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The Correlation Between Poverty and Backsliding Democracy in Africa

TERHEMEN ANDZENGE*

ABSTRACT

As superpower competition faded from the global horizon in the 1990s, there was a resurgence of constitutionalism and democratic rule globally and particularly in Africa. Ironically, within the African context, as constitutional rule blossomed, standards of living dipped, with significant parts of Africa accounting for more than half of the people who live in extreme poverty around the world. As low standards of living spread, widespread democratic backsliding began to unfold around the continent. The paper adopts the Vicious Circle of Poverty Theory and other theories that investigate the correlation between poverty and democracy, and employs a qualitative research methodology to argue that, while there are many explanations for the democratic backsliding occurring across the continent, the dominant culprit remains poverty, and the other explanations are mere symptoms. The paper explores the profoundly adverse effects of poverty on democracy and recommends the embedding and justiciability of economic and social rights within the constitutional frameworks of African countries, as it is only when constitutionalism is rooted in, and addresses, the realities and ravages of poverty that it can create a democratic, free and fair society.

Keywords: *Poverty, Democracy, Constitutionalism, Coups, Democratic Backsliding*

I. INTRODUCTION

The history of constitutionalism and democracy in Africa is complex and can be divided into five episodic phases, each shaped by social, political and historical factors: the pre-colonial period, the colonial era, the period from independence to the early post-colonial constitutions, the era of authoritarianism and single-party rule, and, finally, the resurgence of constitutionalism.[1] From the late 1980s onward, a combination of domestic pressures and external influences, including the end of the Cold War, globalisation and the demands of international donors, led to a massive shift towards multiparty democracy and a new wave of constitution-making in Africa.[2] This new wave was characterised by deliberate efforts to

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[1] IAN TAYLOR, AFRICAN POLITICS: A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION ch. 2 (2018); Donald Arebamen, *Political Institutions and Government in Pre-Colonial Nigeria* (2025) (unpublished manuscript), https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.10685.58085.

[2] DECENTRALIZATION AND CONSTITUTIONALISM IN AFRICA (Charles M. Fombad & Nico Steytler eds., 2019).

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decentralise power away from the highly centralised governance structures inherited from the colonial era, and by the introduction of the popular vote, rights-based constitutions and expanded civic participation.[3] The significance of the governance shift was considerable: before the wave of democratisation of the late 1980s and early 1990s, only Botswana, The Gambia, Mauritius and Senegal practised multiparty democracy. Following the end of the Cold War and the rise of domestic pro-democracy movements, most of the remaining African states moved away from single-party and military rule towards constitution-making and multiparty elections.[4]

II. Statement of the Problem

Notwithstanding the widespread movement towards constitutionalism and multiparty democracy across Africa, persistent poverty remains a significant challenge to the consolidation and effectiveness of democracy on the continent. With some 439 million Africans, more than a quarter of the continent's population, living in extreme poverty, poverty acts as a militating force against the capacity of citizens to participate meaningfully in democratic processes, while also undermining public trust in democratic institutions.[5] The symbols of representative democracy, such as constitutions, elections, the separation of powers and the rule of law, remain in place across the continent. But the economic systems that sustain democracy, and that make it worthwhile as a government of the people, by the people and for the people, instituted to deliver economic security and root out poverty, are degraded and deeply eroded.

By January 2023, the continent had seen 23 successful and attempted coups since 2012 alone.[6] This state of affairs points to a discernible path along which the continent is steadily losing its democratic qualities, a phenomenon referred to as democratic backsliding.[7] It raises critical

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[3] Muna Ndulo, *Constitutions and Constitutional Reforms in African Politics*, *in* Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics (2019), https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.1324 (last visited Sept. 3, 2026).

[4] *See generally* Dengiyefa Angalapu, *Africa's Democratic Journey: A Tale of Progress, Setbacks, and Hopes*, Ctr. for Democracy & Dev. (Sept. 15, 2023), https://www.cddwestafrica.org/blog/africa-s-democratic-journey-a-tale-of-progress-setbacks-and-hopes/.

[5] Statista, *African Countries with the Highest Share of Global Population Living Below the Extreme Poverty Line as of 2026* (Feb. 20, 2026), https://www.statista.com/statistics/1228553/extreme-poverty-as-share-of-global-population-in-africa-by-country/ (estimating that around 439 million people in Africa lived below the extreme poverty line of $2.15 a day in 2025).

[6] *Much of Africa Less Safe, Democratic than in 2012: Mo Ibrahim Foundation*, Africanews (Jan. 25, 2023), https://www.africanews.com/amp/2023/01/25/much-of-africa-less-safe-democratic-than-in-2012-mo-ibrahim-foundation/ (reporting that the 2022 Ibrahim Index of African Governance "notes 23 successful and attempted coups since 2012").

[7] Julius Ihonvbere, *Challenges of Constitutionalism in Africa* (keynote lecture, Conference on Constitutionalism in Southern Africa, Southern Africa Research Institute for Policy Studies, 2000), https://juliusihonvbere.com/challenges-of-constitutionalism-in-africa/; Khabele Matlosa, *The Hazards of Democratic Backsliding in Africa*, *in* Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies (Nalanda Roy ed., 2025), https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.846.

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questions about the viability of democracy on the continent and about the ability of African democracies to deliver the tangible economic benefits to their populations that would generate and sustain political legitimacy. Surveys indicate that citizens are not rejecting democracy itself but are responding to its betrayal, which is termed democratic backsliding.[8] Widespread and persistent poverty fosters political apathy, clientelism, the rise of populism and military adventurers promising prosperity, and thus fuels instability.

This paper explores the deep connection between poverty and democracy and underlines the imperative of addressing the structural economic impediments to genuine democratisation in Africa. It advocates a move away from merely espousing democratic buzzwords towards a frontal engagement, by inserting into the body politic sustainable measures that would ameliorate poverty, so as to move away from "structural economic and institutional entrapment."[9] Although the concept of democratic backsliding has received significant scholarly attention, the literature tilts mostly towards developed rather than emerging economies, and the present exercise seeks to fill that gap. To that end, it reviews the existing literature on democracy and poverty, the pervasiveness of poverty and its effects on political outcomes that are subversive of democratic entrenchment. The paper relies mainly on secondary sources such as books, journal articles, reports of international organisations and official documents.

III. THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

The enquiry this paper undertakes leans on the research of Adam Przeworski and Fernando Limongi[10] and of Frank-Borge Wietzke[11] on the correlation between poverty and democracy. The work by Przeworski and Limongi, an empirical study of 135 countries between roughly 1950 and 1990, established that "no democracy ever fell, regardless of everything else, in a country with a per capita income higher than that of Argentina in 1975: $6,055." Explaining the findings, the authors observed that in wealthy societies the stakes of political conflict are lower: the political risks of losing an election are smaller than the risks of societal upheaval and chaos,

[8] Karabo Mangena & Deon Cloete, *Reframing Democracy in Africa: From Ritual to Transformative Solidarity Economics*, S. AFR. INST. OF INT'L AFFS. (Nov. 25, 2025), https://saiia.org.za/research/reframing-democracy-in-africa-from-ritual-to-transformative-solidarity-economics/ ("Citizens are not rejecting democracy itself; they are rebelling against its betrayal.").

[9] Mangena & Cloete, *supra* note 8.

[10] Adam Przeworski & Fernando Limongi, *Modernization: Theories and Facts*, 49 WORLD POL. 155, 165 (1997), https://www.la.utexas.edu/users/chenry/core/Course%20Materials/Przeworski97/Adam%20Przeworski%20and%20Fernando%20Papaterra%20Limongi%20Neto%20-%20Modernization%20Theories%20and%20Facts%20-%20World%20Politics%20492.htm; *see also* Adam Przeworski, *Democracy as an Equilibrium*, 123 PUB. CHOICE 253 (2005), https://doi.org/10.1007/s11127-005-7163-4.

[11] Frank-Borge Wietzke, *Poverty Reduction and Democratization – New Cross-Country Evidence*, 26 DEMOCRATIZATION 935 (2019), https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2019.1575369.

or of physical oppression under a dictatorship. As a result, political actors accept democratic outcomes, and democracy becomes self-enforcing. Democracies in developed economies are therefore firmly rooted and thrive, while democracies in poor countries are fragile and often fail to survive.

Wietzke, for his part, uses newly available household income data from developing countries to document a small but statistically significant effect of lagged poverty rates on a range of democracy indicators, an effect stronger than that of average income or of inequality. The mechanisms are not hard to see. In impoverished nations and societies, economic dislocation, the scarcity of essential public goods and the pressures of daily survival render political institutions fragile and prone to breakdown, opening the way to military coups or authoritarian takeovers. In high-poverty settings, voters are also inclined towards short-term benefits such as food, small sums of cash or protection rather than long-term systemic reform, which carries populist or rent-seeking political actors into power and into control of the state apparatus. Wietzke's results thus point to more structural obstacles to democratic consolidation in lower-income regions, such as the tendency of populist leaders to exploit the economic grievances of vulnerable lower-middle classes.[12]

To further understand the dynamics that foster democratic backsliding, the paper uses the Vicious Circle of Poverty Theory, which explains that poor countries and individuals remain poor because poverty itself creates conditions that prevent economic growth, irrespective of the governance model in play. The economist Ragnar Nurkse introduced this concept in 1953 to explain why underdeveloped nations struggle to advance.[13] The theory describes a self-reinforcing cycle in which poverty persists from one generation to the next because the factors that cause poverty are both the result and the cause of further poverty. In other words, poor individuals or countries remain poor because their poverty creates conditions that make it very difficult to escape. This scenario carries over into democracy and explains the quagmire: however attractive the ideals and strengths of democracy, the inherent cyclical effects of poverty will prevent it from thriving.[14]

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[12] *Id.* at 935.

[13] Thorakkal Shamim, *Nurkse's Model of Vicious Circle of Poverty Theory: Is It Applicable for Dental Profession in India*, 11 J. FAM. MED. & PRIMARY CARE 1221 (2022), https://doi.org/10.4103/jfmpc.jfmpc_660_21; *see* RAGNAR NURKSE, PROBLEMS OF CAPITAL FORMATION IN UNDERDEVELOPED COUNTRIES (1953).

[14] *But see* P.T. Bauer, *The Vicious Circle of Poverty*, 95 WELTWIRTSCHAFTLICHES ARCHIV 4 (1965), http://www.jstor.org/stable/40436342 (questioning the thesis).

IV. BACKSLIDING DEMOCRACY

Democratic backsliding is a process of declining integrity of democratic values or institutions in a political system, and it occurs when states become gradually less democratic over time.[15] When democratic institutions such as the judiciary, the legislature, the media and electoral systems, or democratic practices and norms, are incrementally eroded and dismantled, leading to a decline in the institutional quality of democracy, democratic backsliding is setting in.[16] Unlike an outright military coup, democratic backsliding occurs "legally" and gradually from within, driven by elected incumbents and political actors who use the law to accumulate power, weaken democratic institutions and neutralise the opposition. Over the past three decades, this tendency has received significant scholarly attention as instances of backsliding emerged in Africa, Eastern Europe, Latin America and even established democracies such as the United States of America.[17]

Waldner and Lust[18] view democratic backsliding as a "deterioration of qualities associated with democratic governance, within any regime," while Bermeo[19] posits that democratic backsliding is manifest when political institutions that help sustain democracy are eliminated or undermined. Distinguishing it from full-blown authoritarianism, Meyerrose[20] argues that democratic backsliding takes two forms. First, incumbent office-holders subvert the separation of powers, capture the judiciary and weaken the press and civil society. Secondly, they tinker with, manipulate or change electoral and voting laws, limit media access in favour of the ruling elite and tilt the political playing field in their favour. To Bellamy, Kröger and Lorimer,[21] however, democratic backsliding involves a scenario in which a government departs from democratic tenets by suppressing the opposition and refusing to tolerate criticism. Finally,

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[15] CARNEGIE COUNCIL FOR ETHICS IN INT'L AFFS., *Democratic Backsliding*, https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/explore-engage/key-terms/democratic-backsliding; Meg Russell, Alan Renwick & Lisa James, *What Is Democratic Backsliding, and Is the UK at Risk?* (Constitution Unit Briefing, 2022), https://www.ucl.ac.uk/social-historical-sciences/sites/social_historical_sciences/files/backsliding_-_final_1.pdf.

[16] Edoardo Grillo, Zhaotian Luo, Monika Nalepa & Carlo Prato, *Theories of Democratic Backsliding*, 27 ANN. REV. POL. SCI. 381 (2024), https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-041322-025352; ADAM PRZEWORSKI, CRISES OF DEMOCRACY (2019).

[17] STEVEN LEVITSKY & DANIEL ZIBLATT, HOW DEMOCRACIES DIE (2018); Nancy Bermeo, *On Democratic Backsliding*, 27 J. DEMOCRACY 5 (2016), https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0012; Press Release, V-DEM INST., Democratic Backsliding Reaches Western Democracies, with U.S. Decline "Unprecedented" (Mar. 17, 2026), https://www.v-dem.net/news/press-release-democratic-backsliding-reaches-western-democracies-with-us-decline-unprecedented/.

[18] David Waldner & Ellen Lust, *Unwelcome Change: Coming to Terms with Democratic Backsliding*, 21 ANN. REV. POL. SCI. 93 (2018), https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-050517-114628.

[19] Bermeo, *supra* note 17.

[20] Anna M. Meyerrose, *Democratic Backsliding*, *in* ANNA M. MEYERROSE, ERODING DEMOCRACY FROM THE OUTSIDE IN: INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS AND DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING 20 (2025), https://doi.org/10.1093/9780197816479.003.0002.

[21] Richard Bellamy, Sandra Kröger & Marta Lorimer, *Party Views on Democratic Backsliding and Differentiated Integration*, 37 E. EUR. POL. & SOC'YS 563 (2023), https://doi.org/10.1177/08883254221096168.

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proposing a concept rooted in a rigorous discussion of democracy itself, Jee, Lueders and Myrick[22] consider democratic backsliding to be any change in a political community's formal or informal rules that reduces that community's ability to guarantee freedom of choice, freedom from tyranny or equality in freedom.

According to Pinckney and Trilling,[23] James[24] and Sobreira,[25] the mechanisms commonly employed to achieve democratic backsliding include dismantling the institutional pillars of democracy by using autocratic-leaning public bureaucrats to subvert systems, processes, procedures and laws, with the promise of shielding them from accountability. Other mechanisms include legal manipulation through emergency powers, constitutional amendments or administrative overhauls to weaken democratically instituted constraints; delegitimising pro-democracy elements in the body politic by fuelling polarisation and isolating them for victimisation; and, finally, administrative capture, by conscripting pliable public administrators and civil servants to serve partisan agendas rather than to uphold democratic values.

The prevailing literature converges on one key point: democratic backsliding often occurs gradually, as a "death by a thousand cuts" or, as Haggard and Kaufman put it, as the "incremental erosion of institutions, rules, and norms that results from the actions of duly elected governments,"[26] hidden under legal trappings that make it difficult for most citizens to detect and resist. Effective resistance therefore requires robust institutions, a vigilant and vibrant press and civil society, and international support for democratic norms.

V. Poverty

Poverty is the socio-economic condition of lacking the financial resources and essentials necessary to achieve a minimum standard of living. It includes the inability to afford basic human needs such as housing, clean water, food and medical care. The World Bank[27] defines poverty as the inability to attain a minimal standard of living, that is, the inability of a society

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[22] Haemin Jee, Hans Lueders & Rachel Myrick, *Towards a Unified Approach to Research on Democratic Backsliding*, 29 Democratization 754 (2022), https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2021.2010709.

[23] Jonathan Pinckney & Claire Trilling, *Breaking Down Pillars of Support for Democratic Backsliding* (2024) (unpublished manuscript), https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.31277.70883.

[24] Toby S. James, *Democracy, Public Administration, and Democratic Backsliding*, 47 Pol'y Stud. 737 (2026), https://doi.org/10.1080/01442872.2025.2521170.

[25] David Sobreira, *How Courts Die*, 50 Vt. L. Rev. 18 (2025), https://ssrn.com/abstract=5218322, http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5218322.

[26] Stephan Haggard & Robert Kaufman, *The Anatomy of Democratic Backsliding*, 32 J. Democracy 27 (2021), https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2021.0050.

[27] Benoit Decerf, *Absolute and Relative Poverty Measurement: A Survey* (World Bank, Policy Research Working Paper No. 10008, 2022), https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099718004182241161/pdf/IDU00220e87405568049f40b4e405d19302f1978.pdf; World Bank, World Development Report 1990: Poverty (1990), http://hdl.handle.net/10986/5973.

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or of individuals to meet basic needs such as food, shelter, healthcare, education and other non-physical amenities. Poverty is a complex concept with multiple dimensions, broadly categorised into two main types: absolute poverty and relative poverty.

Absolute poverty exists when a person's income is too low to meet fundamental human survival needs, such as a minimum daily caloric intake, and falls below the benchmark stipulated by global organisations; it includes circumstances in which individuals lack the minimum finances necessary to maintain basic living standards, such as food, clean water, shelter and clothing.[28] The World Bank's international poverty line, used to measure absolute poverty globally, was set at $2.15 a day in 2022 and was raised to $3.00 a day in June 2025.[29]

Relative poverty, on the other hand, occurs when a person or household is unable to meet the average living standards of the society or community in which they reside. This type of poverty is measured in comparison with the economic status of others within the same society. For instance, an individual may be regarded as poor if their income is significantly lower than the national average, despite having enough resources to meet basic needs. This concept draws attention to social inequalities and disparities in access to opportunities.[30] Economists typically set the relative poverty benchmark at a percentage of a country's median income. In the European Union, for example, people earning less than 60 per cent of the national median income are classified as being at risk of poverty.[31]

VI. The Prevalence of Poverty in Africa

Around 439 million people in Africa, more than a quarter of the continent's population, live in extreme poverty, surviving on less than $2.15 a day, the line used in these estimates.[32] Sub-Saharan Africa has the world's highest extreme poverty rates and is home to nine of the ten countries with the highest extreme poverty rates in the world.[33] The World Bank's *Poverty, Prosperity, and Planet Report 2024* shows that the number of people living in extreme poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa has grown substantially, from 282 million in 1990 to an estimated 464 million in 2024, even though the share of the region's population in extreme poverty fell from

[28] Decerf, *supra* note 27.
[29] World Bank, *June 2025 Update to Global Poverty Lines* (June 5, 2025), https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/factsheet/2025/06/05/june-2025-update-to-global-poverty-lines (announcing "a new international poverty line of $3.00 per person per day, which replaces the previous $2.15 poverty line").
[30] S. Ramphoma, *Understanding Poverty: Causes, Effects and Characteristics*, 13 Interim: Interdisc. J. 59 (2014), https://cutscholar.cut.ac.za/items/8d18b6be-069c-4979-ac9e-d477ed735fa2.
[31] J. Dvorak, *European Union Definition of Poverty*, *in* The SAGE Encyclopedia of World Poverty (Mehmet Odekon ed., 2d ed. 2015), https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483345727.n270.
[32] Statista, *supra* note 5.
[33] World Bank, Poverty, Prosperity, and Planet Report 2024: Pathways Out of the Polycrisis 59 (2024), https://doi.org/10.1596/978-1-4648-2123-3 (Sub-Saharan Africa "is home to two-thirds of the global extreme poor and 9 of the 10 countries with the highest extreme poverty rates in the world as of 2024").

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54.6 per cent to 36.5 per cent over the same period.[34] The African Development Bank likewise finds that poverty in Africa increased until about 1993 and fell thereafter, although the gap between Africa and other developing regions widened over the same period.[35]

Sub-Saharan Africa bears the brunt of these statistics: in 2022, 46 per cent of its rural population and 20 per cent of its urban residents lived in extreme poverty. The region accounts for about 16 per cent of the world's population but is home to 67 per cent of the people living in extreme poverty worldwide.[36] Nigeria, the most populous country on the continent with an estimated 242 million people, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo bear the largest burden, accounting for 12 per cent and 11.7 per cent of the global extreme poverty population, respectively.[37]

VII. Correlation between poverty and democratic backsliding

While democratic backsliding is a complex process driven by multiple variables, poverty occasioned by severe economic hardship continues to act as a primary catalyst of it, as it steadily corrodes the base and undermines the core pillars required to sustain a healthy democracy. Poverty does this in several ways.

A. Democratic divestment

The active and popular participation of the citizenry is the essence of democracy. It ensures fidelity in the way and manner in which citizens are governed, and it secures their civil rights and liberties against infringement or abridgement by the government they elect. Democracy is about the people: it revolves around the people, exists for the people and is centred on the people. This requires that all demographic sections of the populace, regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion or socio-economic status, have a place at the democratic table and the capacity to make their voices heard equally.[38] For the people to exercise their sovereignty truly and to ensure that democracy serves their welfare and interests, they must be empowered and capable of fulfilling their civic responsibilities.

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[34] *Id.* at 94–95 tbls. 1D.1–1D.2 (extreme poverty at $2.15 a day in Sub-Saharan Africa: 54.6 per cent and 282 million people in 1990; 36.5 per cent and 464 million people in 2024).

[35] African Dev. Bank, *Poverty Has Declined in Africa, but Remains High*, *in* African Development Report 2015: Growth, Poverty and Inequality Nexus: Overcoming Barriers to Sustainable Development ch. 2, at 28 (2016), https://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Publications/ADR15_chapter_2.pdf.

[36] World Bank, *supra* note 33, at 59, 74.

[37] Statista, *supra* note 5; U.N. Dep't of Econ. & Soc. Affs., Population Div., World Population Prospects 2024 (medium-variant estimate of 242.4 million for Nigeria in mid-2026).

[38] Tii N. Nchofoung, Simplice A. Asongu, Vanessa S. Tchamyou & Ofeh M. Edoh, *Gender, Political Inclusion, and Democracy in Africa: Some Empirical Evidence*, 51 Pol. & Pol'y 137 (2023), https://doi.org/10.1111/polp.12505.

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Without the active, robust and continuous involvement of the citizenry, democracy risks becoming a mere theoretical concept, an ideal that serves the interests of elites and the political class. Citizen engagement provides the legitimacy, accountability and defence required to entrench constitutionalism and to ensure that governmental powers remain firmly limited by the rule of law.[39] To build a thriving constitutional democracy, citizens can take actions that range from mandatory obligations to voluntary responsibilities. Popular participation in the democratic process takes both conventional and unconventional forms. These include joining or forming political parties and running for office to influence policies, political agendas and decision-making; taking part in discussions, forums or public consultations, which allows citizens to express opinions and shape public discourse; and advocacy initiatives, including organising or joining peaceful marches, boycotts and strikes to express positions on the direction of government policies and programmes.[40]

The germane question, therefore, is whether the prevalence of poverty and its outcomes in Africa permit the meaningful citizen participation in the political process that democracy requires and expects. One of the first unintended outcomes of poverty in Africa has been a pattern in which citizens retreat into survival mode: they prioritise immediate material outcomes over abstract democratic ideals, including political participation. As citizens retreat into survival mode, several outcomes become apparent. Statistics from Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, lend some support to this position. Table 1 sets out turnout at Nigeria's parliamentary elections, whose members are the core representatives of each locality, from the last election before independence to 2019, as recorded by International IDEA.[41] Turnout fell from 79.52 per cent in 1959 to 32.14 per cent in 2019, but the decline has not been steady: turnout rose in 1983, 1999, 2003 and 2015, and International IDEA records no parliamentary figure for 2007. The presidential series shows a sharper and more continuous fall, from 69.08 per cent in 2003 to 26.71 per cent in 2023.[42] Several reasons for this democratic divestment can be identified.

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[39] Adeejat Kolawole, *Good Governance, Constitutionalism and the Rule of Law: Imperatives for Sustainable Development in Nigeria*, 6 OIDA INT'L J. SUSTAINABLE DEV. 129 (2013), https://ssrn.com/abstract=2382402.

[40] POLSCI INST., *Understanding Political Theory: Exploring Conventional and Unconventional Political Participation* (2025), https://polsci.institute/understanding-political-theory/exploring-conventional-unconventional-political-participation/.

[41] INT'L INST. FOR DEMOCRACY & ELECTORAL ASSISTANCE, *Voter Turnout Database: Nigeria, Parliamentary Elections*, https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/question-country?question_id=9188&country=163&database_theme=293 (last visited Oct. 21, 2026) (no figure recorded for 2007).

[42] INT'L INST. FOR DEMOCRACY & ELECTORAL ASSISTANCE, *Voter Turnout Database: Nigeria, Presidential Elections*, https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/question-country?question_id=9189&country=163&database_theme=293 (last visited Oct. 21, 2026) (69.08 per cent in 2003, 57.49 per cent in 2007, 53.68 per cent in 2011, 43.65 per cent in 2015, 34.75 per cent in 2019 and 26.71 per cent in 2023).

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S/N	Year	Voter turnout
1	1959	79.52%
2	1979	32.34%
3	1983	38.90%
4	1999	40.69%
5	2003	49.32%
6	2007	No figure recorded
7	2011	28.66%
8	2015	43.65%
9	2019	32.14%

Table 1: Voter turnout in Nigeria's parliamentary elections, 1959–2019 (source: International IDEA, Voter Turnout Database)

First, in Africa, the financial cost of participating in politics or running for office, and the time required to engage in the political process, are prohibitive and heavily favour the rich and the elite. Party primaries, through which aspirants canvass for nomination and seek to secure a party's ticket, often require massive financial outlays. In many contexts, candidates must pay steep nomination fees or distribute large sums directly to party delegates to win primary elections.[43] Added to this are amorphous budgets for "logistics" that often mask funds allocated for bribing election officials, hiring security personnel or thugs, and direct vote-buying. In highly impoverished regions, voters frequently see elections as a rare chance to extract financial gains from politicians whom they may not see again until the next election cycle.[44]

In addition, political actors seeking the support of citizens come under a stream of relentless demands, year-round, to finance personal needs, local projects and social services (for example, burials, weddings and community infrastructure) in order to maintain their support base.[45] These huge financial outlays are a severe barrier to the participation of poor citizens in politics and leave the space to the elite and the financially strong members of society, thus narrowing the political space. Poverty diminishes the ability of individuals to participate meaningfully in democratic processes, such as voting or running for office, and so undermines the constitutional principles of representation and equality.

[43] Mathias Hounkpe & Olivier Bucyana, *Africa: Money and Politics – Friends or Foes?*, AFRICA AT LSE (Oct. 21, 2014), https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2014/10/21/africa-money-and-politics-friends-or-foes/; *see also* WESTMINSTER FOUND. FOR DEMOCRACY, *Cost of Politics: West Africa*, https://costofpolitics.net/west-africa (noting that "in some cases candidates are helping to fund parties by purchasing nomination forms").

[44] G.S. Mmaduabuchi Okeke & Uche Nwali, *Campaign Funding Laws and the Political Economy of Money Politics in Nigeria*, 47 REV. AFR. POL. ECON. 238 (2020), https://doi.org/10.1080/03056244.2019.1699043.

[45] Westminster Found. for Democracy, *supra* note 43; WESTMINSTER FOUND. FOR DEMOCRACY, *Cost of Politics: East and Southern Africa*, https://costofpolitics.net/east-and-southern-africa; MONEY IN POLITICS: A STUDY OF PARTY FINANCING PRACTICES IN 22 COUNTRIES (Shari Bryan & Denise Baer eds., 2005).

Secondly, beyond contesting elections, poverty constrains the power and reach of advocacy, which is central to the vitality of democracy. Advocacy here refers to the ability of ordinary citizens to organise, advocate and hold leaders accountable. Without a robust and empowered middle class, often regarded as the foundation of democratic stability, there are fewer advocates for reform and transparency. For democracy to function effectively, citizens must be well informed and capable of evaluating complex policy and governance issues thoughtfully. In the absence of strong civic education and literacy, public debate is inhibited, and conversation shifts from substantive, issue-focused dialogue to personality-driven conflicts, narrow self-interest and tribalism. Marginalised and poor communities typically lack the organisation and the means to demand constitutional compliance.[46]

Thirdly, the lack of basic educational opportunities for the poor and vulnerable members of society severely limits their ability to participate meaningfully in the political space, and leaves some of them open to recruitment by political actors as thugs and instigators of electoral violence. Low levels of education and high levels of illiteracy, which remain widespread in parts of Africa, hinder access to and appreciation of information on political developments and civic education, leaving marginalised groups less equipped to navigate complex political systems and to hold representatives accountable. For example, the adult literacy rate of Sub-Saharan Africa, home to the great majority of the continent's population, stood at about 69 per cent in 2024, against a world rate of about 88 per cent, a gap too large to ignore.[47] Low political literacy creates a vacuum in which decisions are easily monopolised by a few elite actors. When voters do not fully understand the limits of public office or how to demand transparency, opaque political financing and godfatherism thrive. Many impoverished individuals are unaware of their constitutional rights or of the procedural steps required to seek redress.

Fourthly, legal information and education are critical for persons who seek to know and effectively assert their rights, as they need to be aware of and understand the legal options open to them and the paths by which to navigate the judicial system and its processes. This is central to the thriving of democracy. Community-driven initiatives and adult legal literacy programmes are critical in ensuring that the poor have the tools and knowledge needed to access justice,[48] but

[46] OFF. OF THE U.N. HIGH COMM'R FOR HUM. RTS., *Draft Guidelines: A Human Rights Approach to Poverty Reduction Strategies* (Sept. 10, 2002), https://hrlibrary.umn.edu/instree/povertyreductionguidelines.html.

[47] WORLD BANK, *Literacy Rate, Adult Total (% of People Ages 15 and Above): Sub-Saharan Africa*, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.LITR.ZS?locations=ZG (68.7 per cent in 2024, against a world rate of 87.7 per cent on the same indicator); Štefan Karolčík, Juraj Steiner & Elena Čipková, *Politics and Political Literacy in Education from the Perspective of the Public*, 12 COGENT EDUC. 2457560 (2025), https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2025.2457560.

[48] Stephen Golub, *Beyond Rule of Law Orthodoxy: The Legal Empowerment Alternative* (Carnegie Endowment for Int'l Peace, Rule of Law Series Working Paper No. 41, 2003), https://gsdrc.org/document-library/beyond-rule-of

the literacy atlas of the continent is uneven, shaped by varying levels of government investment, disparities in access to education, educational infrastructure and resources, colonial legacies, and regional economic stability.

Fifthly, closely aligned to the lack of knowledge are prohibitive legal costs, a lack of access to counsel and complex court procedures. Access to justice for all citizens is a foundation of democracy and features prominently in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 16, which commits states to "[p]romote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels."[49] Serious barriers to access to justice in Africa include long delays in court cases, high costs, corruption, the complexity of legal processes, the lack of legal counsel and concerns about the fairness of the courts. Poor, uneducated and rural citizens are significantly more likely, in some cases more than twice as likely, to encounter these problems than their wealthier, better-educated or urban counterparts. A survey of 36 African countries brings this starkly to the fore: while some countries have made significant progress in providing access to justice, most still face substantial barriers.[50]

Finally, public defender and legal aid systems in Africa are frequently underfunded, which prevents indigent persons from securing adequate legal counsel. This limitation is compounded by a shortage of lawyers across the continent, the few there are being concentrated in urban areas, which hampers the efficacy of public defender and legal aid systems across Africa.[51] The result is often heavy caseloads, long pre-trial detention and broad inequities in access to a fair trial for indigent citizens.[52]

B. Erosion of institutional trust

When democratic governments fail to alleviate widespread economic hardship, citizens lose faith in the system's efficacy. First, widespread economic deprivation has eroded trust in democratic institutions and processes and, by extension, the legitimacy of political processes across Africa. Even though most African citizens still prefer democracy, pervasive poverty

-law-orthodoxy-the-legal-empowerment-alternative.

[49] G.A. Res. 70/1, *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, Goal 16 (Sept. 25, 2015).

[50] Carolyn Logan, *Ambitious SDG Goal Confronts Challenging Realities: Access to Justice Is Still Elusive for Many Africans* 1–3 (Afrobarometer Policy Paper No. 39, Mar. 2017), https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/ab_r6_policypaperno39_access_to_justice_in_africa_eng.pdf.

[51] U.N. OFF. ON DRUGS & CRIME, *Access to Legal Aid in Criminal Justice Systems in Africa: Survey Report* vii (2011), https://www.unodc.org/pdf/criminal_justice/Survey_Report_on_Access_to_Legal_Aid_in_Africa.pdf; Firdausi Kabir, *The Role of Legal Aid in Protecting Vulnerable Populations in Nigeria: A Public Law and Human Rights Perspective*, 3 NNAMDI AZIKIWE U. J.L. & CLINICAL LEGAL EDUC. 113, 117–18 (2026), https://www.journals.ezenwaohaetorc.org/index.php/NAU-JLCLE/article/view/3841.

[52] U.N. Off. on Drugs & Crime, *supra* note 51, at vii–viii.

undermines public trust in democratic institutions, and the resulting collapse of institutional trust invites the emergence of anti-democratic alternatives.[53]

When large segments of the population struggle to meet basic needs, they are more susceptible to promises of enticingly simple solutions, which the traditional leadership is unable to provide, from authoritarian leaders or populist movements. In such contexts, citizens may prioritise immediate material gains over abstract democratic principles, making them vulnerable to clientelism and vote-buying.[54]

Secondly, poverty aids democratic backsliding by rendering the poor susceptible to manipulation, vote-buying or disenfranchisement by elites and political actors. Economic desperation creates fertile ground for vote-buying, in which politicians exploit poverty by exchanging food, money or immediate financial favours for political support, undermining the integrity of democratic elections.[55] Finally, poverty heightens the vulnerability of the poor to coercion: when basic survival is at stake, democratic ideals are often replaced by a transactional politics of instant gratification, undermining the integrity of elections.[56]

Poverty also attracts populist autocrats who seek to capitalise opportunistically on the frustration and desperation of impoverished populations looking for quick fixes to their problems. These groups exist at the fringes of society and are highly receptive to populist or authoritarian leaders who promise rapid economic relief in exchange for concentrated power. The financial insecurity that accompanies poverty weakens trust in democratic systems and makes voters more open to charismatic leaders who make unrealistic promises to overturn the existing order.[57]

High poverty levels foster political clientelism, in which elites secure votes not by engaging voters through campaigns and debates about developmental issues but through targeted material favours in the form of food items, clothing and monetary inducements. Voters with limited

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[53] Mangena & Cloete, *supra* note 8.

[54] Isaac Oluwasegun Adeniyi, Olalekan Joshua Alagbe & Oluwaseun Esther Ijalana, *Vote Selling as a Survival Strategy: The Influence of Poverty and Food Insecurity on Electoral Behaviour in Nigeria* (2026) (unpublished manuscript), https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.14055.41123.

[55] Leena Koni Hoffmann & Raj Navanit Patel, *Vote-Selling Behaviour and Democratic Dissatisfaction in Nigeria* (Chatham House Research Paper, July 2022), https://doi.org/10.55317/9781784135348, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/07/vote-selling-behaviour-and-democratic-dissatisfaction-nigeria/research-findings; Mohammed Sirajo Baba & Abba Nuru Aliyu, *A Philosophical Analysis of the Impact of Poverty on Political Participation in the 2015 General Elections of Nigeria's Yola North Local Government Area, Adamawa State*, 6 INT'L J. SOC. SCI. & HUMANS. RSCH. 555, 561 (2018), https://www.researchpublish.com/papers/a-philosophical-analysis-of-the-impact-of-poverty-on-political-participation-in-the-2015-general-elections-of-nigerias-yola-north--local-government-area-adamawa-state.

[56] Masaaki Higashijima, Leontine Loeber, Holly Ann Garnett & Toby S. James, *Challenges of Electoral Integrity in an Era of Overlapping Crises*, 24 ELECTION L.J. 99 (2025), https://doi.org/10.1089/elj.2025.0007, https://ueaeprints.uea.ac.uk/id/eprint/99126/1/Introduction_special_issue_final.pdf.

[57] Hoffmann & Patel, *supra* note 55.

access to education and information, and weakened by poverty, are more exposed to misinformation, emotional appeals and vote-buying, and may give their votes in exchange for small material inducements.[58] Because of information asymmetry and the lack of access to alternative viewpoints, they often rely on word-of-mouth persuasion and rumour from local power brokers acting on behalf of politicians. This reduces elections to mere shows rather than developmental contests with long-term implications for society.

Fragile institutions and weak property rights regimes across Africa fuel poverty, and thus undermine democracy, by diverting investible funds away from social services and by causing capital flight in unpredictable investment climates. Strong institutions are the bedrock of democracy, providing essential stability through the rule of law, the separation of powers and public accountability.[59] Without them, governance relies on powerful individuals rather than on lasting rules. The outcomes of institutional fragility, such as corruption, a weak rule of law and ineffective governance, are themselves intricately linked to poverty. Poorly paid civil servants and bureaucrats may be more prone to corruption, while underfunded institutions lack the capacity to resist authoritarian encroachment.[60]

The bottom line is that those living in poverty are preoccupied primarily with securing immediate, basic survival needs: food, shelter, healthcare and safe drinking water. Most of their waking hours are spent managing limited resources and debt and avoiding sudden emergencies that could lead to financial ruin. Intangible rights, such as freedom of movement and freedom of speech, become distant philosophical trappings that do not attract the attention of those who must channel their energies towards daily survival.

VIII. Recommendation

As an ameliorative measure, this paper makes a case for making economic, social and cultural rights justiciable across the continent. Economic, social and cultural rights encompass the rights to adequate social security, food, housing, education and health, to take part in cultural life, to water and sanitation, and to work. These rights require proactive government action for their realisation. They differ from civil and political rights, which are traditionally framed as restraints on state interference rather than as claims to the provision of services. For civil and

[58] Diane Zovighian, *Clientelist Politics in Nigeria: Core Voters, Control and Compliance*, 200 World Dev. 107281 (2026), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2025.107281.
[59] James D. Bowen, *Rethinking Democratic Governance: State Building, Autonomy, and Accountability in Correa's Ecuador*, 7 J. Pol. Latin Am. 83 (2015), https://doi.org/10.1177/1866802X1500700103.
[60] Sheilagh Ogilvie & A.W. Carus, *Institutions and Economic Growth in Historical Perspective*, *in* 2 Handbook of Economic Growth 403 (Philippe Aghion & Steven N. Durlauf eds., 2014), https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-444-53538-2.00008-3.

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political rights (which include participation in the political and governance process) to have meaning, the citizen must be alive, well and fit to exercise them; hence the importance of economic, social and cultural rights.

Although these laudable rights appear in most constitutions on the continent, only a few countries have concretely elevated them from objectives to actionable, justiciable rights. Among the African countries that have entrenched economic, social and cultural rights in their national constitutions or whose courts have enforced them are South Africa, Kenya, Malawi, Uganda, Ethiopia and Ghana.[61] Elsewhere, as in Nigeria, where the Fundamental Objectives and Directive Principles of State Policy in Chapter II of the 1999 Constitution are non-justiciable, citizens are effectively shut out from taking direct steps to ensure that the government abides by, and provides, these rights.[62] The justiciability of economic, social and cultural rights serves as a trigger that has the real potential to empower citizens to become civically relevant and informed actors in the democratic space, and to strengthen their hands in protecting democracy.

If made justiciable, economic, social and cultural rights would oblige the state to take measures that reduce poverty to a minimum. The enforcement of socio-economic rights remains central to ensuring that government provides adequate standards of living for the vulnerable and the poor in society. This will in no small way position citizens to be politically responsible, to take their rightful place as civic-minded members of society, and to take informed and participatory steps to strengthen democracy and thereby halt democratic backsliding in Africa.

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[61] S. AFR. CONST., 1996, ss. 26–27; *Gov't of the Republic of S. Afr. v. Grootboom* 2001 (1) SA 46 (CC) (S. Afr.) (holding that the state's housing programme failed to make reasonable provision for people in desperate need); *Minister of Health v. Treatment Action Campaign (No. 2)* 2002 (5) SA 721 (CC) (S. Afr.) (ordering the state to extend nevirapine to prevent mother-to-child transmission of HIV); CONSTITUTION OF KENYA (2010), art. 43; *Mitu-Bell Welfare Soc'y v. Kenya Airports Auth.*, Petition No. 3 of 2018, [2021] KESC 34 (KLR) (Sup. Ct. Kenya Jan. 11, 2021) (on the enforcement of the right to accessible and adequate housing under article 43(1)(b) and the courts' power to issue structural interdicts); CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF MALAWI (1994), ss. 13, 25, 30; CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF UGANDA (1995), arts. 8A, 30; *Ctr. for Health, Hum. Rts. & Dev. (CEHURD) v. Att'y Gen.*, Constitutional Petition No. 16 of 2011 (Const. Ct. Uganda Aug. 19, 2020) (holding that the state's failure to provide basic maternal health services in public health facilities violated the rights to health and to life); CONSTITUTION OF THE FEDERAL DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF ETHIOPIA (1995), arts. 41, 90; CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF GHANA (1992), arts. 24–25 & ch. 6; *Ghana Lotto Operators Ass'n v. Nat'l Lottery Auth.*, Ref. No. J6/1/2008 (Sup. Ct. Ghana July 23, 2008) (treating the Directive Principles of State Policy in chapter 6 as presumptively justiciable). At the regional level, *see Soc. & Econ. Rts. Action Ctr. v. Nigeria*, Commc'n No. 155/96, Afr. Comm'n on Hum. & Peoples' Rts. (Oct. 27, 2001) (finding Nigeria in violation of, *inter alia*, articles 16 and 24 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights).

[62] CONSTITUTION OF THE FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF NIGERIA (1999), § 6(6)(c); University Edih & Basil Ganagana, *Justiciable or Non-Justiciable Rights: A Debate on Socio-Economic and Political Rights in Nigeria*, 8 GLOB. J. POL. & L. RSCH. 78 (2020), https://eajournals.org/gjplr/vol-8-issue-4-july-2020/justiciable-or-non-justiciable-rights-a-debate-on-socio-economic-and-political-rights-in-nigeria/.

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IX. Conclusion

Within the African context, poverty is not simply one of many factors contributing to democratic backsliding; it is the root condition from which other problems often emerge. Addressing poverty is therefore essential not only for improving living standards but also for safeguarding and entrenching democratic governance. For democracy to be meaningful and effective for the majority of citizens who live on the fringes of society, it must address the barriers that poverty creates and ensure that rights and protections are accessible to all members of society. Without tackling poverty, the promises of democracy will be hollow, and efforts to halt democratic backsliding are likely to be undercut as inequality persists and citizens are excluded from real participation by the social and political vulnerabilities that poverty produces.

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