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Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee

Democracy in Africa – current situation and future perspectives. What role for the EESC?

(own-initiative opinion)

(C/2025/768)

Rapporteur: **Carlos Manuel TRINDADE**

Advisor	Paulo Pedroso
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1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1. The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) believes that democracy requires respect for human rights, robust institutions, the separation of powers – guaranteeing the rule of law and independence of the judiciary – free and fair elections, accountability to the people, the right to full participation, and measures to tackle discrimination.

1.2. The EESC acknowledges and endorses the United Nations' (UN) view that the exercise of power based on respect for the will of the people is a fundamental element of a global concept of democracy, enshrined in the Preamble to the United Nations Charter, concluded in the name of 'We the peoples', and pursued through the fundamental principles set out in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which enshrines the right to the self-determination of peoples and requires states to protect civil and political rights for all individuals within their territory who are subject to their jurisdiction, without discrimination on the grounds of race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.

1.3. The EESC strongly believes that the European Union should promote the following principles across all the areas in which it is active:

— the human rights enshrined in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948);

— the EU values enshrined in the provisions of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2000/C-364/01) and in the EU Treaties; and

— respect for the International Labour Organization's (ILO) fundamental conventions.

1.4. The EESC appreciates and welcomes the African Union's (AU) commitment to democratic values, as expressed in its Constitutive Act, in particular where it proposes to promote democratic principles and institutions, popular participation and good governance, as well as promoting and protecting human and peoples' rights, in accordance with the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and other relevant human rights instruments. The EESC also values the African Union's commitment to promoting democracy, as expressed in the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance. The EESC is pleased to note the commitments to good governance, democracy, respect for human rights, justice and the rule of law that are highlighted in the aspirations set out in the AU's 2063 Agenda.

1.5. The EESC welcomes the development of democracy in Africa and African citizens' commitment to this development, as well as the popular support for democracy, which is more extensive in Africa than in many other parts of the world, despite having been eroded somewhat over the past decade.

1.6. It nevertheless recognises that the role of parliaments needs to be strengthened in many African countries and that action has to be taken to increase public confidence in the way that democracy functions.

1.7. The EESC, considering that there is a strong link between peace, security, stability, economic growth, social progress and democracy, applauds the African Union for its decisive role in promoting this link in the democratic development chain and points out that supranational institutions cannot function effectively without full cooperation and commitment from their member states and political leaders. It also believes that strengthening African states' engagement and cooperation with the AU is a real necessity for the latter's role to be more effective.

1.8. The EESC is aware that decentralising power is a challenge that requires resources to be freed up and institutions to be empowered and it calls on the European institutions to step up cooperation on developing democracy and on increasing public trust and participation.

1.9. It feels that the European approach to developing democracy in Africa should be based on a relationship between equals and take into account the continent's complexity in terms of economic development, social progress, the provision of critical infrastructure, diversity, and geopolitical and strategic interests, while complying with the framework for EU-Africa relations.

1.10. The EESC believes that the EU has not accorded sufficient prominence to Africa's geopolitical role. This inappropriate approach has been fuelled by the imprudent behaviour of some Member States, and, consequently, by weaknesses inherent in certain aspects of a foreign policy that is a common (i.e. joint) one; it is crucial to remedy these problems.

1.11. The EESC is aware that Africa is facing external and internal threats to democratic development, where – on the external front – there are outside powers with no interest in strengthening democracy which are growing in influence, and – on the internal front – corruption is deemed fairly acceptable, due to the behaviour of potential 'corruptors' and of those parties susceptible to being corrupted.

1.12. The EESC believes that, in this context, the Global Gateway strategy – launched in 2021 – is of great importance for EU-Africa relations, and reaffirms that, as stated in its opinion on the strategy ([1]), the Global Gateway will strengthen economic and political ties between the EU and its partner countries, ensuring respect for their democratic and social principles, while at the same time enabling the EU to compete effectively at global level when it comes to building and maintaining infrastructure. The Committee reiterates, furthermore, that the investment programmes under this strategy should be based on impact assessments and should take into account aspects of geopolitical and strategic importance, democratic participation, and the economic, social and environmental sustainability of projects.

1.13. The EESC firmly believes that, together with recognised representatives of African civil society (platforms, forums and volunteers) and social partners, it can help promote democratic values, advocate human rights, and help to defend democratic regimes in Africa, taking into account the Samoa Agreement.

([1]) OJ C, C/2024/1574, 5.3.2024, ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/1574/oj.

1.14. Bearing in mind that the Samoa Agreement provides for institutional mechanisms affording a structure for civil society participation through civil and social dialogue, the EESC – with the knowledge and know-how it has acquired over the years, and with all due regard for stakeholders' autonomy – is in an ideal position to cooperate with African civil society as regards the part in can play in efforts to secure economic growth, social progress and the development of democracy in Africa. Through specific action carried out by the EU-ACP Follow-up Committee, the EESC points out that it has gained a considerable amount of experience in relations with Africa over the last 20 years, thanks to numerous initiatives and various missions carried out in several African countries; this experience must be maintained, further pursued and turned to good use. As a result, the EESC and its African partners have a valuable asset that can be used to help promote civil, social and political dialogue and boost civil society in Africa, including strengthening the social partners.

1.15. The EESC firmly reiterates the proposal that the Commission put financial instruments in place to support programmes and study and foresight projects focusing on the situation for civil society organisations and the social partners in the ACP states – in this particular context, those in Africa – taking into account their needs in terms of empowering leaders, their technical robustness, and the implementation of the planned institutional mechanisms.

1.16. The EESC will pursue and improve, within the sphere of its competences, its activities to promote and support African civil society organisations and social partners by facilitating their establishment, organisation and action and by helping boost their institutional capacity, as a contribution to achieving the EU's goal of making democracy resilient in Africa.

1.17. The EESC's action will be guided by the indissoluble link between the promotion of civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights, and economic growth and social progress. Despite being sensitive topics for certain African countries, issues relating to women's rights and to gender and sexual orientation are intrinsic to a democratic culture, and in its partnership with Africa, the EU must promote progress in these areas while bearing in mind that the cultural uptake by the general population of new types of relationships is slow and gradual.

1.18. The EESC is most pleased that a memorandum of understanding was signed between itself (the EESC) and the African Union's Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC) on 17 July 2024; it deems this to be exceedingly important in consolidating civil society's contribution to the partnership between Europe and Africa.

2. **General remarks on common democratic values**

2.1. There is a political dimension to building a democracy and working together to strengthen it, as well as a strong civil and social dialogue dimension. It also entails the establishment of appropriate institutions for the participation of free and independent civil society organisations and movements, as well as social dialogue between social partners.

2.2. There is an intrinsic and indissoluble link between a democratic environment and economic growth, environmental sustainability and social progress, which reflect and sustain each other.

2.3. The implementation of suitable public policies and people's trust in democratic institutions are key elements of public participation. Trust in institutions is a difficult asset to preserve and, once lost, it takes a long time to build it up again.

2.4. The EESC reiterates in this context that it deems universal human rights, such as fundamental labour rights, the freedom to conduct a business, the right to a healthy environment and the rule of law, to be essential common values. Together with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), they form an internationally agreed minimum standard for development programmes and are the basis for an equal development partnership ([2]).

([2]) OJ C 429, 11.12.2020, p. 105.

2.5. Global threats to democracy are a living reality. The EESC joins with the European Parliament in stressing that the EU must be fully prepared to counter the rise and malign influence of authoritarianism, illiberalism and extremism, as well as the threats to human rights protection and the increasing attacks on the universality of human rights, democracy, the rule of law and international humanitarian law ([3]). The EESC also stresses that corruption is a threat to democracy that needs to be tackled.

3. **Specific comments**

3.1. ***The current situation in Africa***

3.1.1. The African continent is internally diverse and includes countries with different levels of economic development, different political institutions and diverse economic, social and political challenges, even though they share a common background as nations that have emerged from decolonisation processes. Democratic dynamics on the continent are likewise diverse, and there is no uniform pattern or trend in any of the countries' current situations or starting points; however, while sometimes significant democratic backsliding has been observed in some countries and regions, major progress has been made in others where resilient democracies have been developed.

3.1.2. There is a two-way relationship between a functioning democracy on the one hand, and development and the distribution of wealth on the other. In Africa, in particular, the development deficit and inadequate wealth distribution must be addressed, and democracy and democratic institutions promoted.

3.1.3. According to the Afrobarometer, African citizens are committed to democracy, to the accountability of politicians and to the rule of law, and although many believe that their countries are democracies, they are not satisfied with the democracies that they have ([4]). Popular support for democracy is more extensive in Africa than in many other parts of the world, even if it has been eroded over the last decade, with support for it shrinking in several countries and acceptance of military power growing ([5]).

3.1.4. In many African countries, there is a perception that they perform less well than the global average in important areas such as the absence of corruption, the requirement to comply with the law, independence of the judiciary, credible elections and elected governments ([6]).

3.1.5. Africa suffers from a serious lack of critical infrastructure, which is key to achieving the SDGs, including infrastructure for water and sanitation, energy, transport, and information and communication technologies. The Europe-Africa partnership should promote the development of this key infrastructure.

3.1.6. The debate on how to strengthen democracy in Africa is ongoing, with trends that support the implementation of the western, Euro-American model of democracy on the one hand, and views to the effect that this model should be adapted or that a specific African model could be established, based on a community and participatory approach, on the other. Beyond this debate, there are global characteristics that are inherent to democracy, namely freedom, freedom of expression, the rule of law and the separation of powers, the voice and participation of civil society, and human development.

3.1.7. The EESC recognises and values the significant efforts Africans have made to build democratic institutions since the democratisation wave of the 1990s. Most countries have introduced multi-party elections; however, the role of parliaments needs to be strengthened in many countries and there needs to be more public confidence in the way their countries' democratic institutions operate.

([3]) Human rights and democracy in the world and the European Union's policy on the matter – annual report 2023, point 3.
([4]) Zamfir, Ionel, *EU support to democracy and good governance in Africa*, European Parliamentary Research Service Briefing, November 2017.
([5]) Afrobarometer, *African insights 2024: Democracy at risk – the people's perspective*.
([6]) International IDEA, *The Global State of Democracy Indices*, v. 7. 1, 2003. Data presented by Roba A. Sharamo at the hearing organised by the EESC as part of the preparation of this opinion.

3.1.8. The African Union has included good governance, democracy and respect for human rights, justice and the rule of law among its aims in the Agenda 2063.

3.1.9. Good governance is the subject of a peer-to-peer review mechanism; the EESC welcomes this and emphasises how important it is. The African Peer Review Mechanism is a voluntary arrangement, purely amongst African States, to assess governance and review compliance with African and international governance commitments, notably in the areas of democracy and political governance, economic governance, corporate governance and socio-economic development; this produces publicly available reports and leads to the creation of national action programmes. The EESC welcomes the creation of this mechanism and urges African states to pursue its implementation.

3.1.10. Europe can be a partner in building African democratic models that respond to people's aspirations, particularly those of young people.

3.1.11. Promoting decent work goes hand in hand with democratic development. The EU and Africa must promote the establishment of ILO standards and conventions, particularly its fundamental conventions.

3.1.12. The informality of the private economy, generally prevalent in African countries, undermines fair competition and causes high levels of job insecurity, poverty and social vulnerability, influencing society itself and social relations. The transition to formality strengthens the autonomy of civil society and increases mutual trust between citizens, economic stakeholders and the state. For this reason, the EESC calls for the effective application of ILO recommendation No 204 on the transition from the informal to the formal economy ([7]).

3.1.13. The predominance of the informal economy, the paucity of modern economic sectors, and the resulting challenges in relations between the state and citizens are reflected in people's vulnerability to worsening social inequalities and the difficulty in harnessing the demographic dividend – which creates proper opportunities for young Africans – thus reinforcing the risk of a vicious circle that makes it difficult for democracy to be affirmed.

3.1.14. Several analyses carried out on the development of African democracy give cause for concern. According to the summary of a 2017 European Parliament research report, trends observed in various (but not all) countries hinder democratic development on the continent: the quality of elections remains poor, dominant parties are entrenched in power, elections have been manipulated and are fraudulent, and control over the media and judicial power has suppressed dissent. Against this background, the EESC reaffirms the importance of credible electoral processes and effective observation missions.

3.1.15. Concentration of power is one step in the direction of a *coup d'état*. Decentralisation of power is a way to make democratic processes more inclusive and boost public participation.

3.1.16. In recent years, there has been an increase in *coups* and attempted *coups*, a trend that should be grasped and covered in future measures of the EU institutions.

3.1.17. There are many problems in Africa that hinder the transition to democracy and are often interlinked:

— countries with unstable governments also perform quite poorly when it comes to social and economic development;

— long-term military presence often creates the feeling among people that a non-violent democratic transition is not possible;

— there is disinformation arising from foreign interference;

— political institutions, the economy and society are being distorted as a consequence of corruption being deemed fairly acceptable;

— space for civil society is shrinking.

([7]) Recommendation adopted by the International Labour Conference at its 104th Session in Geneva, on 12 June 2015: https://www.ilo.org/resource/ilc/104/recommendation-no-204-concerning-transition-informal-formal-economy.

3.2. ***Africa and world geopolitics***

3.2.1. The EU remains Africa's most important partner (development cooperation, investment, trade).

3.2.2. However, according to various African stakeholders, both from the government sector and from civil society, the EU is overly bureaucratic in its approach to Africa. This is a perception that needs to be addressed by promoting the adaptability of EU action to the contexts in which it intends to develop cooperation.

3.2.3. In 2021, the EU launched an investment strategy of particular importance for Africa: the Global Gateway. The EU promises to release up to EUR 300 billion in investment between 2021 and 2027 in order to improve digital, energy and transport infrastructure, and to strengthen health, education and research systems around the world. Up to EUR 150 billion in investment have been mobilised for the African continent. As expressed in its opinion on this strategy ([8]), the EESC:

— argues that the Global Gateway will strengthen economic and political ties with the EU's partner countries, ensuring respect for the EU's democratic and social principles while enabling it to compete effectively on a global level in the construction and maintenance of infrastructure;

— stresses how important it is for Global Gateway investment programmes to be based on an impact assessment. Such assessments should not only take into account aspects of strategic geopolitical relevance, but also ensure both democratic participation in development initiatives in partner countries and the economic, social and environmental sustainability of projects.

3.2.4. The European private sector is committed to participating in the process of economic development in Africa; however, there are still significant institutional obstacles in the legal framework and in investment protection, socially-rooted corruption problems, the lack of an independent judiciary and development deficits such as skills deficits in the workforce and the lack of infrastructure, which could be addressed through partnerships and cooperation.

3.2.5. The EESC calls on European and African institutions to make the fight against corruption and its disruptive effects on economies and society a priority in cooperation between Europe and Africa.

3.2.6. The EESC believes – and regrets – that the European Union has for a long time underestimated the geopolitical and strategic role of the African continent. This situation is fuelled by the imprudent strategies of some European states and, consequently, by the weaknesses inherent in certain aspects of an EU foreign policy that is a common (i.e. joint) one. The actions of some non-European states in the region constitute a major factor contributing to the present situation. Examples include Russia's destabilising actions and China's intense investment activity as part of its geopolitical strategy for Africa.

3.2.7. China's international strategy (applied through its Belt and Road initiative) fuels the risk of democratic regression across the continent of Africa, as does Russia's international strategy (implemented mainly through interventions by Russian companies, including paramilitary organisations such as Wagner).

3.2.8. Unlike the EU, China and Russia do not place universal values at the centre of their international policy, meaning that they are preferential partners in relations with autocratic regimes or governments that have political and/or economic ties with them.

3.3. ***EU-Africa relations***

3.3.1. Article 21 of the Treaty on European Union provides that EU action on the international scene must be guided by the principles which have inspired its own creation, including human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights.

([8]) OJ C, C/2024/1574, 5.3.2024, ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/1574/oj.

3.3.2. Under the Joint Africa-EU Strategy, which provides a comprehensive, long-term framework for Africa-EU relations, the partnership is guided by the fundamental principles of the unity of Africa, the interdependence of Africa and Europe, ownership and joint responsibility, and respect for human rights, democratic principles and the rule of law, as well as the right to development.

3.3.3. The EU and Africa, as part of the afore-mentioned strategy, can work together to seize the opportunities and address these challenges, developing actions that ensure stability, peace, security, human rights, democracy, gender equality, sustainable livelihoods, sustainable economic growth based on healthy ecosystems, social cohesion and good governance.

3.3.4. This is the overall framework in which the Samoa Agreement was concluded between the EU and the OACPS in November 2023. The Samoa Agreement calls for a partnership among equals. In practice, however, African structures are weaker, have fewer political competences, and lack sufficient resources. The AU and the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (OACPS) have considerably fewer resources than the EU. The EESC recommends that the EU take this disparity into account and seek to develop mechanisms for rebalancing the mutual relationship.

3.3.5. The EESC believes that for the Samoa Agreement to be properly implemented, it will be helpful for the parties to agree on progress indicators.

3.3.6. The New Consensus on Development, jointly approved by the Commission, the Council, the Parliament and the High Representative in June 2017, considers democracy in the broader context of development policies.

3.3.7. The Council Conclusions on the EU Action Plan for Human Rights and Democracy 2020-2024 include as priorities for action building resilient, inclusive and democratic societies, and promoting a global system for human rights and democracy.

4. **The EESC and African civil society**

4.1. In this context, the main question that arises is how the EESC can help promote democratic values and defend democratic regimes in Africa, while taking into account the Samoa Agreement and the EU-Africa partnership?

4.2. We must bear in mind the role of social and economic development and space for civil society in building resilient democracies.

4.3. In this context, the EESC reiterates that respect for universal human rights – essential common values – must be the foundation for any political engagement within an equal development partnership with Africa ([9]).

4.4. The EESC firmly believes that (as stated in its opinion on the 'Joint communication to the European Parliament and the Council for a renewed impetus of the Africa-EU Partnership'), along with genuine representatives of Africa's civil society (platform, forum and volunteers) and social partners, the EESC can make a key contribution to democracy and human rights ([10]).

4.5. The Samoa Agreement, and specifically the EU-Africa partnership, is the framework that should be taken into account. The agreement provides for institutional mechanisms that give structured space for civil society participation through civil and social dialogue; the EESC has long experience in such processes.

4.6. The signing of the memorandum of understanding between the EESC and the African Union's Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC) on 17 July 2024 is a key step towards strengthening this contribution. The two institutions will step up their cooperation by reaffirming the strategic partnership between the African Union and the European Union, promoting renewed democratic dialogue and strengthening cooperation between European and African civil societies for promoting economic and social development, deepening the involvement of civil society and pursuing sustainable development.

([9]) OJ C 429, 11.12.2020, p. 105, point 1.1.
([10]) OJ C 237, 6.7.2018, p. 66, point 1.4.

4.7. The state and civil society must support each other, but in Africa they are often seen as adversaries, with those in power accusing civil society of trying to destabilise and overthrow them. Healthy alternation of power requires institutional continuity that needs to be strengthened, clarifying autonomous spheres of action for the state and civil society, without prejudice to healthy political conflict.

4.8. Civil society represents a part of citizens' own efforts to find solutions to social and environmental problems, among others, facing their communities. This spirit of initiative can be seen in many shapes and forms and represents the existence of a democratic environment that authoritarian governments do not accept and often seek to ban.

4.9. The principle of a strong civil society is consolidated together with the level of development. In some countries, civil society is organised on an ethnic basis. The culture of citizen-based civil society should be promoted.

4.10. As already stated in the context of EU-ACP relations, the EESC has set as an objective the application of institutional mechanisms and promoting and supporting civil society organisations and the social partners, thus recognising their role as driving forces behind sustainable development, particularly in light of UN SDG 17 ([11]).

4.11. The EESC believes that cooperation with the African Union's ECOSOCC is key to establishing a structured strategy and guaranteeing continuity in the involvement of stakeholders in the EU-AU partnership.

4.12. The EESC will also maintain its relations with the Union of Economic and Social Councils of Africa (UCESA) through mutual participation in events organised by parties or in joint projects.

Brussels, 4 December 2024.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Oliver RÖPKE

([11]) OJ C 443, 22.11.2022, p. 29, point 1.9.