

OP-ED

Violence, Trauma, and Trust Deficits: Rethinking Human Security in East and Southern Africa

"Democracy is not only a system of governance; it is a collective psychological contract. When citizens feel safe, heard, and healed, peace becomes sustainable. When trauma is ignored, even the most eloquent constitutions crumble"



Issued: 07/11/2025

Authors: Mpfareleni Baby Mabidi¹ | Derrick Chestit²

Introduction

Across East and Southern Africa, the convergence of political violence, democratic backsliding, and untreated trauma continues to erode citizens' sense of safety and trust in public institutions. From Uganda's tense run-up to its 2026 General Elections to the Democratic Republic of Congo's protracted conflict and the psychosocial wounds that shadow communities in South Africa, the region faces a shared crisis of human security. Justice Access Point (JAP) observes that these crises cannot be understood only through the lens of politics or economics they are deeply psychosocial. Violence leaves scars not only on bodies but on national consciousness. Unless governments, civil-society actors, and regional blocs adopt trauma-informed, human-centered reforms, the promise of democracy in East and Southern Africa will remain fragile.

Uganda 2026: Electoral Conflict and the Psychosocial Crisis

JAP's Situation Analysis Report on Electoral Conflict, Mental Health and Psychosocial Support ahead of the 2026 Elections (October 2025) warns that Uganda is entering its next electoral cycle under severe strain. Political temperatures are rising between opposition and ruling-party supporters,

and the civic space continues to shrink. The report identifies multiple structural and institutional risk factors: entrenched political polarization, partisan security forces, weak accountability mechanisms, and an electoral commission whose credibility has been repeatedly questioned. Surveys such as Afrobarometer confirm declining public confidence in the Electoral Commission of Uganda, while incidents in the Kawempe North by-election exposed how heavy-handed policing can transform civic participation into collective trauma.

Psychosocial Impact

The mental-health dimension of electoral violence remains largely invisible. JAP's fieldwork notes that survivors often suffer from untreated post-traumatic stress, depression, and anxiety. Yet Uganda's mental-health infrastructure, a handful of psychiatrists and over-stretched community counsellors cannot meet national demand. Stigma, under-reporting, and limited funding compound the problem.

Initiatives such as the Sauti 116 helpline and District Action Centres are promising but insufficient without nationwide coordination and the integration of psychosocial care into electoral-security planning. A trauma-informed approach where victims, police, and communities receive psychosocial support—

1. Mpfareleni Baby Mabidi is a Psychosocial Support Associate at Justice Access Point on Exchange program funded by NOREC in Uganda 2025
2. Derrick Chestit is an Advocacy Support Associate (Countering Violent Extremism & Atrocity Crimes) at Justice Access Point on Exchange program funded by NOREC in Uganda 2025

would reduce cycles of revenge and alienation that often follow contested polls.

Security Forces and Trust Deficits

The Uganda Police Force and military continue to play an outsized role in managing elections. Despite government commitments, the perceived politicization of these institutions persists. During the Kawempe North incident, for example, excessive force and partisan policing led to deaths, injuries, and mass arrests. As RFI and Al Jazeera have reported, opposition leaders face intimidation and detention in military courts, deepening the public's mistrust.

This crisis of trust has psychosocial consequences: when citizens view law-enforcement agencies as partisan, the entire democratic process becomes emotionally destabilizing. JAP recommends that electoral-security training incorporate mental-health and stress-management modules for officers, a reform supported by Makerere University's partnership with the Police Force—to improve both accountability and empathy.

Socio-Economic Drivers of Youth Vulnerability

Uganda's youth unemployment (16 % overall; 18.7 % among young women) has created fertile ground for political manipulation. More than 4.2 million young people are classified as NEETs (*“neither in employment, education, nor training”*), making them susceptible to mobilization by political actors.

In urban centres such as Kampala, Gulu, and Arua, frustrated youth have often been instrumentalized during protests or campaign clashes. Without targeted economic inclusion and civic-education initiatives, their anger can easily become the engine of electoral violence.

To break this cycle, JAP advocates for:

- a. National youth-resilience programmes that combine entrepreneurship training with civic dialogue.
- b. Integration of psychosocial support into youth employment projects.

- c. Partnerships between CSOs, faith-based groups, and traditional leaders to destigmatize mental-health care.

Regional Context: The Retreat of Democracy in East Africa

Uganda's democratic strain is not isolated. Across the East African Community (EAC), authoritarian drift, shrinking civic space, and human-rights violations are reversing gains made since the early 2000s.

In Tanzania, opposition leader Tundu Lissu faces treason charges amid reports of harassment of journalists and human-rights defenders (CIVICUS Lens, 2025). In Kenya, youth-led protests against the 2024 Finance Bill were met with lethal force, leaving more than 60 people dead and many abducted (Council on Foreign Relations, 2025).

The EAC Treaty (1999) explicitly mandates the promotion of democracy, good governance, and human rights, yet enforcement remains weak. The EAC Vision 2050 aspires to “a prosperous, competitive, secure, and politically united East Africa,” but political unity cannot be achieved without democratic legitimacy and psychosocial healing.

Human Security vs. State Security

Regional governments often equate security with state control, neglecting citizens' emotional and social well-being. JAP argues for a redefinition of security that places mental health, dignity, and civic trust at its core. Authoritarian policing may silence dissent temporarily, but it breeds long-term trauma that undermines national cohesion. The Africa Centre's 2017 State of Democracy study already warned of democratic fatigue; by 2025, Uganda's Democracy Index had declined from 4.94 to 4.6 (Uganda Radio Network), underscoring systemic regression.

Human Security and Psychosocial Resilience

Across the region, peace building remains heavily militarized. Yet communities recovering from violence demand a different kind of security, one rooted in psychological recovery and social cohesion.

In Uganda, the lack of MHPSS (Mental Health and Psychosocial Support) following electoral violence perpetuates silence and stigma. In the DRC, decades of conflict have normalized trauma to the extent that post-conflict interventions often overlook it. In South Africa, police officers themselves experience unprocessed stress from repeated exposure to violence, contributing to burnout and secondary trauma that affect their judgment and behavior.

A human-security framework therefore must:

1. Recognize mental health as a national-security priority.
2. Institutionalize psychosocial services in electoral and post-conflict programming.
3. Train security officers and local leaders in psychological first aid.
4. Build community-based healing networks using traditional and faith structures.

Recommendations for Rebuilding Trust and Democratic Resilience.

1. Electoral Reforms and Accountability

- a. Strengthen the independence of electoral bodies through transparent appointments and oversight.
- b. Implement past observer-mission recommendations (EU, AU, and EAC) before 2026.
- c. Digitize voter registers with public verification mechanisms.

2. Security-Sector Transformation

- a. Enforce strict neutrality of police and military in electoral processes.
- b. Establish civilian oversight boards with psychosocial-support components for officers.
- c. Ban partisan militias and politically affiliated youth brigades.

3. Civic and Mental-Health Interventions

- a. Expand community counselling and trauma-healing services, especially in rural districts.
- b. Integrate MHPSS into national disaster and electoral-preparedness plans.

- c. Promote mental-health literacy through media and education.

4. Civil Society and Media

- a. Guarantee media freedom and protect journalists from intimidation.
- b. Encourage balanced reporting to counter misinformation.
- c. Partner with tech firms to flag hate speech while safeguarding digital rights.

5. Regional and International Action

- a. Urge the EAC, African Union, and development partners to link aid to measurable democratic reforms.
- b. Maintain international election observation and early-warning systems.
- c. Support cross-border initiatives addressing the mental-health impacts of political violence.

Conclusion: Healing Democracy

East and Southern Africa stand at a crossroads. Political repression and psychosocial distress feed each other in a vicious cycle that corrodes democracy from within. Breaking that cycle requires leadership grounded not in fear, but in empathy and accountability.

For Uganda, credible elections in 2026 will depend on how well the state rebuilds trust—with voters, with victims, and within its own institutions. For the EAC, reclaiming its democratic mandate will mean placing human security at the heart of regional integration. And for civil society, including JAP, it means continuing to document, advocate, and heal.

“Democracy is not only a system of governance; it is a collective psychological contract. When citizens feel safe, heard, and healed, peace becomes sustainable. When trauma is ignored, even the most eloquent constitutions crumble.”

The work ahead is immense—but so is the resilience of African societies that refuse to surrender their humanity to fear. By merging electoral integrity with psychosocial recovery, East and Southern Africa can finally move from managing violence to cultivating peace.

References.

1. Justice Access Point (2025). Situation Analysis Report on Electoral Conflict, Mental Health & Psychosocial Support ahead of 2026 Elections. Kampala: JAP.
2. Afrobarometer (2024). Ugandans' Views on Elections and Trust in the Electoral Commission. <https://www.afrobarometer.org>
3. RFI (2023). Uganda Opposition Protests Turn Violent as Police Crack Down. <https://www.rfi.fr>
4. Al Jazeera (2023). Ugandan Opposition Faces Growing Repression. <https://www.aljazeera.com>
5. Makerere University & Uganda Police Force (2024). Mental Health Integration in Security Sector Training. Kampala.
6. UNICEF Uganda (2025). Sauti 116 Helpline Annual Report. <https://www.unicef.org/uganda>
7. Uganda Bureau of Statistics (2024). Labour Force Survey 2024. Kampala.
8. CIVICUS (2025). Tanzania: Repression of Civil Society Intensifies. <https://monitor.civicus.org>
9. Council on Foreign Relations (2025). Kenya's Finance Bill Protests and Human Rights Concerns. <https://www.cfr.org>
10. East African Community (2016). EAC Vision 2050: A Prosperous, Competitive, Secure and Politically United East Africa. Arusha.
11. The Africa Centre for Strategic Studies (2017). The State of Democracy in Africa. <https://africacenter.org>
12. Uganda Radio Network (2025). Uganda Democracy Index Report 2025. <https://ugandaradionetwork.net>
13. International Alert (2023). Healing after Conflict: Community-Based Psychosocial Approaches. London.
14. World Health Organization (2024). Mental Health in Emergencies – Africa Region Report. Geneva.
15. African Union (2024). Election Observation Mission Recommendations: Uganda and Kenya. Addis Ababa.
16. Human Rights Watch (2024). East Africa: Shrinking Civic Space across the Region. <https://www.hrw.org>