of sustained support for electoral preparedness, institution building, conflict prevention, and democratic transition processes. Despite progress under the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS), critical benchmarks relating to constitution-making, security sector reforms, electoral administration, voter registration, civic education, and the establishment of key democratic institutions remained incomplete, ultimately necessitating the postponement of the country's first post-independence elections.

Similar challenges are evident elsewhere in the region,

particularly in Somalia and Sudan, where ongoing insecurity, political transitions, institutional fragility, contested governance arrangements, displacement, and humanitarian crises continue to constrain the development of inclusive and credible electoral processes[18]. In Somalia, electoral processes continue to be shaped by security concerns, federal-state tensions, debates over the transition to universal suffrage, and the threat posed by violent extremist groups. In Sudan, the outbreak of armed conflict in 2023 reversed progress toward democratic transition, disrupted governance institutions, and effectively halted preparations for credible elections.

The experiences of South Sudan, Somalia, and Sudan underscore the broader challenges of advancing electoral democracy in post-conflict and transition contexts, highlighting the importance of implementing regional and continental commitments under the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG), the African Union's Agenda 2063, the AU Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Development Policy, the IGAD Peace and Security Framework, and the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), all of which recognize the link between peacebuilding, institution building, democratic governance, and sustainable electoral processes.

Strengthening electoral preparedness in post-conflict settings therefore requires long-term investment in governance institutions, peace agreements, civic participation, conflict mitigation, electoral management bodies, and inclusive political dialogue to create conditions conducive to peaceful, credible, and democratic elections.

3.4 Emerging Information Integrity Risks



Misinformation, disinformation, digital manipulation, and online polarization are increasingly shaping electoral processes across the East and Horn of Africa, affecting public trust, voter confidence, and the integrity of democratic discourse. However, these challenges extend far beyond the region and form part of a broader set of hybrid threats confronting democracies worldwide[19].

Electoral actors are increasingly exposed to coordinated influence operations, foreign and domestic disinformation campaigns, manipulated content, hate speech, algorithmic amplification, cyber-enabled information operations, and the weaponization of digital platforms to influence public opinion and electoral outcomes. These threats transcend national borders and exploit interconnected digital ecosystems, making them difficult for individual countries or organizations to address in isolation.

Addressing information integrity challenges therefore requires a coordinated, multi-stakeholder response involving governments, electoral management bodies, civil society organizations, media institutions, academia, technology companies, and regional and international organizations. The multinational nature of major digital platforms such as TikTok, Meta, X, YouTube, and other emerging technologies underscores the urgency of developing harmonized regional approaches to monitoring, reporting, and responding to information threats[20].

[18] United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Electoral Assistance in Fragile and Conflict-Affected States*; International IDEA, *Democracy and Elections in Transitional Contexts*; African Union Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Development Policy.

[19] United Nations Global Principles for Information Integrity; World Economic Forum, *Global Risks Report (Information Disorder and Disinformation Risks)*; OECD, *Facts Not Fakes: Tackling Disinformation*, 2024.

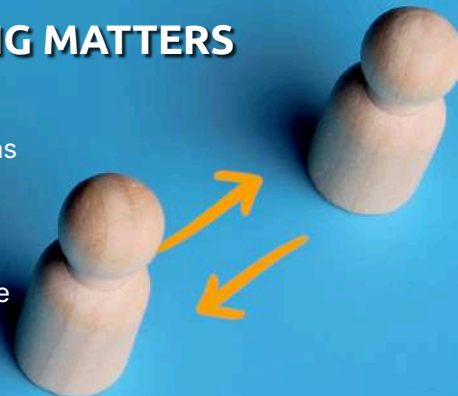
[20] Meta Transparency Center; TikTok Transparency Center; X Transparency Center.

Civil society organizations play a particularly important role in promoting digital literacy, election monitoring, fact-checking, and public accountability. Fact-checking and debunking networks have demonstrated the value of collaborative responses to false and misleading information[21]. However, their effectiveness

can be significantly enhanced through the establishment of robust regional frameworks for data collection, information sharing, access to platform data, cross-border collaboration, and early warning systems. Strengthening these mechanisms, alongside commitments contained in the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG), the African Union Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection (Malabo Convention), the African Union Digital Transformation Strategy, and relevant international frameworks on information integrity and digital governance, will be critical to safeguarding electoral processes and democratic resilience in an increasingly complex information environment.

4. WHY REGIONAL OBSERVATION AND PEER-LEARNING MATTERS

The experiences of Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania, Uganda, South Sudan, and Ethiopia demonstrate that electoral challenges are increasingly regional in nature. Issues such as restrictions on observer accreditation, shrinking civic space, insecurity, electoral disputes, information integrity threats, technological vulnerabilities, and institutional capacity gaps are common across many countries in the East and Horn of Africa. Strengthening regional peer-learning mechanisms therefore offers an important avenue for sharing experiences, promoting good practices, and enhancing the credibility and resilience of electoral processes across the region[22].



a)

Improve Election Preparedness

Regional peer-learning initiatives provide electoral stakeholders with opportunities to exchange lessons on planning, coordination, and election management. Learning from both successful and challenging electoral experiences enables stakeholders to identify risks early, strengthen operational readiness, improve contingency planning, and enhance preparedness for future electoral processes. This is particularly important in countries undergoing democratic transitions or emerging from conflict.

critical component of electoral accountability across Africa. Through regional exchanges, observer groups can share methodologies for observer recruitment, training, deployment, data collection, verification, and reporting. Such collaboration strengthens the professionalism, consistency, and effectiveness of citizen observation efforts and promotes the adoption of proven approaches across different electoral contexts.

mechanisms and fosters a culture of openness that can enhance public confidence in electoral institutions and processes.

b)

Strengthen Citizen Observation Capacity

Citizen observation has become a

c)

Promote Transparency and Accountability

Peer-learning mechanisms encourage the exchange of best practices on electoral transparency, stakeholder engagement, results management, and public communication. Exposure to different approaches helps electoral stakeholders improve accountability

d)

Facilitate Adoption of Innovative Technologies

The growing use of technology in elections presents significant opportunities for improving efficiency, transparency, and public engagement. Regional platforms enable stakeholders to learn from innovations such as digital voter registration, election situation rooms, results transmission systems, geographic information systems, media monitoring platforms, and fact-checking initiatives. Shared learning helps institutions adopt technologies that are appropriate to their contexts while minimizing costs and implementation challenges.

[21] ° Code for Africa, African Fact-Checking and Information Integrity Programmes; Africa Facts Reports on Election Information Integrity.

[22] Carter Center, Election Observation and Democratic Development in Africa; International IDEA, Peer Learning and Electoral Integrity in Africa; African Union, Agenda 2063 Democratic Governance Aspirations.

e)



a) Support Conflict-Sensitive Electoral Management

Many elections in the region take place in environments affected by political tensions, insecurity, or social divisions. Regional exchanges allow stakeholders to share experiences on conflict prevention, early warning systems, mediation, dialogue facilitation, and incident response mechanisms. These lessons contribute to more peaceful electoral processes and strengthen the capacity of institutions to manage disputes before they escalate into violence.

f)



a) Build Trust Among Electoral Stakeholders

Trust remains a cornerstone of credible elections. Regional peer-learning forums create opportunities for electoral management bodies, civil society organizations, political parties, security agencies, media practitioners, and development partners to engage constructively and learn from one another. Such interactions help foster mutual understanding, reduce mistrust, and encourage collaboration in support of democratic processes.

g)



a) Strengthen Democratic Resilience Across Borders

Democratic challenges and opportunities increasingly transcend national boundaries. Regional learning mechanisms contribute to the development of shared democratic norms, stronger institutions, and collective responses to emerging threats such as misinformation, disinformation, electoral violence, and democratic backsliding. By facilitating cooperation and solidarity among electoral stakeholders, these platforms help build more resilient democracies capable of withstanding political, technological, and governance-related challenges across the East and Horn of Africa.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS



Institutions	Recommendations
1. To Governments and Election Management Bodies	• Ensure open, transparent and inclusive accreditation processes for regional actors • Facilitate regional learning missions that contribute to knowledge exchange and regional cooperation • Strengthen Stakeholder Engagement through institutionalized dialogue to enhance trust and improve electoral processes
2. To Regional Organizations (African Union, Intergovernmental Authority on Development, and East African Community)	• Institutionalize regional electoral learning and knowledge-sharing mechanisms that support election learning missions, technical exchanges, joint research initiatives, regional communities of practice, comparative electoral assessments • Operationalize existing regional and Continental standards on observer accreditation that promote

	minimum standards and best practices, encourage openness, transparency, and consistency in accreditation processes • Strengthen implementation of regional support frameworks for electoral preparedness in transitional and fragile contexts by strengthening technical and political support for countries undergoing democratic transitions, including South Sudan and other fragile contexts
To International Development Partners	• Invest in long-term democratic infrastructure, extending support beyond election-day activities and focus on peer-learning networks, election observation systems, information integrity initiatives, civil society capacity strengthening, electoral technology development for a sustained effort for democratic resilience • Support regional knowledge exchange by dedicating funding for learning missions, exchange programmes, and regional forums that facilitate transfer of knowledge and innovation • Strengthen digital electoral ecosystems by investing in real-time data collection systems, election situation rooms, incident management platforms, media monitoring systems, artificial intelligence applications for electoral integrity
To Civil Society and Election Observation Networks	• Build collaborative observation models that continue strengthening partnerships, harmonizing methodologies, and sharing resources to maximize impact • Document and share electoral lessons • Expand south-south cooperation and increase exchanges among African institutions to promote locally driven solutions and contextualized democratic innovations

5. CONCLUSION

The electoral experiences of Rwanda, South Sudan, Burundi, Tanzania, Uganda, and Ethiopia provide important insights into the opportunities and challenges facing democratic governance in the East and Horn of Africa.

While restrictions on observer

access and accreditation continue to limit regional engagement in some contexts, the Ethiopia Learning Mission demonstrated the transformative potential of peer learning, collaboration, and knowledge exchange in strengthening electoral processes across the region.

Equally important, the growing use of Election Situation Rooms (ESRs) across the region has demonstrated their value as both a complementary and alternative mechanism for electoral observation, information gathering, analysis, and knowledge sharing, particularly where physical

deployment of observers or learning missions is constrained. ESRs have enhanced real-time situational awareness, strengthened evidence-based reporting, and facilitated regional collaboration.

For the region to build more credible, inclusive, and resilient electoral systems, policymakers must move beyond election-specific interventions and invest in long-term mechanisms that support observation access, institutional learning, technological innovation, and regional cooperation.

Strengthening electoral integrity requires not only credible elections within countries but also stronger democratic partnerships across borders. Regional peer-learning and collaboration should therefore be recognized as strategic investments in peace, democratic governance, and sustainable development throughout the East and Horn of Africa region.

