

RETREAT OF DEMOCRACY IN EAST AFRICA



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ABSTRACT

This article examines the concerning trend of democratic backsliding in East Africa, where authoritarian tendencies, human rights abuses, and restrictions on civic freedoms are increasingly prevalent clawing back on gains made on democracy and civil rights. Despite the East African Community's (EAC) mandate to promote democratic governance and human rights, the region faces significant challenges, including limited civic space, electoral irregularities, and political repression. The article highlights specific cases of democratic erosion in Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya, and argues that the EAC must play a more proactive role in promoting democratic values and human rights within the region. It concludes by emphasizing the importance of strengthening civil society participation, protecting freedom of expression and assembly, and promoting inclusive and participatory democracy in East Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Democracy in East Africa is facing a critical juncture. Despite progress in some areas, the region is witnessing a concerning trend of democratic backsliding, with authoritarian tendencies, human rights abuses, and restrictions on civic freedoms becoming increasingly prevalent. As the East African Community (EAC) continues to prioritize economic integration, the protection of democratic values and human rights within the region hangs in the balance. This article explores the retreat of democracy in East Africa, highlighting the challenges, implications, and potential ways forward for promoting democratic governance and human rights in the region.

CONTEXT

East African countries have seen a decline in key indicators of democratic governance, including freedom of expression, electoral processes, and the rule of law. Research Study by [The Africa Centre 2017](#) showed that democracy is on the decline in East Africa, despite opinion polls showing that democracy remains the preferred system of governance in the region, the last few years have seen supply side deficits marked by failure of leaders to deliver and further entrenched by a steady decline in key indicators of democratic norms and practices¹

¹ "The State of Democracy."

In Uganda, [The Security and Governance Program](#) report has revealed that Uganda registered a decline in Democratic Index and failed to hit the required target which indicates a deterioration in its international ranking. The report shows that the decline from 4.94% to 4.6% against the target of 7.3 calls for more efforts geared towards the Governance and Security Programme in realizing the 7.3% target for 2022/2023 and the 8.6% target for 2024/2025². With less than a year until Uganda's General Election, the political climate is increasingly tense. The main opposition party has condemned the brutal crackdown on activists, saying 2,000 kidnappings have taken place since the last elections in 2021³. The abduction of Ugandan opposition leader Dr. Kizza Besigye from Kenya to Uganda exposed deepening political repression in East Africa. Besigye was later charged alongside FDC member Haji Obeid Lutale, with offenses of treason in military court yet they are civilians⁴.

Reports suggest a concerning trend towards authoritarianism in Tanzania, particularly since the 2020 elections. While Tanzania once held a reputation as a beacon of democracy in Africa, recent actions by the ruling party, Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM), have raised serious concerns about the suppression of dissent and a return to authoritarian rule⁵. The treason charges were brought against Tundu Lissu, leader of Tanzania's main opposition Party for Democracy and Progress (Chadema) on 10 April 2025, following his arrest on 9 April. On 19th May 2025 Tanzanian police arrested and deported prominent human rights activists from Kenya and Uganda who had travelled to Dar es Salaam to observe a hearing in the treason case against detained opposition leader Tundu Lissu. Activists Boniface Mwangi and Agather Atuhairwe were detained for four days without trial and when they were released, they reported to the media having undergone torture and taken to the hospital for medical attention⁶. The Kenyan Government and Uganda Government through their foreign affairs ministries had written a protest letter to Tanzania demanding whereabouts and release of their citizens.⁷

The Global State of Democracy (GSoD) 2024 reports that Kenya performs in the mid-range across all four categories of its framework. [International IDEA](#) indicates Kenya's score is 0.540 in their 2024 report⁸. However, in 2025, Kenya's opposition leaders and

² "Uganda Registers Decline in Democratic Index-Report :: Uganda Radionetwork."

³ "Ugandan Opposition Denounces Brutal Crackdown Ahead of 2026 Elections."

⁴ "Uganda's Kizza Besigye 'Kidnapped' in Kenya, Taken to Military Court | Politics News | Al Jazeera."

⁵ CIVICUS, "Tanzania."

⁶ "'Tortured' Ugandan Activist Dumped at Border Following Arrest in Tanzania | Politics News | Al Jazeera."

⁷ "Tanzania Frees Kenyan Activist Boniface Mwangi after Protest | Monitor."

⁸ "Kenya _ The Global State of Democracy."

human rights activist have decried the Government attempt to frustrate, intimidate, and harass the human rights defenders and opposition leaders, particularly the former Deputy President, Hon. Rigathi Gachagua, Member of Parliament Hon. Peter Salasya and Governor George Nitembeya.⁹ The rising wave of political persecution disguised as law enforcement has been seen in as a betrayal of democratic values and principles of good governance as enshrined in the constitution. During the July 2024 Gen Z youth protest against the finance bill, many youths were killed and over 60 people abducted by security agencies, of which some are still missing¹⁰.

EAST AFRICA COMMUNITY (EAC) MANDATE

The East African Community (EAC) mandate, as outlined in the Treaty for the Establishment of the East African Community, is to foster regional economic integration and cooperation among member states.¹¹ The EAC treaty also mandates promotion of democracy within its member states, focusing on good governance, the rule of law, and human rights. This includes creating an enabling environment for the private sector and civil society, encouraging continuous dialogue, and providing avenues for input into policy-making¹². The EAC also aims to entrench democratic values, access to justice, and the rule of law, as outlined in the EAC Vision 2050¹³

RECOMMENDATIONS AND WAY FORWARD

Many countries in East Africa are characterized as having authoritarian systems with limited democratic norms and practices. The EAC has prioritized economic integration and political federation over democratic governance and the promotion of civil rights.

- The EAC should address the decline in democratic standards and promoting a more inclusive and participatory democracy. Strengthening civil society participation and engagement through digital technologies is crucial for promoting democratic governance and human rights.
- The citizens, civil society organizations and state institutions including EAC Court of Justice and EAC Parliament should strive to ensure that there is freedom of expression, assembly, and association as a crucial principle for a functioning democracy in EAC Countries.
- The EAC should play a more proactive role in promoting democratic governance and human rights within the region.

⁹ democracyinternational, “A Profound Legacy Advancing Democratic Elections and Political Processes.”

¹⁰ Michelle, “Accountability Gone Missing in Kenya | Council on Foreign Relations.”

¹¹ Bazo, “The Treaty for the Establishment of the East African Community,” 12.

¹² Bazo, “The Treaty for the Establishment of the East African Community.”

¹³ East Africa, “East African Community Vision 2050.”

CONCLUSION

The retreat of democracy in East Africa is a pressing concern that demands attention and action from regional leaders, civil society, and the international community. As the East African Community continues to prioritize economic integration, it must not lose sight of its mandate to promote democratic governance and human rights. By strengthening civil society participation, protecting fundamental freedoms, and promoting inclusive and participatory democracy, the region can reverse the trend of democratic backsliding and build a more just, equitable, and prosperous future for all East Africans. The future of democracy in East Africa depends on the collective efforts of governments, civil society, and citizens to uphold democratic values and principles.

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