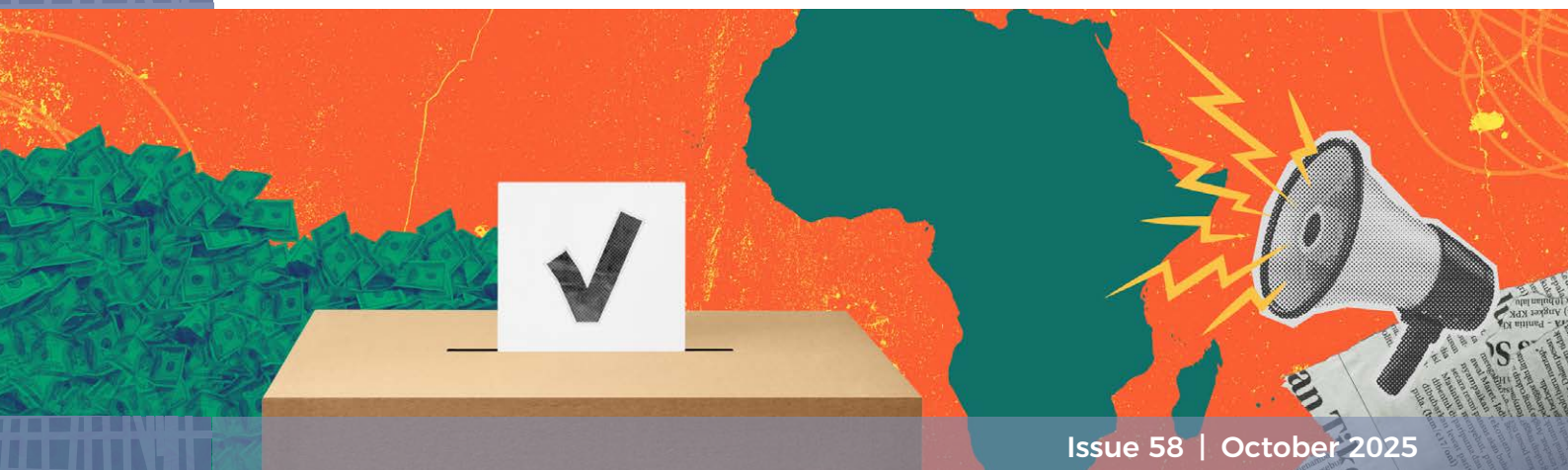




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Power for sale: the organised crime infiltration of elections in Africa

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Summary

This paper presents three key avenues through which organised crime infiltrates elections – election financing, the deployment of violence, and disinformation campaigns – and the impact on electoral integrity and thus on democracy. The author argues that to preserve the integrity of Africa's elections, the mutually beneficial relationship between criminal actors, states and state-embedded actors must be directly addressed. If left unchecked, it will perpetuate democratic backsliding and rising criminality, further eroding democratic institutions.

Key findings

Socio-economic and political dynamics contributing to democratic backsliding on the continent have been compounded by the influence of organised crime on electoral processes in Africa.

- Actors operating from within the state apparatus have become increasingly intertwined with criminal networks and often collaborate with them during elections to gain or maintain political power.
- To end the influence of organised crime on democratic politics, it is necessary to establish systems and practices that emphasise institutional continuity, the rule of law and accountability, and build state legitimacy.

An underexplored challenge to electoral integrity is the infiltration of organised crime into electoral processes and the impact on electoral integrity and democracy

Introduction

Footage from recently held elections in Africa showing crowds at polling stations, citizens casting their ballots, and officials tallying the votes featured across the media in 2024 in what was dubbed a 'bonanza election year' for the continent.¹ These scenes conveyed a sense of civic engagement and the process of democracy in action.

In subsequent scenes, however, the tone shifted dramatically. Protestors were seen in the streets, chanting and waving signs, demanding that the results be overturned.² Many expressed frustration, questioning the integrity of the election and calling for a recount or for the election to be declared illegitimate.

In Mozambique, for example, protests broke out after the opposition leader, Venancio Mondlane, contested the October 2024 election results. Hundreds of Mozambicans took to the streets in protest against fraudulent election results. The European Union Election Observation Mission noted several irregularities with the electoral process in its final Observer Mission report.³ The protests, initially decrying the election outcome, went on to highlight socio-economic and political challenges in the country and general disenchantment with the democratic process. These protests were violently quashed by state security forces and left over 300 people dead.⁴

These contrasting scenes from the 2024 election cycle are not new. They have been a recurring feature in Africa for decades as democracy has declined, civil and political liberties have eroded and governance progress has stagnated. While protests against election results have been primarily rooted in socio-economic challenges and political fractures motivating the need for political change, they frequently occur after the integrity of the elections has been compromised.

Protest action has typically followed when elections have been affected by state-sponsored violence, fraud such as vote rigging has occurred or irregularities have been noted, all of which undermine the integrity of elections. However, an underexplored challenge to electoral integrity is the infiltration of organised crime into electoral processes and the impact on electoral integrity and democracy.

This research paper explores the connection between elections and organised crime in Africa. It sheds light on how criminal networks are used to undermine electoral integrity. Although elections are just one aspect of democracy, they remain an important democratic function that ought to be free from criminal interference. The paper focuses on three key criminal activities – electoral violence, illicit financing of elections and disinformation campaigns – that are used to destabilise elections and contribute to a decline in democracy.

The infiltration of organised crime into Africa's elections has occurred gradually. This paper thus first explores the evolution of the relationship between state-embedded actors,⁵ states and organised crime actors during elections. It then delves into the three selected key organised crime threats to electoral integrity in Africa to establish the links between organised crime, elections and democracy.

Lastly, the paper offers ways to preserve the integrity of Africa's elections by directly addressing the mutually beneficial relationship between criminal actors and state-embedded actors. If left unchecked, this nexus will perpetuate democratic backsliding and rising criminality, further eroding democratic institutions. Confronting these entrenched links between criminal networks and political elites is essential to prevent the continued threat to electoral integrity and democratic governance across the continent.

Evolution of the relationship between organised crime and elections

The political trajectory of many African countries after independence has been deeply intertwined with the rise of liberation parties and the challenges of establishing democratic governance. Beginning with Ghana's independence in 1957, the continent experienced a wave of decolonisation. This period was marked by fervent political movements and the emergence of political parties, often with strong nationalistic ideals, that sought to centralise efforts to overthrow colonial rule – sometimes through armed struggle.

After the fall of colonial rule, the immediate task for many African nations was to establish new governments. Elections were the primary means through which power was formally transferred from colonial governments to nationalist governments. The parties that came to power in these independence elections are often referred to as 'liberation parties'.⁶ These parties, although not always proponents of democratic models, utilised elections as the primary mechanism to legitimise their rule.⁷ Socialism, communism and other ideologies also gained traction during this post-colonial period, influencing the policies of newly formed governments.

However, once these liberation parties had assumed power, the challenges of democratic governance and political opposition soon became apparent. Despite initially coming into power through democratic means, many of these parties struggled with accepting political opposition and handing over power. Over time, they began to adopt authoritarian tactics during elections to consolidate their power and prevent opposition. In the early stages, this often involved state-sponsored violence, propaganda and the misuse of public funds.⁸

Once these liberation parties had assumed power, the challenges of democratic governance and political opposition soon became apparent

State-sponsored violence

State-sponsored violence during elections was aimed at silencing dissent, cracking down on opposition parties and suppressing civil society. While several triggers of violence during post-independence elections have been noted, including democratic institutionalisation, the legacy of past elections and grievance instrumentalisation, the incumbent running for re-election was found to be a sure predictor of electoral violence.⁹

In Kenya's 1992 elections, state-instigated electoral violence erupted along ethnic lines, leading to the death and displacement of thousands of people and a victory for the incumbent party, the Kenya African National Union.¹⁰ Violence during these elections was deployed by security forces to punish opposition supporters and prevent them from voting through intimidation or displacement.¹¹

State-sponsored violence also broke out in the weeks following Ethiopia's 2005 elections when the incumbent party realised they were losing to the opposition, the Coalition for Unity and Democracy.¹² Violence and intimidation of the opposition by government security forces resulted in the deaths and detention of hundreds of people who disputed the elections and election results.¹³

Turning tides: Surprise electoral outcomes and peaceful power transfers

There were multiple surprise election outcomes in Africa during the 2024 election cycle that resulted in peaceful transfers of power and challenged systems of entrenched incumbency. For example, the Botswana Democratic Party lost its parliamentary majority for the first time in 58 years; the incumbent vice president in Ghana conceded defeat to John Mahama; in Mauritius, the Alliance for Change coalition won a landslide victory over the governing coalition; and in Senegal, Bassirou Diomaye Faye defeated the ruling party's candidate.

The role of an active civil society underpinned the electoral outcomes in these countries, especially in Senegal, where mass protests led by civil society and opposition leaders pushed back against the previous president's attempt to run for a third term. These trends highlight the importance of an active civil society in disrupting the infiltration of organised crime in electoral processes.

More recently, in the face of international sanctions, military or diplomatic isolation, condemnation by international election observers, and the loss of trade and foreign aid, many African governments have turned to more covert methods of entrenching their power. However, state-sponsored violence remains rife, as illustrated by the violent crackdown by state security forces against protestors contesting the 2024 election results in Mozambique.¹⁴

Instead of relying solely on state institutions to carry out election-related violence, however, some regimes are now collaborating with criminal actors, granting them the mandate to commit acts of violence, intimidation and corruption on their behalf. In Nigeria's election landscape, for example, political elites have actively engaged criminal groups to perpetrate violence against voters and election officials, creating a mutually beneficial ecosystem that undermines democracy and empowers criminal gangs.¹⁵

Propaganda

State media such as radio, print and television have been instrumental in spreading ruling governments' propaganda. Post-independence, some African governments held a monopoly on the media environment and used it to spread propaganda and suppress the opposition, particularly during elections. The style of reporting and content of print media were largely propagandist rather than informational. This was a direct result of government ownership and control of the press.¹⁶

During Zimbabwe's 2008 elections, the Media Monitoring Project of Zimbabwe reported that the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation, the state broadcaster, allocated most of its political coverage to the ruling party, ZANU-PF, with minimal and often negative coverage of opposition parties.¹⁷ Propaganda jingles were popular during this time and were played on radio and television broadcasts, reinforcing the ruling party's messaging.

While press freedom remains repressed in most African countries,¹⁸ the media environment has been partially democratised by digital and technological improvements.¹⁹ Increased access to the internet has almost levelled the media space in Africa, although this comes with its own challenges. There has been a proliferation of independent news websites and access to information probing government policies and exposing corruption. Although states still arrest, detain and kill journalists, close independent newspapers, and promulgate repressive media laws,²⁰ private-sector actors now provide digital strategies for states and individuals that sometimes weaponise the internet through targeted campaigns spreading misinformation and disinformation.

The commercial market for disinformation is a new criminal avenue through which states have started repressing opposition by targeting and discrediting critical information.²¹

Misuse of public funds

The looting of public enterprises has traditionally provided states with much-needed capital during elections. Access to these funds gives incumbents an unfair advantage over opponents and allows them to sustain patronage networks.

For example, Gambia's former president Yahya Jammeh was accused of looting millions of dollars from the state during his 22-year dictatorship.²² He and his political party, the Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction, won consecutive elections in a country offering no public funding for campaign financing. It would be reasonable to infer that looted funds made up part of Jammeh's campaign financing. Allegations have also been levelled against his party that proceeds from the plundering of state coffers contributed to their general funding.²³

While the looting of public enterprises by states continues, it can be argued that it was a more lucrative source of funds immediately post-independence, when most African economies were thriving. Now, however, the systematic plundering of public enterprises has largely contributed to economic disinvestments and downturns. This has significantly reduced the pool of state resources for funding election campaigns, increasing reliance on proceeds from illicit activities as an alternative source.

In cases where election financing is made available, it is often insufficient for purposes of clientelism. Therefore, unaccountable cash from illicit activities has emerged as a way to facilitate the buying of votes and to fund patronage networks.

Organised crime threats to electoral integrity

Before examining the impact that criminality can have on electoral integrity and how this undermines the foundations of democratic systems, the paper first establishes the relationship between organised crime, states, elections and democracy, and how these elements intersect.

This paper defines organised crime as criminal activity involving criminal networks, private-sector actors and mafia-style actors doing business with state-embedded actors and legitimate businesses. State-embedded actors or the state itself use the relationship with these criminal actors for their financial and political benefit.

Unaccountable cash from illicit activities has emerged as a way to facilitate the buying of votes and to fund patronage networks

The relationship between states and organised criminal groups is often categorised as either antagonistic, where the state is in conflict with organised crime groups and actively works to combat them, or opportunistic, where there is some sort of collaboration between the state and organised crime groups.²⁴ The latter, facilitated by state-embedded actors, is the main focus of this research paper.

On the one hand, organised criminality is a threat to states, often contributing to violence and instability, lost revenue and declining state legitimacy.²⁵ An antagonistic stance is a point of vulnerability for organised crime during elections when political candidates use law enforcement reform and strategies to combat organised crime as an advocacy platform. This may result in organised crime groups that previously operated without resistance being targeted to show the effectiveness of an incumbent government as part of their campaigning strategy.

Holding free and fair elections is recognised as a fundamental component of a functioning democracy

Organised crime actors also risk losing their political protection if it does not fit the political rhetoric at the time. In addition, heightened security during elections disrupts the flow of illicit goods and other criminal activities. Election campaigns can also inadvertently expose criminal networks that are backing certain candidates or political parties. This has the potential to tarnish both political and criminal reputations.

On the other hand, organised criminality can be an asset for politicians and states to keep and strengthen their hold on power. This is particularly evident during election periods, when proceeds from illicit activities are used to fund election campaigns and buy votes, and when criminal networks are employed to enact violence and intimidation or spread disinformation in areas where they have control or influence.²⁶ Corruption, the use of the public office for private gain, underpins this opportunistic relationship between states and organised crime groups.

In these relationships, states and criminal groups seek each other out for their mutual benefit, which can be financial or otherwise. For the state, it could be to maintain their hold on power, to feed their patronage networks, for developmental purposes and, sometimes, out of pure greed. Criminal actors could gain protection from prosecution, ease of operating where the threat from law enforcement is removed, elimination of their competition by the state, and their activities could even be legitimised by working with state-embedded actors.

Although elections do not automatically mean that democracy is present, holding free and fair elections is recognised as a fundamental component of a functioning democracy.²⁷ Elections and electoral integrity are important determinants of the quality of democracy that is experienced.²⁸

Governance structures and their interactions with organised crime

Democracies tend to be well equipped to address both the root causes and occurrences of organised crime given their emphasis on the rule of law, systems of checks and balances, accountability and transparency, social protection measures, and open civic spaces.²⁹ Well-functioning democracies have been found to be more resilient against organised crime threats and their impact.³⁰ Democratic institutions including the judiciary, oversight bodies, and a free and active civil society and media can hold governments accountable and report on corruption.³¹

However, democratic states are also vulnerable to being infiltrated by organised crime. Various characteristics of democracies, such as political contestation, provide avenues for organised crime to infiltrate, for example through political financing. Although sustainable democracies build up their resilience to organised crime over time, they are vulnerable in the early stages of democratisation because their democratic institutions are not yet strong enough to resist infiltration by organised crime.

For example, despite achieving scores of 5.0 or higher (on a 0–10 scale) in the Democracy Index in 2023, Kenya, South Africa and Ghana also exhibited elevated levels of criminality – 5.0 and above (on a 0–10 scale) – in the 2023 Africa Organised Crime Index, showing the complex interplay between democratic development and organised criminal influence. Furthermore, these three countries all documented instances of organised crime infiltration during elections.

It is possible that the infiltration of organised crime is well documented in democracies (as opposed to in authoritarian regimes) because they have more public coverage, independent investigative and oversight bodies, and stronger civic participation.

Authoritarian regimes, lacking the foundational principles of transparency and accountability, often do not have the same incentives as democracies to combat organised crime.³² Instead, they have been found to be more likely to foster criminal groups and corruption when they are not employing violent suppression techniques.³³ This demonstrates that strong democratic frameworks are vital for enhancing a state's ability to combat criminality.

Threats to electoral integrity, including illicit campaign financing, electoral violence and intimidation, and disinformation campaigns have been increasing and create opportunities for organised crime to exert influence over elections.³⁴

Illicit funding of elections

According to the Electoral Integrity Project, campaign financing is the weakest aspect of elections around the world.³⁵ Democracy presupposes that everyone has an equal chance at the ballot box. However, campaign financing can be a deterrent to access when flows of money give some candidates and parties an unfair advantage over others.³⁶

Furthermore, when solutions to regulate election irregularities are proposed, they are often focused on electoral violence, the role of independent election observers or peacekeeping measures. Regulatory measures seldom take into account illicit financing, partly because of its clandestine nature.

Election costs, while generally high, are higher in Africa than elsewhere in the world. The average cost of an election in Africa, which involves expensive filing fees and excessive campaign budgets, is almost twice the world's average (US\$2.20), at US\$4.20 per capita.³⁷

In Ghana, for example, a candidate needs to raise and spend an estimated GH¢575 million (roughly US\$100 million) to stand a chance at the presidency, running on the ticket of either the National Democratic Congress or the New Patriotic Party.³⁸ In another example, since 2005, overall election costs in Guinea-Bissau, where the minimum wage is just €80 a month, are typically over €30 million.³⁹

While several countries such as Algeria, Burundi, Cameroon, Namibia, Seychelles, Morocco and Madagascar provide public funding to political parties, only Cape Verde and Tunisia provide funding for election campaigning specifically.⁴⁰ Most countries have to rely on private sources of funding for election campaigning, which may include proceeds from illicit markets.⁴¹

The high cost of election financing can lead to various scenarios in the absence of regulation. First, candidates may collaborate with criminal networks in exchange for financial benefit. This is also an opportunity for criminal networks to corrupt and manipulate politicians. Criminal actors who stand to profit

from political power through influence, favours or protection have a vested interest in financing politicians, not only during elections. For example, non-state armed groups engaging in the illicit timber and charcoal trade in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) are known to collaborate with local politicians who facilitate their illicit business in exchange for financial benefit.⁴²

Second, election candidates may engage in criminal activities to fund their campaigns. In Kenya, for example, some campaign funding has come from illicit activities such as tenderpreneurship, money laundering and extortion in the minibuss taxi sector.⁴³

Attempts to regulate campaign financing, including caps on election campaign budgets, vary widely from country to country. Several African countries, including South Africa, Nigeria, Tanzania and Zimbabwe, either impose campaign spending limits or have regulations on election budgets. However, these efforts face challenges, such as inconsistent enforcement, regulatory frameworks that are weak or not strictly adhered to, and a lack of resources to properly monitor and enforce funding regulations.

Despite these regulatory frameworks, the use and reliance on illicit funds for election campaigning is widespread and provides the gateway for organised crime to infiltrate and influence elections.

Political party financing in Ghana

A study conducted by the Ghana Centre for Democratic Development identified several criminal financiers of political parties and candidate campaigns.⁴⁴ The criminal activities included illegal mining, illegal oil distribution (bunkering) and fraudulent business and procurement crimes.⁴⁵ Once elected, the politicians remained indebted to their financiers and used their networks and influence to impede investigations into their criminal and illegal activities.⁴⁶

Further research found that the illegal extraction of gold in key artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) regions has been 'mutually constitutive' with democracy, electioneering and campaign financing in Ghana.⁴⁷ Electoral competition in these areas was found to be sustained and partly dependent on proceeds from illegal ASM, with incumbent governments issuing mining licences in exchange for votes, and political elites extracting money from illicit mining for party financing.⁴⁸

This seepage of proceeds from criminal activities into politics in Ghana has been facilitated by a lack of transparency and ineffective regulatory oversight over campaign financing. This is compounded by increased electoral competition and the high costs of election campaigning in the country.

The already high costs of elections are driven up further in contexts where winning an election provides immense political power and access to patronage networks. This increases the stakes of an election and leaves candidates susceptible to illicit funding to ensure victory.

The case of Guinea-Bissau

Winning the presidential election in Guinea-Bissau is a winner-takes-all situation. Election victory confers major political power to the Office of the President, granting extensive authority over all branches of the state, from state security and defence to the judiciary and the legislature.⁴⁹ Whoever is in charge of the executive and defence also automatically has power over highly lucrative illicit economies in the country, such as the cocaine trade.

Profits from illicit markets such as drug trafficking, illegal logging and arms trafficking have been an important source of political patronage and a critical resource to support political campaigns in Guinea-Bissau since the first democratic elections in 1994.⁵⁰ From the 1990s, the country was a conduit for arms, primarily destined for anti-government insurgent groups in southern Senegal.⁵¹

This trafficking in arms was an important source of funds for political elites to build and maintain alliances and loyalty.⁵² It became a mechanism of 'self-financing' separate from diverted public budgets and corruption to feed patronage networks.⁵³ These networks extended to the military, where the loyalty of many troops was determined by which officers could support them financially.⁵⁴ Control of or support from the army contributed significantly to political power.

More recently, competition for control of lucrative illicit flows, including narcotics, has been rife. Political power guarantees access to these unlawful flows. Since the mid-2000s, narcotics trafficking has steadily worsened in the country. The cocaine trade and the local profits it generates, primarily through protection fees paid to members of the political elite, have become deeply ingrained in the country's political landscape,⁵⁵ earning it the label of a 'narco-state'.⁵⁶

Revenue from illicit logging also contributes to the campaigns of political candidates. For example, a 2014 presidential candidate's expansive campaigning and advertising material was attributed to funds acquired from the export of illegal logs.⁵⁷

In sum, profits from illicit markets have become important sources of campaign funding during elections in Guinea-Bissau. Airtime for cellphones, t-shirts and food are all established forms of informal political exchanges given out to obtain votes during elections.⁵⁸ Therefore, access to extra and unaccountable money immediately enhances a candidate's political chances. Aspiring politicians without access to these funds are at a disadvantage.⁵⁹ This has undermined the political process and democracy by resourcing political and military bureaucrats whose primary aim is to misuse the political office for personal financial gain.⁶⁰

The illicit funding of elections has long-lasting consequences on democracy. It opens the pathway for criminality and corruption to infiltrate the state. In turn, corruption and patronage become widespread, and the state itself or state institutions are effectively criminalised.

In countries where candidates gain an unfair advantage because of funding from criminal activity, the quality of politicians is determined not by their qualifications or ability to serve but by their financial ability to run a successful campaign and buy votes. In such environments, the integrity of the democratic process is severely compromised, as citizens are more likely to vote for candidates who offer the most immediate financial rewards, rather than those best suited to govern. This embeds money and patronage at the heart of politics, at the expense of both the ideological aims of the government and the administrative business of governance.⁶¹

Limiting campaign contributions from individuals and entities is key to eliminating the influence of organised crime on elections. While measures such as capping campaign finances and demanding financial transparency have been implemented in some countries, as noted earlier, politicians have consistently found ways to circumvent or bypass these regulations. In certain cases, these measures are either poorly enforced or not applied at all. What is needed, instead, is the complete elimination of independent financing for elections. Arguably, a more effective solution may be to implement public financing systems for all candidates who meet certain qualifications.

Although not without challenges, this system would ensure that no candidate has a financial advantage over another, so levelling the playing field. In addition, political advertising needs to undergo reform to guarantee that all candidates receive equal airtime. This would ensure that candidates are evaluated based on their qualifications, policies and even charisma, rather than on their financial backing, which in some cases is provided by criminal actors or illicit sources. In this way, elections can be decided on merit instead of money, giving every candidate a fair chance to compete.

Organised violence and elections

Criminal organisations that do not aim to overthrow or break away from the state may still exert political influence 'through the accumulation of the means of violence itself and have developed variously collaborative and competitive relationships with the state'.⁶²

In collaborative relationships with the state, some criminal networks use violence to protect candidates with whom they have an agreement or a beneficial relationship, or to protect the state against threats or opposition. In these instances, the violence is often perpetrated at the behest of state-embedded actors. Very rarely do criminal groups instigate violence of their own accord during elections, even when they are in competition with the state. The risks of doing so are too high and often do not outweigh the benefits.

Electoral and organised violence

Electoral violence is a subcategory of organised violence. The term 'electoral violence' is used in cases where political actors employ violence, coercion and intimidation to purposefully influence the process and outcome of elections.⁶³ The institutional frameworks surrounding elections shape the ways in which violence intervenes in the electoral process.⁶⁴ Electoral violence would not occur or would manifest differently in the absence of an electoral contest.⁶⁵ 'The actors, practices, and institutions provided by the electoral framework affect how and why electoral violence arises,' and influence both when it occurs and who is targeted.⁶⁶

Electoral violence also refers to instances of state repression, where instruments of the state, such as the army and the national police, are employed to perpetrate violence during elections. Furthermore, it refers to cases where criminal actors are employed to commit and foment violence during election periods.

Organised crime-related violence during elections is violence perpetrated by organised criminal actors with the intended consequence of influencing an election or electoral process for financial or other benefit. Outside of the elections, these actors are involved in other organised crime activities, which often include violence. In cases where organised violence is already pervasive, elections may simply offer a different incentive for criminal actors to be violent.⁶⁷

Organised violence during elections spans multiple forms, including targeted killings, voter and opponent intimidation, destruction of election materials, attacks on election staff and displacement of voters before, during and after an election.

Examples of violent collaboration between incumbent candidates and criminal networks, sometimes in the form of gangs, abound across Africa. For example, although the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria was relatively more peaceful than previous elections, organised violence still occurred. Some politicians from the ruling party used members of the vigilante Civilian Joint Task Force to intimidate their opponents and commit electoral violence.⁶⁸ In the Lagos, Rivers and Bayelsa states, thugs carried out attacks and vandalism, preventing some voters from casting ballots and forcing elections to be rescheduled for the next day in some polling units.⁶⁹

In Ghana, the resurfacing of militant and armed vigilantes associated with political parties has contributed to violence during elections.⁷⁰ Gang-instigated violence has featured in elections in Kenya, with criminal gangs funded by politicians and ethnic and political party militias using violence to influence election results.⁷¹ In South Africa, the assassination of political candidates as part of the violent contestation for coveted municipal positions during municipal elections has become increasingly common.⁷²

After the elections, criminal actors are compensated in cash, or with material gifts and other favours from political actors, including political protection and appointments to positions within state institutions. In some cases, no remuneration is offered but the criminals are allowed to keep whatever they have looted.

Many of these criminal actors return to their day-to-day activities, which are often illicit. The Yandaba gang members in Kano, Nigeria coordinate local drug markets, while in Rivers, Nigeria, political thugs are involved in oil bunkering, piracy and kidnapping.⁷³

In South Africa, hitmen who carry out politically motivated killings continue to operate in the commercialised market for targeted violence after elections. They carry out assassinations for insurance fraud purposes, to resolve business disputes, for organised crime reasons, or as part of minibuss-taxi violence.⁷⁴

In Kenya, ethnic militias who commit deadly violence during elections switch to criminal activities such as cattle rustling and extortion or legal activities such as farming and the extractive industries.⁷⁵

These criminal activities are key to the economic sustenance of criminal actors between election cycles. They return to these activities with a renewed sense of impunity due to their proximity to elected officials. This is a significant concern because it provides criminal actors with political cover and access to the means to perpetrate further acts of violence and criminality.⁷⁶

When the politicians they support lose elections, the consequences for criminal actors are significant, including loss of access to benefits such as political appointments, patronage or protection. They sometimes also become targets of the violence they meted out in the past. They face persecution, crackdowns and raids, and risk being sent to prison. These consequences escalate the stakes, compelling criminal actors to take drastic measures to secure electoral victory for their 'employers' by any means necessary.

Organised violence during elections has immeasurable consequences, including the destruction of lives and property, forced displacement, undermining of the integrity and credibility of the electoral process, and the erosion of public trust in the democratic process. Collaborations with winning candidates can allow criminal groups to have direct influence over the actions of local and state police and access to intelligence on pending arrests or other operations.⁷⁷ In the most extreme cases, political influence allows criminal groups to employ state security forces as appendages of their organisations, to detain or kill targets and to protect the transportation of illicit goods.⁷⁸

An underestimated consequence of violence during elections is the deterrent effect it has on voters in future elections. During the 2023 presidential elections in Nigeria, for example, only 27% of registered voters participated.⁷⁹ The low voter turnout was attributed to the fear of attacks, activities of self-defence militias and displacement.⁸⁰

While the immediate impact of organised violence during elections is primarily local, perpetrators are often also engaged in other criminal activities, sometimes with transnational consequences. For example, in Nigeria, the criminal gangs used during elections are also engaged in sea piracy outside of election seasons.⁸¹ Because organised crime networks rely on illicit activities for funding outside of election cycles, addressing the problem of organised crime as a whole is essential to curbing the influence of criminal actors during elections.

Dismantling criminal networks and disrupting illicit flows and activities would limit the pool of readily available criminal networks to collaborate with during elections. There is a disproportionate focus on elections being free and fair, and not enough focus on the way democracies are undermined by the influence of criminality as a whole. Disrupting criminal networks would have a deterrent effect on political-criminal collaborations in the long run.

Disinformation campaigns

The use of social media as a campaign tool during elections has spread across Africa due to increasing connectivity, the widespread availability of mobile phones and increased internet access. Social media campaigns have coincided with the rise in social media participation, which has been both emancipating and destructive.

While greater connectivity allows for easier access to information, it has eroded traditional and verifiable news sources. Platforms such as X, Facebook, TikTok and Instagram allow users to access real-time

updates, share content and engage directly with stories. This bypasses the need for conventional newspapers and radio and television broadcasts, which, when functioning optimally and independently, are controlled by editorial oversight and fact checking.

As a result, traditional news houses are facing dwindling audiences and diminishing advertising revenue while social media thrives on its ability to personalise content, amplify user-generated stories and provide instant feedback. Although this shift has democratised information sharing, it has also raised concerns about the quality and accuracy of news, with disinformation and misinformation becoming growing problems in the digital age. The damaging consequences of this are best illustrated by the use of disinformation campaigns during elections.

Disinformation refers to the intentional dissemination of false information with the intent of advancing a political or ideological objective.⁸² During elections, it is increasingly becoming a weaponised tool to discredit candidates and drive false narratives, with a deterring effect on voters in Africa. Disinformation campaigns qualify as organised crime when they are illegal, coordinated activities that are conducted for profit by criminal actors.

Disinformation campaigns during Kenya's August 2022 election illustrate this commodification of influence and disinformation during elections. Research conducted by the Institute for Security Studies found that while motivations for social media campaigns spreading false information were both financial and political, they were overwhelmingly commercial rather than ideological.⁸³ Digital entrepreneurs in Kenya monetised their social networks for profit during the election season. Their campaigns were organised and coordinated, targeted at candidates, spread falsehoods and incited fear of violence, highlighting the very real threat they pose to democratic institutions by weaponising digital communications.⁸⁴

In recent years, dozens of carefully designed campaigns have pumped millions of intentionally false and misleading posts into Africa's online social spaces.⁸⁵ From Algeria to Zimbabwe, multiple countries in Africa have had to contend with online election interference campaigns over the last 10 years.⁸⁶ The preceding example of Kenya shows how digital entrepreneurs are often at the forefront of these campaigns.

However, other online campaigns have been orchestrated and led by private-sector actors or state-embedded actors, making them organised criminal activities. This is different from state-sponsored disinformation campaigns at the behest of foreign governments, for example, which invoke fears of foreign interference in local elections. A notable example of state-sponsored disinformation is that of Russia, which has invested in disinformation campaigns to foment polarisation, derail democracy and help authoritarian figures stay in power.⁸⁷

State-sponsored disinformation: Russia's coordinated disinformation campaigns

The Africa Center for Strategic Studies identified 23 disinformation campaigns targeting African countries between 2014 and 2022.⁸⁸ Of these, 16 were linked to Russia.⁸⁹ Russian-sponsored disinformation campaigns were seen in Angola, the DRC, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Madagascar, Mozambique and Zimbabwe.⁹⁰ The objectives of these campaigns varied, from championing Russian interests to discrediting other countries and promoting military juntas in West Africa.⁹¹

In South Africa, there were allegations that a non-governmental organisation called the Association for Free Research and International Co-operation (Afric) had tried to create a disinformation campaign that favoured the African National Congress and put out propaganda against the opposition Democratic Alliance and Economic Freedom Fighters during the 2019 elections.⁹² While it appears that this campaign did not gain any traction, it remains an important example of Russia's interference in elections through the use of disinformation campaigns.

Senegal too faced expanding Russian-sponsored disinformation campaigns that threatened to foster confusion and disillusionment with democracy during its elections in 2024.⁹³ Anti-democratic sentiments were also peddled by social media influencers backed by Russian-affiliated entities in Mali, the Central African Republic, Cameroon and Mozambique during 2019.⁹⁴ A year earlier, disinformation campaigns targeted at supporting ruling party candidates were disseminated on social media and seen by millions of social media users in Cameroon, Madagascar, Sudan and Côte d'Ivoire.⁹⁵

While the effects of Russian-sponsored disinformation vary, it forms part of a disruptive model that has the potential to be mimicked to stoke instability, especially in already fragile contexts, and thus poses a credible threat to electoral integrity in Africa.

The threat of disinformation extends beyond state-sponsored campaigns, which may have provided the blueprints for privately led disinformation campaigns. Private-sector actors have been employed to use social media platforms to push false information in support of political candidates during elections, or information that discredits electoral and other democratic bodies. Private-sector actors are 'profit-seeking individuals or entities who own, manage or control a segment of the legal economy free from state ownership or control, that collaborate or cooperate with criminal actors [including state-embedded criminal actors] as the driving force, wilfully, through coercion or neglect'.⁹⁶

Privately led disinformation campaigns

Investigations into the British political consulting firm Cambridge Analytica found that it had run election campaigns in Nigeria in 2015, manipulating data from Facebook user profiles and orchestrating smear campaigns to damage opposition candidates.⁹⁷ The firm was allegedly hired by a Nigerian billionaire to support the re-election of President Goodluck Jonathan against Muhammadu Buhari.⁹⁸ In efforts to discredit Buhari and dissuade his supporters and potential voters, the firm peddled disinformation suggesting that he would support Boko Haram and end women's rights.⁹⁹

Cambridge Analytica was accused of playing a similar role in Kenya during the 2013 election and again in 2017. Opposition leaders accused them of 'manipulation and propaganda' as part of their work with the Jubilee Party, which was then led by former president Uhuru Kenyatta.¹⁰⁰ They reportedly used tactics such as sponsored posts, attack advertisements and disinformation on Facebook.¹⁰¹

Bell Pottinger, another British firm, was implicated in a scandal involving the Gupta family in South Africa. Leaked emails showed that they had paid Twitter (now X) users to spread propaganda.¹⁰² The Guptas reportedly paid Bell Pottinger £100 000 for their work. The firm ran an online campaign promoting the idea of 'white monopoly capital', alleging that white-owned business was impeding South Africa's economic progress.¹⁰³ This idea was used in political speeches to label any opposition to then-president Jacob Zuma as agents of white monopoly capital.¹⁰⁴

Disinformation is used to create confusion, sow discord by fuelling existing tensions, or advance a particular agenda. It can also include influential individuals feigning support for a particular political candidate to give them a false advantage over other candidates.¹⁰⁵ In Kenya, for example, a fake news story purported to show former United States president Barack Obama endorsing a presidential candidate.¹⁰⁶ This peddling of false information is aimed at manipulating voters and disrupting civic processes. It can also lead to violence and intimidation by provoking anger and fear.

Similar to organised violence discussed above, another consequence of disinformation campaigns is voter suppression, where voters are dissuaded from voting. A false story during Kenya's 2022 elections claimed that a leopard was on the loose in the Mount Kenya region.¹⁰⁷ The aim was to instil fear in potential voters and discourage them from going to the polls out of concern for their safety. The manipulation of voter

Electoral integrity is a crucial factor when analysing the interference of organised crime in Africa's elections

behaviour weakens democratic processes and harms the integrity of elections by diminishing trust in institutions and the electoral process.

In sum, collaboration between criminal and political actors results in a reduction of opportunities for political contestation by deterring and intimidating voters and qualified politicians.¹⁰⁸ Healthy political contestation is also affected by the absence of social control measures such as independent investigative journalism and civil society oversight when members of civil society are intimidated or paid to look the other way.¹⁰⁹ The presence of organised crime also negatively influences public trust, weakens democracy, the rule of law and state institutions, including those responsible for fighting crime, and channels public funds away from basic service delivery.¹¹⁰

Safeguarding electoral integrity from the interference of organised crime

Electoral integrity is a crucial factor when analysing the interference of organised crime in Africa's elections. The absence of electoral integrity provides fertile ground for criminal groups to corrupt the electoral process and, by extension, the broader system of governance.

As this report has shown, politics plays a central role in both fighting and perpetuating organised corruption. Organised corruption – a mix of organised crime, criminal methods and high-level corruption – creates a system that benefits and protects those in power.¹¹¹ It also involves buying and shaping public support to gain or hold on to political and economic power.¹¹² It tends to manifest in places where the political integrity and political will to tackle organised crime are lacking.

In the absence of political will, countries with the most robust strategies to fight organised crime can fail due to a lack of political commitment. Political will is the difference between the enactment and implementation of legislation. It is the drive that turns laws into tangible results by garnering the necessary support to allocate resources, create and direct systems, and overcome resistance.

To preserve the integrity of Africa's elections, the deeply intertwined relationship between criminal actors and political elites must end. Confronting the entrenched links between these players is essential to preventing the continued threat to electoral integrity and democratic governance, which undermines the prospects for stable, democratic institutions across the continent. The recommendations listed in the next section aim to provide the building blocks that will untangle the relationships between criminals and political elites.

Without robust electoral integrity, corruption becomes widespread, accountability among leaders and officials erodes, and public trust in election outcomes diminishes.¹¹³ This weakens the legitimacy of the government, making it more vulnerable to organised crime. When the electoral system is compromised, criminal organisations are able to influence decision making, co-opt state institutions, and perpetuate a cycle of corruption that undermines the foundations of democratic governance. The presence of organised crime works as a catalyst for political corruption, hollowing out institutions at all levels of the government and eroding the relationship between citizens and their representatives.¹¹⁴

Corruption extends along a spectrum from small bribes to organised corruption and state capture. To end the influence of organised crime on democratic politics, systems and practices need to be established that build state legitimacy and emphasise institutional continuity, the rule of law and accountability.

That said, a cultural and social shift needs to happen in the way in which society regards politicians. The state as an institution needs to be clearly distinguished from the state as a political party, as political elites or as an individual. The distinction between the state as an institution and the state as an individual, particularly as represented by the president or other political leaders, is a crucial aspect of modern democratic governance. On the one hand, the state as an institution should embody the collective will of the people, bound by laws and regulations. Political elites, on the other hand, are merely individuals in a much larger political and administrative system.

Recommendations

- **Accountability and transparency as bulwarks against corruption:** Enacting and strictly enforcing anti-corruption laws can help prevent politicians from using their power for personal gain or to facilitate criminal activity. These laws can be supported by strong independent oversight mechanisms such as anti-corruption agencies and ombudspersons. A strong civil society is necessary to hold politicians and elected individuals to account and to demand transparency in all facets of governance. Media freedom is also essential to expose corruption and to conduct independent investigations into illicit dealings. Open access to information about political decisions, financial dealings and public contracts can also make it harder for criminals and politicians to operate in the shadows.
- **Campaign finance reform:** Limiting private campaign contributions is essential to reduce the influence of organised crime on elections. A more effective solution is full public financing for candidates who qualify, ensuring that no one gains an unfair financial advantage. Coupled with equal access to political advertising, this would level the playing field and make elections about merit rather than money.
- **Fostering integrity among politicians by setting clear, ethical standards:** States should establish clear codes of conduct and ethical guidelines that explicitly outline what constitutes unacceptable behaviour. These should apply not just to specific actions but also to overall transparency and accountability. Politicians should be required to disclose their financial dealings, assets and potential conflicts of interest to create transparency and reduce opportunities for unethical behaviour. Clear and consistent consequences for misconduct and corruption should be applied. Countries need to create an environment of incentivising integrity, with rewards for ethical individuals.
- **Tackling organised crime holistically:** A whole-of-society approach to tackle organised crime is essential to curb its influence on politics. This can help dismantle criminal networks and disrupt the flow of illicit activities that sustain political-criminal relationships. International cooperation between law enforcement agencies, financial institutions and governments can help identify and disrupt the flow of illicit money and transnational criminal activity.

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