



Article

Reimagining Democratic Governance in Africa: Between Citizen Participation and Elite Capture

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Abstract

This study examines democratic governance in Africa, focusing on the persistent tension between citizen participation and elite capture. Despite the adoption of democratic institutions across many African states, governance outcomes are often undermined by entrenched elite interests, patronage networks, and weak institutions. At the same time, rising civic awareness, youth mobilization, and digital activism reflect increasing demands for inclusive governance. Adopting a qualitative research design, the study draws on participatory democracy and elite theory to explore conditions under which citizen engagement can coexist with accountable governance. Using a comparative case study approach, it relies on qualitative data from policy documents, scholarly literature, and institutional reports, analysed through qualitative content analysis. Findings indicate that while elite capture remains a major constraint, strong civil society engagement, decentralization reforms, and digital participation can mitigate its effects. The study argues that democratic renewal in Africa is achievable through strengthened accountability mechanisms, civic education, and institutional reforms that enhance citizen agency. It concludes that balancing elite influence with grassroots participation is essential for advancing inclusive development and political legitimacy in African democracies.

Keywords: Reimagining, Democratic, Governance, Africa, Citizen Participation, Elite Capture.

Introduction

In the continent of Africa, democratic governance has been at the centre of political and academic discourse following the wave of democratisation that cut across the continent in the early 1990s. This transition, is often described as Africa's "second liberation," was expected to deepen political accountability, ensure citizen participation in democratic process and curtail authoritarian excesses that

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characterized post-independence regimes (Diamond, 2008; Gyimah-Boadi, 2015). However, the democratic trajectory of many African states has since been marred by complex contradictions between formal democratic institutions and the informal practices of elite domination, Clientelism, and political exclusion. At the core of the democratic ideal is the notion of citizen participation, which implies the ability of ordinary people to influence decision-making processes, hold leaders accountable, and equally engage meaningfully in public life (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997). This democratic and participatory tenet is important for legitimacy, equity, and responsiveness in governance. Across Africa, processes such as elections, public consultations, civil society activism, and local government reforms have been introduced to institutionalize participation. Nevertheless, the quality and depth of such engagement remain limited, often constrained by structural poverty, weak civic institutions, political repression, and elite manipulation of democratic processes (Adejumobi, 2000; Logan & Mattes, 2012).

Altogether, the phenomenon of elite capture has become a recurring impediment to democratic consolidation in Africa. Elite capture refers to a situation in which powerful individuals or groups typically those with access to wealth, political networks, or traditional authority manipulate state institutions, policies, or public resources to serve narrow interests rather than the broader citizenry (Booth & Cammack, 2013; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). Elite capture ultimately promotes inequality in the society, undermines accountability, and most especially, erodes the trust of citizens in democratic governance. According to Onuoha, (2019), in many African countries, democratic institutions such as legislatures, political parties, and electoral commissions are co-opted by ruling elites to entrench their dominance in the political space, restrict political competition, and maintain access to rents and privileges for themselves.

The difference between genuine citizen participation and elite capture reveals the unclear nature of democratic governance on the African continent. While many African states continue to exhibit what appears like regular elections, constitutions, and formal institutions the substance of democratic rule is often overshadowed by elite control over the political economy (Van de Walle, 2003; Cheeseman, 2015). However, the growing influence of social media, youth movements, and grassroots organizations in recent years has begun to challenge elite dominance, indicating a contested and evolving democratic landscape. Against this backdrop, the central research question guiding this study is: To what extent does elite capture undermine citizen participation and democratic governance in Africa? More specifically, the study asks how the mechanisms of elite control interact with emerging forms of citizen engagement to shape the prospects for inclusive, accountable, and sustainable democratic development on the continent.

Statement of the problem

Despite the adoption of democratic system of government across Africa, the continent continues to grapple with weak governance, entrenched elite domination, weak accountability mechanisms, and limited citizen participation. While democratic reforms since the early 1990s have aimed to foster inclusive governance and empower citizens, in practice, political and economic elites have increasingly captured democratic institutions, diverting them from serving the public interest to protecting private and partisan agendas. Furthermore, elite capture often encourages patronage systems, state resource monopolization, manipulation of electoral processes, and suppression of dissent. All these put together, undermine the democratic governance. Thus, citizens are often marginalized from meaningful

participation in decision-making, leading to widespread political apathy, weakened civic institutions, and declining public trust. This study seeks to explore the competing forces of citizen participation and elite capture in African democratic governance, to provide a more comprehensive framework for understanding the evolving nature of democracy on the continent. The problem this research addresses is the persistent gap between democratic ideals and lived political realities in Africa, and the need to reimagine governance in ways that prioritise inclusion and accountability

Conceptual Clarification

Elite Capture

Elite capture refers to a situation in which powerful individuals or groups typically political, economic, or traditional elites manipulate public resources, institutions, or decision-making processes for their own benefit, often at the expense of the broader population. It represents a distortion of democratic and development processes, where policies and governance outcomes are shaped not by collective needs or public interest, but by elite preferences and interests. According to Khan (2006), elite capture is "a form of rent-seeking behaviour where groups with disproportionate access to power appropriate public resources or manipulate policies for narrow gain." These elites may include politicians, bureaucrats, business magnates, or traditional leaders who use their access to political or economic power to divert benefits such as state contracts, subsidies, or decision-making authority.

Plateau and Abraham (2002), further describe elite capture as the process by which "the more powerful or better-connected individuals within a community or society gain control of local decision-making or development benefits, thereby subverting intended outcomes of equity and fairness." This often occurs in decentralized systems or participatory development programs where weak institutions fail to prevent elite domination.

Citizen Participation,

Citizen participation denotes active involvement of individuals and groups in the decision-making processes of governance and public affairs. Citizen participation is the basis of democratic governance and a key indicator of political legitimacy, accountability, and inclusiveness. According to Arnstein (1969) citizen participation is "the redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens, presently excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future." She famously conceptualized this idea through the "Ladder of Citizen Participation," ranging from nonparticipation (manipulation) to degrees of tokenism (consultation) and ultimately to degrees of citizen power (partnership, delegated power, and citizen control).

Oakley and Marsden (1984) define citizen participation more broadly as "the involvement of people in the creation and implementation of decisions that affect their lives." This can take place through formal mechanisms like elections, referenda, public hearings, participatory budgeting, or informal means such as protests, civic campaigns, and community forums. In the African context, citizen participation is especially critical given the historical marginalization of ordinary people from governance processes, first under colonial rule and later under authoritarian regimes. Participation allows citizens not only to

express their preferences and hold leaders accountable, but also to co-produce governance outcomes that reflect local needs and aspirations (Gaventa, 2004; Logan & Mattes, 2012).

Review of Literature

Institutional factors play a decisive role in enabling or constraining effective citizen participation in democratic governance across Africa. The literature broadly agrees that while formal democratic structures such as constitutions, elections, and representative bodies are necessary, they are insufficient without supportive institutional conditions that foster meaningful engagement. Scholars therefore emphasize the quality, design, and functionality of institutions as critical determinants of participatory outcomes. A central argument in the literature is that institutional design and capacity significantly shape opportunities for citizen engagement. According to Robert A. Dahl (1989), democratic participation depends on the existence of inclusive and contestable institutions that guarantee political equality. In many African contexts, however, weak institutional capacity undermines these ideals. Larry Diamond (2008) notes that although multiparty systems and electoral processes have been widely adopted, their effectiveness is often compromised by administrative inefficiencies, lack of independence, and limited enforcement mechanisms. This weakens citizens' ability to influence governance outcomes beyond periodic elections. Closely related is the issue of institutional autonomy and accountability. INNicolas van de Walle (2003) argues that the persistence of neo-patrimonial practices in African states allows political elites to manipulate institutions for personal or factional gain. This dynamic constrains participation by eroding public trust and discouraging civic engagement. Similarly, Staffan I. Lindberg (2006) finds that while repeated elections may gradually improve democratic norms, their impact is limited when institutions remain vulnerable to elite capture.

Elite networks and patronage systems have been acknowledged as central obstacles to inclusive political participation and equitable policy outcomes, particularly in developing democracies across Africa. Rather than functioning as neutral arenas of representation, many political systems are shaped by informal power structures in which access to state resources is mediated through personal relationships, loyalty networks, and clientelist exchanges. These dynamics fundamentally distort democratic governance by privileging elite interests over collective public welfare. Patronage systems undermine inclusive participation by conditioning political access on loyalty rather than citizenship rights. Joel S. Migdal (1988) contends that in "strong societies and weak states," informal networks often supersede formal institutions, enabling elites to dominate decision-making processes. In such contexts, political participation is not driven by policy preferences or ideological competition but by access to patron-client networks. Similarly, Richard Joseph (1987) describes Nigerian politics as deeply embedded in prebendal structures, where public office is treated as a resource to be distributed among patrons and supporters, thereby excluding citizens who are outside elite networks.

Elite capture further undermines participation by restricting meaningful competition and weakening democratic accountability. Michael Bratton and Nicolas van de Walle (1997) argue that clientelism in African politics distorts electoral processes by turning voting into transactional exchanges rather than policy-based choices. Staffan I. Lindberg (2006), argues that citizens are often mobilized through material inducements rather than programmatic platforms, which reduces the quality of democratic engagement and weakens accountability mechanisms. This dynamic limits the ability of citizens to hold

leaders responsible for policy performance, as political loyalty is often purchased rather than earned through service delivery. According to Acemoglu and James A. Robinson (2012), extractive political institutions tend to persist where elites control access to economic and political resources. In such systems, policy decisions are often designed to sustain elite privileges rather than promote inclusive development. This results in misallocation of public resources, weak public service delivery, and persistent inequality. Policies that could improve education, healthcare, or infrastructure are frequently subordinated to projects that reinforce elite political survival (Robert 2008).

One prominent manifestation of elite capture is found in electoral processes. While multiparty elections are widely held across Africa, scholars argue that these contests are often distorted by elite interference. Staffan I. Lindberg (2006) acknowledges that repeated elections can foster democratic norms, but notes that their quality is frequently compromised by vote buying, electoral manipulation, and unequal access to resources. Similarly, Andreas Schedler (2002) describes such systems as “electoral authoritarianism,” where democratic procedures are maintained in form but subverted in practice. In these contexts, electoral commissions may lack independence, allowing ruling elites to influence outcomes and limit genuine political competition. Elite capture also manifests within political parties, which are expected to serve as vehicles for representation and policy aggregation. In many African countries, however, parties are highly personalized and dominated by influential figures.

Nicolas van de Walle (2003) argues that party systems in Africa are often shaped by clientelism and patronage, where party loyalty is maintained through material incentives rather than ideological commitment. This weakens internal democracy and excludes grassroots participation, as candidate selection and decision-making processes are controlled by elite actors. Consequently, political parties fail to articulate broad societal interests and instead reinforce elite dominance. Legislative institutions provide another avenue for elite capture. Although parliaments are designed to ensure oversight and representation, they are frequently constrained by executive dominance and patronage networks. Joel D. Barkan (2009) highlights that in several African countries; legislatures lack the autonomy and capacity to effectively check executive power. Members of parliament may prioritize personal or factional interests over national policy concerns, particularly where access to state resources is tied to political loyalty. This undermines the legislature’s role in promoting accountability and inclusive governance (Gyimah-Boadi, 2015).

Theoretical Framework

Elite Theory

The elite theory was applied to guide this study. The theory is rooted in the works of political theorists such as Vilfredo Pareto (1935), Gaetano Mosca (1939), and later C. Wright Mills (1956). The theory posits that in every society, a small and cohesive group the elite dominates political and economic power, regardless of democratic structures or mass participation. Elite theorists argue that democratic institutions often serve as cover-ups that legitimise elite rule. Even in formally democratic systems, real decision-making is concentrated in the hands of a minority political elites, business oligarchs, or technocrats who manipulate political outcomes to maintain their dominance. In the African context, this manifests through patronage networks, rent-seeking behaviour, and in connivance with the civil society.

The very idea of "reimagining" governance in Africa is an indication of a critique of the current order, where democratic forms exist without substantial democratic substance. Elite theory helps expose how electoral politics, constitutional reforms, and governance institutions have been engineered or manipulated to maintain elite hegemony. For instance, electoral cycles in countries like Nigeria, Kenya, and Uganda are often marked by elite bargains rather than open competition, reducing citizens to spectators rather than active participants in governance. Citizen participation via protests, voting, civic engagement, and community organising can be viewed as a counterforce to elite capture. However, the elites have a way of adapting and neutralizing these pressures from the citizens. For example, civil society leaders are often co-opted into government, while grassroots movements are weakened through repression or being carried along. Elite theory thus suggests that unless structural inequalities and power imbalances are addressed, citizen participation risks becoming just symbolic participation in government.

Application of the theory

Elite theory provides a robust explanation for the failure of institutions to deliver public goods equitably in many African states. From parliaments to anti-corruption commissions, institutions are often staffed and influenced by elites who prioritize self-interest over public interest. This capture results in widespread public disillusionment and delegitimises democratic processes, leading to voter apathy, protest movements, and sometimes regime instability. Elite theory challenges the assumption that elected representatives truly reflect the interests of the masses. In many African democracies, political elites tend to represent narrow ethnic, regional, or class interests. Parliamentary systems are often platforms for elite negotiation and coalition-building that excludes the broader population from meaningful influence. Thus, reimagining governance must involve confronting the myth of representation and exploring new models of inclusive decision-making.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative comparative case study design to examine the relationship between citizen participation and elite capture in democratic governance across Africa. The qualitative approach is appropriate because it enables an in-depth exploration of political processes, institutional dynamics, and contextual factors that may not be adequately captured through quantitative methods. The study relies on interpretive analysis to understand how governance outcomes are shaped by interactions between state actors and citizens.

Case Selection and Justification

The study employs a comparative case study approach using, Nigeria, Ghana, and Kenya. These cases are selected based on a combination of Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD) and controlled comparison logic.

Justification:

All three countries have experienced democratic transitions and regular elections. The three countries have varying degrees of elite capture and citizen participation and provide a regional diversity (West and East Africa). These countries have relatively rich and accessible secondary data. This selection allows the study to identify both similarities and variations in governance outcomes, thereby strengthening analytical generalisation.

Data Sources

The study relies on qualitative secondary data, which includes academic journal articles and books, Government publications and policy documents, Reports from international organizations (e.g., governance and democracy reports). Credible media sources and civil society publications, these sources provide triangulated evidence to enhance validity and reliability.

Method of Data Analysis

Data for the study is analysed using qualitative content analysis. This involves thematic coding of data based on key variables such as identification of recurring patterns across cases, Within-case analysis followed by cross-case comparison. This approach allows for systematic interpretation while maintaining sensitivity to context.

Variables and Analytical Framework

Independent Variable: Citizen Participation. This refers to the extent to which citizens are actively involved in governance processes.

Indicators:

Voter turnout in elections, Strength and activity of civil society organizations, Level of youth and grassroots mobilization, Digital political engagement (e.g., social media activism), Public participation in local governance (decentralization)

Dependent Variable: Democratic Governance Outcomes.

This captures the effectiveness and responsiveness of governance systems.

Indicators:

Government accountability and transparency, Policy responsiveness to public needs, Institutional performance and service delivery, Public trust in government, Intervening Variable:

Elite Capture

This refers to the extent to which political and economic elites dominate decision-making processes.

Indicators: Influence of political elites on policy decisions, Prevalence of patronage networks, Corruption levels and misuse of public resources, Electoral manipulation or elite interference

Analytical Strategy

The study follows a two-stage analytical process: Within-Case Analysis, where each country is examined independently to understand the nature of citizen participation, the extent of elite capture and governance outcomes

Cross-Case Comparison, Findings are compared across the three cases to: Identify patterns of convergence and divergence, explain why similar systems produce different outcomes, Draw broader conclusions about democratic governance in Africa.

Data Presentation and Analysis

This section presents and analyses data on the relationship between citizen participation, elite capture, and democratic governance outcomes in selected African countries. Using a qualitative comparative approach, this section is organized into two main sections: within-case analysis and cross-case comparison.

Within-Case Analysis

Nigeria

In Nigeria, citizen participation is formally institutionalized through periodic elections, civil society activities, and increasing digital engagement. Voter turnout, however, has shown inconsistency, and participation is often constrained by electoral irregularities, insecurity, and distrust in institutions. While civil society organizations and youth-led movements such as recent digital mobilization expanded civic space, their impact on policy outcomes remains limited. Elite capture manifests strongly within Nigeria's political system. Political parties are highly centralized and dominated by elite actors who control candidate selection and resource distribution. Patronage networks and prebendal politics continue to shape governance, with public office often used for private gain. Electoral processes are frequently influenced by vote-buying and elite interference, undermining genuine competition. As a result, governance outcomes in Nigeria reflect limited accountability and weak policy responsiveness. Despite democratic structures, institutional performance remains inconsistent, and public trust in government is relatively low. This suggests that elite capture significantly constrains the effectiveness of citizen participation.

Ghana

In Ghana, citizen participation is comparatively stronger and more institutionalized. Regular elections are generally credible, with relatively high voter turnout and peaceful transfers of power. Civil society organizations and the media play an active role in promoting accountability, while decentralisation reforms have enhanced local-level participation. Although elite influence persists, it is less dominant than in Nigeria. Political parties are more institutionalized, and electoral management bodies demonstrate

greater independence. Patronage practices exist but are moderated by stronger institutional checks and public scrutiny. Consequently, governance outcomes in Ghana are relatively more positive. There is higher public trust in democratic institutions, improved accountability, and more consistent policy responsiveness. This suggests that where institutions are stronger, the negative effects of elite capture can be mitigated, allowing citizen participation to have a more meaningful impact.

Kenya

In Kenya, citizen participation is dynamic but uneven. Elections are competitive and often accompanied by high voter engagement, yet they are also marked by political tensions and occasional violence. Civil society and judicial institutions play significant roles in shaping governance, particularly through electoral oversight and constitutional enforcement. Elite capture in Kenya operates through ethnic alliances, political patronage, and control over state resources. Political competition is often structured around elite coalitions, which can limit inclusive participation. However, Kenya's 2010 Constitution and subsequent reforms have introduced mechanisms to counterbalance elite dominance, including judicial independence and devolution. Governance outcomes in Kenya reflect a mixed picture. While there have been improvements in accountability and institutional performance, challenges remain due to persistent elite influence and political polarisation. Citizen participation has contributed to reforms, but its impact is mediated by elite competition.

Cross-Case Comparative Analysis

A comparison of Nigeria, Ghana, and Kenya reveals important patterns.

Citizen participation alone is insufficient to ensure effective governance. While all three countries exhibit formal mechanisms of participation, outcomes vary significantly depending on institutional strength and elite behavior. Elite capture is most pronounced where institutions are weak. Nigeria demonstrates how entrenched patronage networks can undermine participation and governance. In contrast, Ghana shows that stronger institutions can constrain elite dominance and enhance democratic outcomes. Kenya represents an intermediate case, where reforms have improved governance but not fully eliminated elite influence. The findings indicate that institutional quality mediates the relationship between participation and governance outcomes. Where institutions are independent, transparent, and accountable, citizen participation is more likely to translate into meaningful governance improvements.

Discussion of Findings

Citizen Participation and Governance Outcomes

The findings demonstrate that while mechanisms of citizen participation such as elections, civil society engagement, and digital activism are present across all three cases, their effectiveness varies significantly. This supports arguments by Robert A. Dahl (1989) that meaningful participation depends not merely on formal inclusion but on the presence of institutions that ensure political equality and responsiveness. In Ghana, relatively stronger institutional frameworks enable citizen participation to translate into improved accountability and governance outcomes. This aligns with Larry Diamond (2008), who argues that institutional quality is central to democratic consolidation. In contrast, the case of Nigeria reveals that

participation often remains procedural due to weak institutions and limited trust, reinforcing the argument that democratic forms do not necessarily produce democratic substance. Kenya presents a mixed outcome, where participation has contributed to reforms but is still constrained by political tensions and elite competition.

Table 1, Mechanisms and Consequences of Elite Capture within Democratic Institutions in Africa

Mechanisms of Elite Capture	Consequences of Elite Capture
Patronage Networks and Clientelism Elites distribute state resources to loyal supporters and clients.	Distortion of Public Resource Allocation, Resources are diverted from public goods to elite interests.
Political Party Financing and Control Wealthy elites finance and control political parties and candidates.	Undermined Electoral Integrity Elections become a contest of wealth rather than ideas or merit.
Control of Media and Information Elites influence media narratives to shape public opinion.	Weak Accountability and Transparency Citizens lack accurate information to hold leaders accountable.
Capture of Bureaucratic Institutions Elites influence appointments and operations of state institutions.	Erosion of Institutional Independence Public institutions serves elite interests rather than the public.
Manipulation of Legal and Constitutional Frameworks Elites alter laws to entrench their power.	Democratic Backsliding Weak rule of law and erosion of checks and balances.
Restriction of Civil Society and Opposition Use of legal, financial, or violent means to suppress dissent.	Reduced Civic Space Civil society, opposition, and independent voices are weakened or silenced.
Ethnic and Regional Favouritism Elites use identity politics to divide and dominate electorates.	Social Fragmentation and Conflict Rise in ethnic tension, inequality, and possible violence.
Elite Domination of Policy Processes Policy decisions are made behind closed doors with little public input.	Poor Policy Outcomes Policies do not reflect the needs of the majority, leading to poor development.
Privatization of State Assets for Self-Gain. Elites exploit state-owned enterprises and contracts.	Widening Economic Inequality Public wealth is concentrated among a few, deepening poverty for many.
Voter Manipulation and Disenfranchisement Use of vote buying and voter suppression tactics.	Decline in Political Participation Citizens become apathetic and distrustful of the democratic process.

Source: Compiled by Author

Table 1, illustrates how various mechanisms of elite capture produce far-reaching negative consequences for democratic governance and development. It shows that when elites use patronage networks and clientelism, public resources are diverted away from collective welfare toward private interests, leading to distorted resource allocation. Similarly, elite control of political party financing turns elections into contests of wealth rather than merit, thereby undermining electoral integrity. The table also highlights how control of media and bureaucratic institutions weakens accountability and erodes institutional independence, as citizens are deprived of reliable information and state institutions become tools of elite interests. In addition, the manipulation of legal frameworks and the restriction of civil society contribute to democratic backsliding and reduced civic space, limiting opposition and weakening checks on power. Furthermore, practices such as ethnic favoritism and elite dominance of policy processes deepen social divisions and result in poor policy outcomes that fail to address the needs of the broader population. Economic exploitation through the privatization of state assets widens inequality, while voter manipulation reduces political participation and public trust. Overall, the table demonstrates that elite capture operates through interconnected mechanisms that collectively weaken democratic institutions, exacerbate inequality, and hinder inclusive governance.

Table 2, Impact of Elite Domination on Political Accountability, Inclusion, and Public Trust

Domain	Impact of Elite Domination
Political Accountability	- Weak Oversight Mechanisms: Elites manipulate oversight institutions (e.g., judiciary, legislature) to avoid scrutiny. - Reduced Responsiveness: Leaders prioritize elite interests over public needs, avoiding policy reforms that serve the majority. - Suppression of Whistle-blowers & Media: Critical voices are silenced through threats, censorship, or co-optation.
Political Inclusion	- Marginalization of Vulnerable Groups: Women, youth, and minorities are excluded from decision-making processes. - Limited Electoral Competition: Political parties are dominated by elite factions, discouraging alternative voices and grassroots candidates. - Inequality in Access to Power: Access to political office is reserved for the wealthy and well-connected.
Public Trust	- Perception of Corruption: Citizens associate governance with self-serving elite behaviours, eroding confidence in

	institutions. - Voter Apathy and Disengagement: People withdraw from civic engagement due to perceived futility of participation. - Proliferation of Protests and Unrest: Lack of trust triggers demonstrations, resistance, and sometimes violence.
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Source: compiled by author

Table 2, shows that elite domination weakens democratic governance by eroding political accountability, limiting political inclusion, and undermining public trust in a mutually reinforcing cycle. In terms of accountability, elites manipulate key institutions such as the judiciary and legislature, weakening oversight, reducing transparency, and allowing leaders to avoid scrutiny. This leads to governance that prioritizes elite interests over public needs, while the suppression of the media and whistle-blowers further restricts accountability. Regarding political inclusion, elite control creates systemic exclusion by marginalizing vulnerable groups like women, youth, and minorities. It also limits fair political competition, as elite dominance within parties blocks grassroots participation and concentrates power among those with wealth and connections. For public trust, these patterns generate widespread disillusionment. Perceived corruption becomes normalized, leading to voter apathy, disengagement, and, in some cases, protests or unrest. The table highlights a cycle in which weakened accountability and exclusion reduce public trust, and this declining trust, in turn, helps sustain and deepen elite domination.

Conclusion

This study has shown that democratic governance in Africa is shaped by the complex interaction between citizen participation and elite capture. While democratic institutions have expanded significantly since the 1990s, their effectiveness is often constrained by entrenched elite interests and weak institutional frameworks. Evidence from Nigeria, Ghana, and Kenya demonstrates that meaningful democratic progress is contingent upon strengthening institutions that can both facilitate participation and limit elite dominance. Achieving inclusive and accountable governance in Africa requires not only expanding democratic participation but also transforming the institutional environment within which such participation occurs

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance citizen participation, limit elite capture, and improve democratic governance outcomes in Africa, with particular relevance to Nigeria, Ghana, and Kenya.

1. Strengthening Institutional Independence and Capacity

There is need to reinforce the autonomy and effectiveness of key democratic institutions, particularly electoral management bodies, legislatures, and anti-corruption agencies. Governments should implement legal and administrative reforms that insulate these institutions from political interference, ensure merit-

based appointments, and provide adequate funding. Strong institutions are essential for translating citizen participation into meaningful governance outcomes and for constraining elite manipulation.

2. Electoral Reforms to Enhance Credibility and Inclusion

Electoral processes should be reformed to reduce elite interference and improve public trust. This includes strengthening electoral transparency, enforcing campaign finance regulations, and adopting technologies that enhance the integrity of voting processes. In contexts like Nigeria and Kenya, where electoral credibility is often contested, such reforms are particularly important for deepening democratic legitimacy.

3. Regulation of Political Parties and Campaign Financing

Political parties should be subject to stricter internal democracy requirements and financial transparency standards. Regulatory frameworks should ensure open candidate selection processes, limit the influence of money in politics, and promote ideological coherence. Reducing the dominance of elite-controlled patronage networks within parties will enhance inclusive participation and improve the quality of representation.

4. Strengthening Civil Society and Civic Education

Governments and development partners should support civil society organizations as key actors in promoting accountability and citizen engagement. Civic education programs should be expanded to enhance political awareness, reduce voter manipulation, and empower citizens to demand accountability. This is crucial for countering patronage politics and fostering informed participation.

5. Deepening Decentralization and Local Governance Reforms

Decentralization should be strengthened to bring governance closer to citizens and enhance local participation. However, safeguards must be put in place to prevent the replication of elite capture at subnational levels. This includes improving transparency, ensuring local accountability mechanisms, and providing adequate resources for local governments.

6. Leveraging Digital Technologies for Participation and Accountability

The growing role of digital platforms in civic engagement should be harnessed to promote transparency and citizen oversight. Governments should support open data initiatives, e-governance systems, and digital feedback mechanisms that enable citizens to monitor public policies and service delivery. At the same time, measures should be taken to prevent digital repression and misinformation.

7. Strengthening Anti-Corruption Mechanisms

Effective anti-corruption strategies are essential for reducing elite capture. This includes enhancing the independence of anti-corruption agencies, strengthening judicial systems, and enforcing sanctions against corrupt practices. Transparency initiatives, such as public disclosure of government spending, can also help limit opportunities for elite exploitation.

8. Promoting Inclusive Governance and Social Equity

Efforts should be made to address structural inequalities that limit citizen participation, including poverty, marginalization, and unequal access to political resources. Policies that promote social inclusion particularly for youth, women, and marginalized groups are essential for broadening participation and reducing elite dominance.

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Bio

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