

Tracing the path to democratic governance in South Africa and Ethiopia: a comparative policy analysis

Transforming
Government:
People, Process
and Policy

203

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to investigate the dynamics of democratic governance in South Africa and Ethiopia within the framework of Africa Agenda 2063 (AA2063), including how political polarisation and populism shape the democratisation process.

Design/methodology/approach – A mixed-methods approach integrates quantitative analysis using the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) data set with qualitative case studies from South Africa and Ethiopia. Cohort analysis, comparative analysis and descriptive statistics revealed patterns and trends in democratic transformation, how groups evolve over time and the momentum needed for both countries to achieve the goals of AA2063.

Findings – This study found that the political landscapes of South Africa and Ethiopia are significantly shaped by the emergence of democracy, political polarisation and populist parties. Considering the 10-year expected outcomes outlined in AA2063, the findings show that South Africa achieved 84% of its 10-year

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Future research directions: One potential avenue for future research is the African Union's role in democratisation. Given the focus on Agenda 2063, future studies could evaluate the role of regional organisations, particularly through an in-depth examination of the effectiveness of mechanisms such as the African Peer Review Mechanism in supporting democratic governance and promoting political reform.



democratic governance policy goals, whereas Ethiopia reached only 25%. South Africa, despite demonstrating a strong commitment to clean elections, has experienced significant political polarisation and the rise of populist movements. In Ethiopia, the shift towards one-man governance has significantly diverted the country's trajectory from liberal democratic aspirations to undemocratic practices.

Practical implications – The findings provide actionable policy recommendations aimed at building resilient democracy against political polarisation and populism.

Social implications – This study highlights the vital role of informed citizens in safeguarding democratic practices.

Originality/value – This study makes a significant contribution through a rigorous comparison of democratic practices in South Africa and Ethiopia by elucidating the critical factors that shape their differing levels of democratic maturity. The analysis uncovers the impact of political polarisation and populism on governance by employing a comprehensive array of democratic indicators to provide a nuanced understanding of these dynamics.

Keywords Africa Agenda 2063, Electoral democracy, Liberal democracy, Participatory democracy, Deliberative democracy, Egalitarian democracy

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

On a global scale, we are collectively grappling with a series of overlapping political, economic and environmental crises (Peters, 2021; De Marchi and Gereffi, 2023). These crises manifest through geopolitical shifts, declining global cooperation and rising political polarisation. The threats of climate change, potential pandemics, rapid urbanisation and digital transformation present challenges and opportunities for sustainable development. These crises overshadow democracy as authoritarianism, populism and political polarisation increase. The 2023V-Dem Project report revealed that global democracy has declined to 1986 levels, indicating that the democratic gains of the past 35 years have been “wiped out” (V-Dem, 2023). Africa, like the rest of the world, faces these challenges (Bartlett, 2024; Gebrihet and Eidsvik, 2024).

After gaining independence, many African countries adopted democratic governance influenced by global democratic trends, economic pressures and internal demands for reform from civil society organisations (Ikuenobe, 2017; Gebrihet and Eidsvik, 2024). However, varied experiences with democracy have sparked discussions on alternative governance models (Cilliers, 2021). These debates emphasise the need to develop governance models that can provide more effective and inclusive responses to complex national, continental and global challenges. This focus is reflected in Aspiration 3 of AA2063, adopted in 2015 (African Union, 2015b), which symbolises African governments' renewed commitment to the Pan-African Vision of Democratic Transformation, including in nations such as South Africa and Ethiopia (Viswanathan, 2018).

Despite their differing histories, South Africa and Ethiopia face similar challenges in their democratisation journeys. South Africa's fight against apartheid has shaped its democratic path (Masipa, 2018). The country has made strides in localising AA2063 and integrating its goals into national development plans. Similarly, Ethiopia has progressed in implementing AA2063, showing improvements in Gross National Income per capita and energy generation (Ali *et al.*, 2024). However, political polarisation and populist parties, often framed as “Us” versus “Them”, remain significant obstacles to democratisation in both countries (Fölscher *et al.*, 2021; Michielsen, 2022).

Analysing these complexities is crucial for understanding the effects of political polarisation and populist parties on democratic governance in South Africa and Ethiopia. South Africa's apartheid legacy has entrenched racial and economic divides that populist

rhetoric often exacerbates (Masipa, 2018; van Zyl-Hermann, 2018). This polarisation fuels the rise of populist parties seeking political traction. Ethiopia's ethnic diversity is also marked by ongoing conflicts that populist parties exploit to foster division and unrest (Michielsen, 2022; Sahledengil and Amsalu, 2023). The rise of polarisation and populism in both countries creates volatile environments that challenge democratic governance, highlighting critical dynamics relevant to the African Union's Agenda 2063.

A growing body of literature on AA2063 has explored its origins (Viswanathan, 2018), its relationship with tourism growth (Gowreesunkar, 2019), governance (Nwebo, 2018), connections to Sustainable Development Goals (Garfias Royo *et al.*, 2022), challenges to development (Ogbonnaya, 2016), contributions to economic growth (Opeyeoluwa and Fatokun, 2022) and significance for youth political participation (Amupanda, 2018). Other studies have examined public trust, corruption and tax mobilisation in relation to AA2063 (Gebrihet *et al.*, 2024), political polarisation and public trust (Gebrihet and Mwale, 2024) and the progress and challenges of democracy in Africa (Gebrihet and Eidsvik, 2024). Despite these insights, empirical research on the practical implementation of AA2063 aspirations at a national level is limited. Most existing literature focuses on broad goals or specific case studies without addressing the gap between policy and practice.

This study examines the 10-year democratic governance journey of South Africa and Ethiopia, using Aspiration 3 of AA2063 as a benchmark, and evaluates the integration of these objectives into their national development plans. The study underscores how populist movements and political polarisation hinder democratic progress in these countries. Using the V-Dem data set complemented by qualitative cases, it presents a more nuanced understanding of democratic processes and challenges in both countries.

This study provides valuable theoretical, practical and social insights by comparing the democratic practices in South Africa and Ethiopia. It draws on a wide range of democratic indicators to explore how democracy has evolved in both countries. This study offers insights into the impact of political polarisation and populism on governance and democratic stability. It provides policy recommendations for addressing gaps in democratic practices, especially in Ethiopia, with a focus on the suppression of opposition parties and civil liberties. It also raises public awareness and encourages citizens to advocate for more democratic governance.

2. Literature review

2.1 *The conceptual foundation of democratic governance*

The term "democracy" originates from the Greek word *demokratía*, meaning "rule of the people" (Hansen, 1992). It signifies a governance system in which power lies with the people, exercised directly or through elected representatives, with political power derived from people's will (Ehrenberg, 1950). This definition has been debated since ancient Greece, focusing on three main issues (Sheehan, 2015): who qualifies as "the people", the conditions necessary for democracy, and whether it should extend beyond politics to areas such as family and the workplace. However, these discussions have yielded no definitive resolution.

While definitions and practices of democracy vary across cultures, essential elements such as free and fair elections, accountability, transparency and the protection of human rights are universally recognised as the hallmarks of a democratic system. Several factors influence the development and sustainability of democracy, including the historical context, socioeconomic conditions, cultural factors and the institutional framework. International influence can either encourage or hinder democratic progress.

Democratisation is a political process aimed at transforming states and political societies (Osaghae, 1997). In Africa, the first formal liberal democracy emerged from colonial

legislation (Taylor, 2018). However, many African leaders post-independence have altered or abolished these institutions, leading to one-party systems. While political changes have occurred, the quality of democracies in Africa has varied, often with democratic values remaining shallow.

Democracy has profound implications, fostering accountability, transparency and reducing corruption. It empowers citizens to voice their concerns, influences policymaking and contributes to social cohesion and sustainable economic growth, offering mechanisms for peaceful conflict resolution.

To assess democratic governance, V-Dem categorised over 400 indicators into five dimensions: electoral, liberal, egalitarian, deliberative and participatory (Coppedge *et al.*, 2024). The electoral dimension examines the representative selection processes, stressing free and fair elections. The liberal dimension focuses on protecting civil liberty. The egalitarian dimension promotes equal opportunities for marginalised groups. The deliberative dimension encourages public discourse, whereas the participatory dimension highlights active citizen involvement beyond elections. Together, these dimensions provide a framework for assessing democratic governance, as discussed in detail in this study's findings and discussion.

This study aims to examine the state of democratisation in South Africa and Ethiopia during the first ten years of AA2063, employing a common definition of democracy in which political power resides with the people, ensuring equal participation (African Union, 2015a).

2.2 *The theoretical foundation of transition to democracy*

Theories of democratic transition offer valuable insights into the complex processes leading up from authoritarian rule to democratic governance. These theories can be classified based on their focus on domestic factors (political, economic or cultural) or international influence (Munck, 2015). Since the 1980s, there has been greater emphasis on political explanations and political actors' choices, moving away from the economic and sociological focus of the 1960s' theories. Treisman (2020) posed the question: how does democracy emerge from authoritarian rule? He categorises transitions into three types: "deliberate democratisation, unintended but unavoidable democratisation, and democratisation by mistake."

Deliberate democratisation occurs when existing elites choose to shift towards democracy, motivated by various factors such as fair resource distribution, preventing revolutions or seeking international aid. This type accounted for approximately 34% of the first wave of democratisation (1828–1926), 25% of the second wave (1926–1962) and 21% of the third wave (from 1962). Unintended but unavoidable democratisation occurs when a leader attempts to prevent democratisation but ultimately fails. This type constitutes approximately 7% of the first wave, 7% of the second wave and 1% of the third wave (Treisman, 2020). For example, a leader might seek to consolidate power but encounter challenges that lead to democratisation, illustrating the dynamic interplay between political forces. Democratisation by mistake occurs when elites fail to prevent democratisation because of errors influenced by domestic outsiders, regime insiders or international actors. This transition made up approximately 59% of the first wave, 68% of the second wave and 79% of the third wave.

In many African countries, democratic reform aligns with Treisman's typology. The negotiated transitions from apartheid in South Africa during the 1990s, Malawi (1993–4) and Comoros (1991–2000) exemplify deliberate democratisation (Svåsand, 2011; Stokke, 2018; Sanches, 2020; Treisman, 2020). By contrast, the power shift in Ethiopia in 1991 represents an unintended transition (Fiseha, 2021), with similar unintentional transitions occurring in Mali in 1991, in Senegal 2000 and in Kenya in 2002 (Treisman, 2020).

These theories provide valuable insights into the pathways and challenges involved in establishing resilient democratic institutions, which are crucial for achieving the goals outlined in AA2063. A brief overview of these aspirations appears in Section 2.3.

2.3 Comparative analysis of democratic transitions in South Africa and Ethiopia

The African Union reaffirmed its commitment to Africa's development through AA2063, launched in 2013, which envisions the continent as a global powerhouse by 2063. As indicated in Figure 1, the African Union aims to achieve seven aspirations. Aspiration 1 promotes inclusive growth and poverty eradication, whereas Aspiration 2 seeks political unity based on pan-African ideals. Aspiration 3 emphasises good governance, human rights and the rule of law, whereas Aspiration 4 focuses on peace and security. Aspiration 5 celebrates cultural identity, Aspiration 6 encourages active participation, particularly of women and youth and Aspiration 7 aims for resilient, united Africa.

Within this broader continental vision, South Africa and Ethiopia represent contrasting case studies of democratic transitions, each embodying different pathways, challenges and outcomes in their quest for governance. South Africa's journey began in the early 1990s with the end of apartheid (Masipa, 2018). The 1994 elections saw Nelson Mandela elected as the first black president (Lodge, 1995), symbolising a commitment to racial equality and democracy. The 1996 constitution enshrined rights and established a democratic framework.



Source: Figure courtesy of African Union Watch (2019)

Figure 1. The seven Aspirations of the Africa Agenda 2063

Civil society and independent media have played vital roles in holding governments accountable and advocating for reforms (Wasserman, 2020). However, significant challenges remain, including corruption and mismanagement, which undermine public trust in governmental institutions.

Ethiopia's political history includes constitutions adopted in 1931, 1955, 1987 and 1995, each aimed at modernising governance (Ayferam, 2015). The 1931 and 1955 constitutions maintained autocratic rule under Emperor Haile Selassie. The 1987 Constitution sought to introduce socialism under the Derg, but ultimately failed due to repression and civil war. Following Derg's fall in 1991, the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia was established, introducing a federal system to accommodate diverse ethnic groups. The 1995 Constitution enshrined federalism and ethnic autonomy, yet challenges such as ethnic tensions and violent conflict persist, threatening democratic progress (Jima, 2023).

Both countries demonstrated significant progress towards democratic governance while grappling with issues such as corruption, ethnic tensions and political instability. Their experiences reflect varied motivations and challenges in democratic transitions, aligning with Treisman's typology and the goals of the African Agenda 2063 for good governance. This study seeks to understand how political polarisation and the rise of populist parties impact democratic advancements in South Africa and Ethiopia. Despite these challenges, ongoing efforts to establish and maintain democratic governance highlight the complex nature of democratisation processes, making it crucial to understand these dynamics to promote stability and democratic principles in Africa.

3. Method and materials

This study is based on a case study design and adopts a mixed-methods approach integrating quantitative analysis with qualitative case studies to examine the trends of democracy in South Africa and Ethiopia within the AA2063 framework. The mixed-methods approach allows for a detailed exploration of both statistical data and in-depth contextual analysis, providing a more nuanced understanding of how democratic transformations unfold in each country.

3.1 Source and nature of data

This study relies largely on the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) data set, which captures insights from local and international experts on democratic indicators. The V-Dem data set is a robust and reliable source of data that has been carefully gathered and coded by over 3,700 local and cross-national experts (Coppedge *et al.*, 2024). This data set spans 1900–2023 and includes over 400 indicators related to electoral, liberal, egalitarian, deliberative and participatory democracy. The indicators were scored between 0 and 1, representing varying degrees of democracy for each country. The use of V-Dem data is particularly appropriate for this study as it offers a wide-ranging and detailed assessment of democratic components that are key to understanding how South Africa and Ethiopia align with the goals of AA2063.

In addition to quantitative data from V-Dem, qualitative cases were integrated to complement the statistical findings. These qualitative cases draw on secondary sources such as government reports, policy documents and expert analyses of the political situation in each country.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

No field research has been conducted to collect quantitative data directly. Instead, data for this study were obtained from the V-Dem database, which provides publicly accessible secondary data. Several techniques were used to analyse the data. Initially, cohort and comparative analyses examined the patterns of democratic transformation over the decade in

both countries. Descriptive statistics were used to assess the rate of change and estimate the momentum required for achieving AA2063 goals using the current pace as a reference. The analysis focuses on five dimensions of democracy—electoral, liberal, egalitarian, deliberative and participatory—aligned with Aspiration 3 of AA2063.

Moreover, qualitative cases delve into political challenges such as polarisation and populism, enriching quantitative findings with context-specific insights. Using content analysis of secondary sources, such as government reports, policy documents and scholarly findings, qualitative analysis unpacks the nuances of polarisation and populism. Conducted after the quantitative analysis to support and contextualise the statistical results, the qualitative cases provide a detailed understanding of the democratic landscapes in South Africa and Ethiopia.

3.3 Study term

The research period spans 2014–2023, offering a 10-year timeframe for assessing democratic transformation in both countries. This period aligns with the first 10-year implementation phase of AA2063, allowing for a focused examination of the progress made in relation to the aspirations of the agenda.

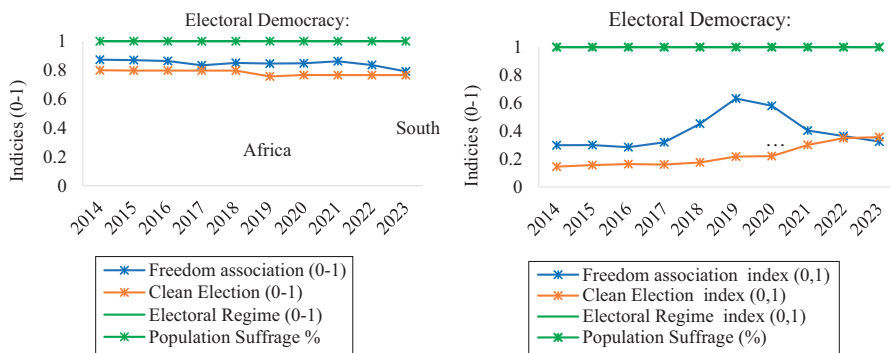
4. Findings and discussions

This section addresses the transformation of the five dimensions of democracy in both countries.

4.1 Trends in the transformation of electoral democracy: South Africa and Ethiopia

Figure 2 provides a comparative analysis of the electoral democracy components in South Africa and Ethiopia. The findings show that both countries adhere to regularly scheduled national elections, as stipulated by election law, and uphold the legal rights of adult citizens to vote in national elections. However, the success of these democratic processes depends on how much freedom of expression exists and how free and fair elections are.

Both South Africa and Ethiopia have experienced a decline in freedom of expression over the past three years, affecting government respect for media freedom and citizens’ liberty when discussing political matters. However, the challenges in Ethiopia are significantly greater than those in South Africa. Ethiopians face substantial hurdles in discussing politics



Source: Figure created by authors using V-Dem data, (2014–2023)

Figure 2. Electoral democracy components: South Africa and Ethiopia

publicly, as the government restricts online expression through internet shutdowns, censorship, repressive laws and hate speech regulations (Ayalew, 2020). These measures contradict the African Agenda 2063 (AA2063) and suppress free expression, thereby hindering democratic development. Ayalew (2019) noted that Ethiopia has shut down the Internet six times since 2016, citing national security. Such actions limit protests and public participation, fostering dissatisfaction, eroding trust in government institutions and ultimately stifling democratic growth.

By contrast, South Africa has shown a strong commitment to clean elections, with over 75% adherence to electoral standards. The 2024 election marked the largest shift in voting patterns since the country's transition to democracy, as the African National Congress (ANC) failed to secure the majority needed to form a government, receiving only 40.2% of the vote (Hood, 2024). The opposition Democratic Alliance secured 21.8%, similar to its 20.8% share in 2019, whereas the Economic Freedom Fighters' support slightly decreased from 10.8% to 9.5%. However, voter turnout plummeted, with only 16.3 m of the estimated 42 m eligible voters participating, resulting in a 38.8% turnout, down from 49.0% in 2019. This decline suggests a growing political disengagement, potentially indicating a lack of trust in the political system, which undermines the legitimacy of future elections.

Despite higher electoral democracy scores, the 2024 South African election highlighted significant political polarisation and the rise of populist movements, impacting the formerly dominant ANC. Movements such as uMkhonto weSizwe (MK) and Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) have gained traction. Jacob Zuma, ousted in 2018 due to corruption, retains strong support among ethnic Zulus. His MK movement achieved notable electoral success, particularly in KwaZulu-Natal, securing 14.6% of the national vote and 45.9% in the province (Bartlett, 2024; Morieson, 2024). The EFF, labelled populist, advocates for land reform without compensation and nationalisation of key industries, making racial income inequality a central issue. While it made modest gains in 2024, the EFF remained a significant political force that influenced governance. Nyenhuis (2020) found that populism in South Africa has racial elements. Both Malema and Groenewald explicitly made racialised appeals, undermining the political norm of non-racialism that underpins stability. This can lead to conflict.

Ethiopia has struggled to exceed 35% adherence to democratic standards over the past decade despite a noticeable upward trend. Elections scheduled for August 2020 were postponed to June 2021 and were not conducted in several regions because of insecurity and logistical issues (Freedom House, 2022). Challenges included allegations of irregularities, voter intimidation and doubts about the independence of electoral commissions. Political and ethnic tensions further undermined the election's credibility, resulting in widespread perceptions of lack of transparency. Ongoing electoral issues could severely undermine the legitimacy of Ethiopia's government and exacerbate tension. Yimenu (2024) noted that the 2021 elections, marked by the detention of key opposition leaders and significant boycotts, resulted in a decisive victory for the ruling Prosperity Party (PP), highlighting continued electoral dominance and deepening public distrust.

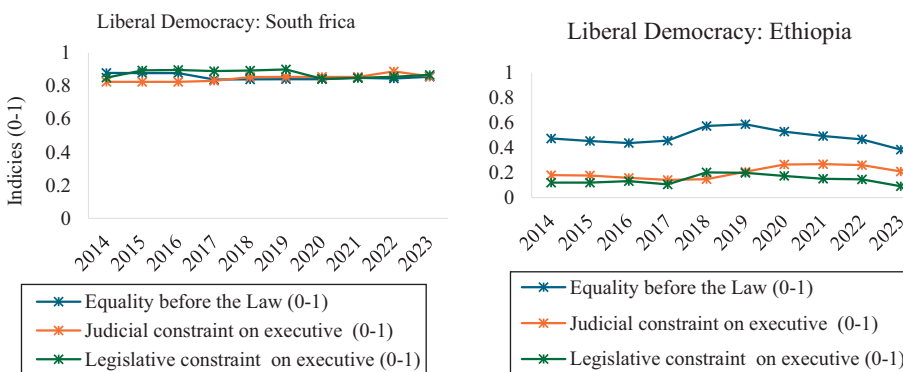
Under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, Ethiopia transitioned from a repressive party-state to a one-person governance system. His election as president of the PP on 12 March 2022 exemplifies this shift. Abiy supervised the proceedings, personally addressed the congress and asked those opposed to him to raise their hands. This dual role creates a conflict of interest, undermining the integrity of elections. Such intimidation discourages honest opposition and skew results in his favour, eroding key democratic norms, such as transparency and accountability.

Ethiopia is grappling with heightened polarisation (Teshome, 2023). Prime Minister Ahmed adopted a populist stance, presenting himself as the nation’s sole saviour. Contemporary populism often features charismatic leaders who use nationalist rhetoric and external blame to secure their support. Ahmed’s populism deepens societal divisions and hampers efforts towards national unity. Such leaders frequently deploy divisive rhetoric that exacerbates political and ethnic tensions. Reck *et al.* (2024) noted that populist rhetoric simplifies conflicts, potentially consolidating power in the short term but risking long-term instability.

4.2 Trends in the transformation of liberal democracy: South Africa and Ethiopia

Figure 3 shows the divergent paths of liberal democracy in Ethiopia and South Africa. The data reveal Ethiopia’s struggle to keep pace with South Africa as a key indicator of democracy. South Africa has consistently achieved a commendable score of over 82% in ensuring citizens’ equality before the law and in maintaining checks and balances between government branches, despite a slight dip in judicial constraints on the executive.

Ethiopia’s performance in democratic governance declined significantly. Despite an upward trend until 2019, the equality before the law fell to 38% by 2023. The legislative’s ability to question and oversee the executive has remained alarmingly low, dipping below 20% over the past decade and hitting under 10% by 2023, indicating severe erosion of checks and balances. The ruling PP, which won the 2021 elections, controlled most regions and dominated security forces and bureaucracy (Seyoum, 2024). Members who have opposed the Prime Minister have faced arrests and public degradation, diminishing their dignity within the parliamentary setting. The recent arrest of parliamentarians, despite their immunity, signals a severe erosion of democratic checks and balances and an alarming shift towards authoritarianism. Parliamentary immunity, a key principle of democratic governance, is intended to shield legislators from political retribution, enabling them to represent their constituents without fear. The executive’s disregard for this principle undermines the independence of the legislative branch, revealing an alarming centralisation of power that suggests Ethiopia may be moving towards one-man rule. This disregard for immunity sets a dangerous precedent, weakening an already fragile democratic framework and eroding public trust in institutions. This erosion of democratic processes fosters increased authoritarianism and marginalisation of dissent. According to Arriola *et al.* (2016),



Source: Figure created by authors using V-Dem data, (2014–2023)

Figure 3. Liberal democracy components: South Africa and Ethiopia

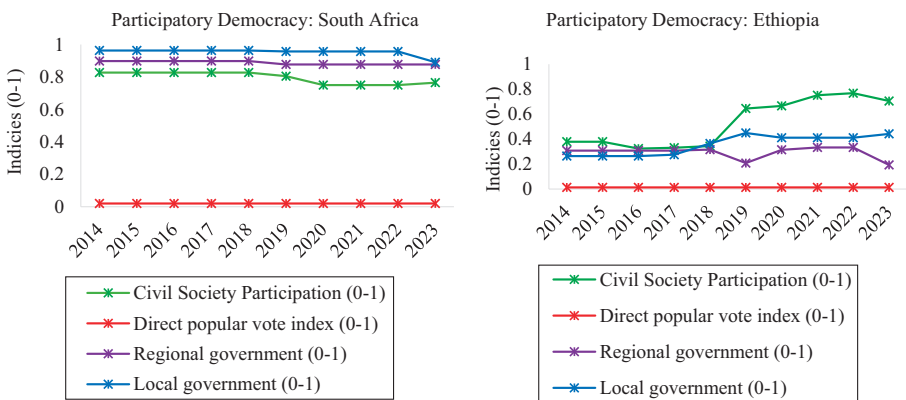
the outcomes of Ethiopia’s 2015 elections suggest that authoritarian rule will persist in Africa’s second-most populous country.

The judiciary’s independence and the executive’s respect for the Constitution in Ethiopia are alarmingly low, facing significant challenges (Seyoum, 2024). Despite constitutional provisions emphasising human rights, the judiciary lacks the authority to interpret them, hindering its ability to address conflicts and abuse effectively. There is a perception of political influence and corruption, with some suspects being quickly released due to connections. Furthermore, opportunities for judicial review of executive actions are restricted as regulations limit legal scrutiny. Courts do not assess the constitutionality of legislative acts; this responsibility lies in the House of Federation.

Politicians have been arrested for months and even years without court rulings under the Prime Minister’s orders, underscoring the erosion of judicial independence and the executive’s disregard for constitutional principles in Ethiopia. This prolonged detention without due legal process reveals a disturbing trend where judicial authority is subordinated to the executive’s will, dismantling the separation of powers essential to democracy. Such unchecked power erodes public trust in the judiciary and signals a shift towards authoritarianism, where constitutional rights are routinely compromised, and dissenting voices are silenced. The lack of judicial independence and the effective rule of law perpetuates human rights abuses and erodes public trust in the legal system. When the judiciary is viewed as corrupt or politically influenced, it fails to check executive power, resulting in a justice system that protects citizens’ rights inadequately.

4.3 Trends in the transformation of participatory democracy: South Africa and Ethiopia

Figure 4 illustrates the contrast between South Africans’ and Ethiopians’ involvement in civil society organisations over a specific period. In South Africa, the lowest score is 75%, whereas in Ethiopia, it is merely 36%. Despite a high score, South Africa’s civil society participation has shown a declining trend since 2018, with a slight increase in 2023. By contrast, Ethiopia has seen a significant improvement, especially after 2018, with an increase from 36% in 2018 to 65% in 2019, albeit with a slight decrease in 2023. This decline



Source: Figure created by authors using V-Dem data, (2014–2023)

Figure 4. Participatory democracy components: South Africa and Ethiopia

weakens the role of civil society in holding the government accountable and advocating for public interest, potentially affecting the overall health of democracy.

The direct popular vote index, which shows almost none in either country, does not necessarily indicate an undemocratic nature. Direct popular voting in the V-Dem data set refers to an institutionalised process in which citizens register their choice or opinion on specific issues through a ballot, primarily intended to embrace referendums. This captures some aspects of the broader concept of direct democracy at the national level.

South Africa scored 90% in regional government autonomy, although this has slightly decreased since 2018. Conversely, Ethiopia's situation is concerning, with autonomy decreasing from 20% in 2019 to 19% in 2023. Despite elected regional governments, these bodies remain subordinate to unelected officials, often appointed by higher authorities. This subordination intensified since the PP assumed power in 2018. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed dismissed and arrested Abdi Mohammed Omar, the former president of the Somali region (Meseret, 2018) and replaced multiple Amhara presidents and the Oromia president. He waged a war on Tigray when the TPLF refused to join the PP. Gebrihet and Pillay (2023); Gebrihet (2023) and Jima (2021) noted that the Prime Minister centrally appoints regional presidents, except in Tigray, where rejection of this led to conflict and military offensive against the TPLF. Regional presidents oppose *Medemer* beliefs for automatic removal. This lack of autonomy exacerbates centralisation, undermining local governance, and eroding trust in the political system. Such centralisation stifles regional voices and fuel conflicts, as evidenced by the Tigray crisis, ultimately destabilising Ethiopia and hindering inclusive governance and national unity.

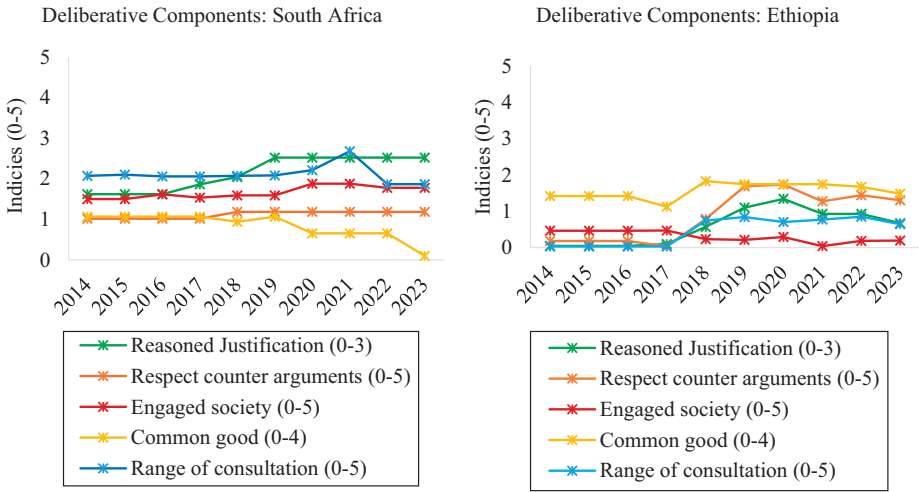
The trend in local government operations without interference from unelected bodies at the local level is more than 96% in South Africa, whereas Ethiopia scored less than 45%, despite a slight improvement after 2017. This analysis underscores the challenges faced by Ethiopia, where regional and local governments lack autonomy, thereby limiting the effectiveness of the democratic processes. In Ethiopia, not only citizen participation but also the autonomy of regional and local governments has not yet been ensured.

4.4 Trends in the transformation of deliberative democracy: South Africa and Ethiopia

The deliberative principle of democracy underscores the importance of the decision-making process in a polity with an emphasis on achieving a deliberative process. This process necessitates public reasoning centred on the common good, as opposed to emotional appeals, solitary attachments, parochial interests or coercion.

According to Figure 5, South Africa has achieved a high level of deliberative practice, whereas Ethiopia has scored poorly, highlighting significant deficiencies in its democratic process. For instance, shortly after his appointment, Abiy Ahmed constructed three parks in Addis Ababa, claiming funding from a donation without specifying its source. Neither the Parliament nor the Council of Ministers was informed about this donation, and the tendering process lacked transparency. He instructed the House of People's Representatives not to question the undisclosed funding (Gebrihet and Pillay, 2023; Gebrihet, 2023). This lack of transparency undermines Ethiopia's democratic deliberation and erodes trust in government institutions and decision-making.

The "respect counterarguments" measure assesses how political elites acknowledge differing opinions during significant policy discussions (Coppedge *et al.*, 2024). South Africa scores low, indicating that, while counterarguments are permitted by some parties, they are often disregarded. This suggests that political elites in South Africa may acknowledge differing opinions but rarely accept them or alter their positions. In Ethiopia, counterarguments were typically not allowed or penalised until 2017. Improvements from 2018 to 2020 saw some acknowledgement, although the elites often degraded opposing



Source: Figure created by authors using V-Dem data, (2014–2023)

Figure 5. Deliberative democracy components: South Africa and Ethiopia

views with negative statements. After 2020, the situation regressed, with counterarguments permitted but largely ignored by most parties. This reflects a generally low level of respect for counterarguments among Ethiopian elites. Disregard for differing opinions in both countries suppresses meaningful political discourse and hinders democratic progress. In South Africa, this leads to superficial engagement with democratic principles, whereas in Ethiopia, it underscores a fragile democratic culture that marginalises dissenting voices.

Wide and independent public deliberations are essential for deliberative democracy, measured by the indicator “engaged society.” In South Africa, such deliberations are infrequent and often dominated by elites, although there has been slight improvement since 2019. Ethiopia has faced an even graver situation, with public deliberation rarely permitted and continuing to decline since 2017. Journalists encounter significant challenges, including security risks, governmental pressures, potential arrests and expulsions (Freedom House, 2022). Local and international media often experience government interference when conflicts and political issues are reported. Ethiopian journalists fearing arbitrary arrest or violence frequently resort to aliases or self-censorship. State-run media must follow the ruling party’s narrative and censor any conflicting content. This lack of independent public deliberations and suppression of journalistic freedom severely undermines deliberative democracy in Ethiopia. Darge and Woldearegay (2023) highlighted that Ethiopian journalists face numerous challenges exacerbated by the absence of judicial freedom. When discourse is controlled by elites, it limits the crucial exchange of ideas necessary for informed policy making.

The “common good” measure reveals that South Africa receives its lowest scores among recent indicators, particularly in 2023, where justification based on the common good is often lacking. Ethiopia fares better, demonstrating a mix of interests and common goods. The neglect of the common good in South Africa’s political discourse may lead to policies favouring specific interests, potentially fragmenting society, marginalising certain groups and exacerbating social inequalities.

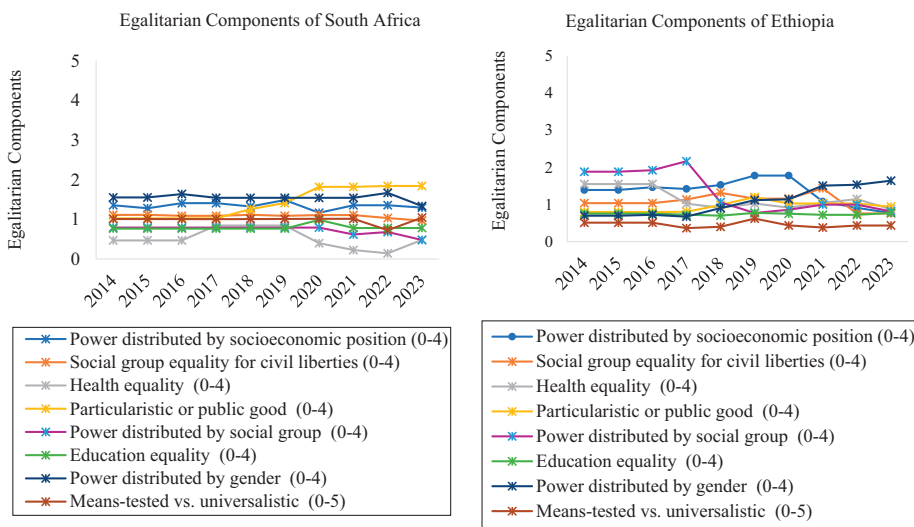
South Africa scored 2, indicating that consultations typically involve loyal government affiliates and party executives, excluding broader political and societal representations. In Ethiopia, the situation is even dire; despite a shift from no consultation to very limited consultation, neither loyal affiliates nor diverse elites are engaged. The lack of broad-based consultation in both countries risks policy decisions that do not reflect the interests and needs of the entire population. Limited engagement in South Africa further narrows the focus of policy, whereas Ethiopia's situation highlights the exclusion of significant political and societal voices.

4.5 Trends in the transformation of egalitarian democracy: South Africa and Ethiopia

Figure 6 shows the components of egalitarian democracy. The results indicate that these components do not always progress simultaneously in both countries; instead, some improve while others remain stagnant or decline. Compared to the other dimensions, egalitarian democracy has experienced a notable setback in South Africa, whereas in Ethiopia, most indicators have shown a drop in the last three years, except for power distributed by gender.

Power distribution by socioeconomic position indicates unstable development, with scores of 1–2 in both South Africa and Ethiopia, suggesting that average-income individuals have limited influence and poorer people have no influence. Civil liberties are unevenly distributed, with certain social groups enjoying fewer rights than the general population does. Both countries score around one for educational equality, indicating extreme inequality in high-quality basic education, with at least 25% of children receiving inadequate education that hampers their rights as adults. While Ethiopia mirrors this in health and education, South Africans face extremely poor-quality healthcare, undermining at least 75% of citizens' political rights.

The most significant change occurs in terms of the indicator of particularistic or public goods under egalitarian indicators in South Africa. Initially, South Africa and Ethiopia



Source: Figure created by authors using V-Dem data, (2014–2023)

Figure 6. Egalitarian democracy components: South Africa and Ethiopia

started from relatively low levels in 2014, where most social and infrastructure expenditures were particularistic, but a significant portion were public goods. However, after 2019, social and infrastructure expenditures in South Africa were evenly divided between particularistic and public goods programs, whereas they remained unchanged in the case of Ethiopia.

Ethiopia showed consistent and significant reductions in the indicator measuring the power distributed by social groups throughout the study period. Initially, political power was monopolised by several social groups comprising most of the population; however, since 2017, it has shifted to specific minority groups. This monopolisation indicates that significant segments lack proportional representation in authority. Similarly, South Africa has exhibited a comparable situation, in which political dominance is held by select minority groups. This concentration of power can lead to increased marginalisation and social unrest. A lack of inclusivity in governance exacerbates social tensions, undermines trust in political institutions and may result in instability and conflict.

In terms of political power distribution by gender, men dominate, although women have some influence on South Africa. Ethiopia has seen more significant changes over time; women had marginal political influence until 2017 but began to gain footholds. However, neither country has achieved equal political power despite Ethiopia appointing a female president. [Freedom House \(2022\)](#) highlighted the substantial under-representation of women in both elected and appointed positions in Ethiopia. While there has been some progress, including the appointment of a female president, women still lack proportional influence over political decisions. Furthermore, many women in high-ranking positions, including the president, were removed by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed after being used to bolster his reputation abroad. [Yibeltal \(2024\)](#) noted that the Sahle-Work Zewde was replaced due to reported disagreements with Ahmed. This indicates that the inclusion of women in leadership often reflects external perceptions rather than genuine empowerment, undermining efforts towards gender equality.

The means-tested versus universalistic measure assesses whether welfare programs target specific groups (e.g., the poor through cash transfers) or benefit all citizens (e.g., free education and national healthcare). Most welfare policies in South Africa have been means-tested, whereas Ethiopia has had no or extremely limited welfare policies in the last decade. The lack of universal welfare in Ethiopia may exacerbate social inequality and hinder development. Without inclusive programs, vulnerable individuals often lack support, increasing poverty and social stratification. Similarly, South Africa's means-tested policies may leave gaps in social protection for those who do not qualify for it. Both countries would benefit from comprehensive welfare strategies to enhance social support and development.

4.6 Comparative analysis of democratic transition in South Africa and Ethiopia

[Table 1](#) presents the overall trends in the dimensions of democracy. The overall 10-year unweighted average (2014–2023) for each dimension was measured for both South Africa and Ethiopia.

South Africa scored an unweighted average of 0.73 (73%) for electoral democracy. This score fulfils the anticipated outcomes of AA2063, which envisions that at least seven out of ten individuals in each member state of the union perceive elections as free, fair and credible by 2023 ([African Union, 2015b](#)). These statistics demonstrate that South Africa achieved 104% of the 10-year expected outcome regarding the democratic nature of its elections. The country also scored 62% in liberal and deliberative democracies, fulfilling 97% of the expected outcomes outlined in AA2063. The average unweighted value for the five dimensions is 59%. The study's main findings reveal that South Africa achieved 84% ($\frac{59}{70} * 100$) of the 10-year expected outcome (70%) for democratic governance. South Africa's

Table 1. Comparative analysis of 10-year democratic transition in South Africa and Ethiopia

Year	South Africa					Ethiopia				
	EDI	LDI	PDI	DDI	EGDI	EDI	LDI	PDI	DDI	EGDI
2014	0.75	0.63	0.50	0.63	0.51	0.23	0.10	0.10	0.15	0.16
2015	0.75	0.64	0.50	0.63	0.51	0.23	0.10	0.10	0.15	0.16
2016	0.75	0.64	0.49	0.63	0.50	0.23	0.10	0.09	0.15	0.16
2017	0.74	0.62	0.49	0.62	0.49	0.23	0.10	0.10	0.15	0.17
2018	0.74	0.62	0.49	0.63	0.49	0.27	0.13	0.12	0.23	0.20
2019	0.71	0.61	0.46	0.62	0.47	0.33	0.16	0.17	0.29	0.23
2020	0.71	0.60	0.46	0.63	0.49	0.32	0.15	0.17	0.29	0.23
2021	0.72	0.61	0.46	0.64	0.51	0.29	0.14	0.17	0.25	0.22
2022	0.71	0.60	0.45	0.61	0.50	0.30	0.13	0.17	0.26	0.20
2023	0.69	0.58	0.43	0.59	0.47	0.28	0.11	0.16	0.23	0.20
UWA	0.73	0.62	0.47	0.62	0.49	0.27	0.12	0.13	0.21	0.19
\bar{x} UWA			0.59					0.18		

Notes: EDI = electoral democracy index (0–1); LDI = liberal democracy index (0–1); PDI = participatory democracy index (0–1); DDI = deliberative democracy index (0–1); EGDI = egalitarian democracy index (0–1); UWA = unweighted average (2014–2023); \bar{x} UWA = mean of unweighted average

Source: Table created by authors using V-Dem data, (2014–2023)

progress in achieving its democratic goals, as outlined in AA2063, indicates a positive trajectory towards robust democratic governance by 2063. With a high score in electoral democracy and significant achievements in liberal and deliberative democracy, South Africa has a strong foundation for continued democratic development. This momentum suggests that, if sustained, South Africa is well positioned to meet and potentially exceed its ambitious democratic aspirations, contributing to a more stable and inclusive political environment.

Ethiopia scored a 0.27 (27%) in electoral democracy. Ethiopia deviates from the anticipated outcomes of the agenda, which envisions that at least seven out of ten individuals in each member state of the union will perceive elections as free, fair and credible by 2023 (African Union, 2015b). These statistics demonstrate that Ethiopia achieved 38.5% of the 10-year expected outcome on the democratic nature of elections. If the current trend continues, the National Electoral Commission will likely remain distrusted and citizens will not perceive elections as free and fair. This ongoing lack of credibility in the electoral process can lead to increased political instability, reduced public participation and weakened democratic framework, making it challenging for Ethiopia to achieve its democratic aspirations by 2063.

In terms of liberal democracy, with an unweighted 10-year average of 0.12 (12%), the country has achieved 17% of the expected outcomes outlined in AA2063. If the ongoing trend persists, Africa faces a scenario of power concentration, highlighting a critical link between the absence of separation of powers and vulnerability to unconstitutional changes in the government. The findings reveal that Ethiopia achieved 25% ($\frac{18}{70} * 100$) of the 10-year expected outcome (70%) for democratic governance. The significant gap between current performance and the ambitious goals of AA2063 indicates that, without substantial improvements, Ethiopia and other African nations may struggle to achieve democratic governance. This underscores the urgent need for reforms that promote the separation of powers, enhance the independence of institutions and foster a more inclusive and accountable political environment.

Significant disparities exist in the democratic progress of South Africa and Ethiopia. Ethiopia has achieved less than half of South Africa’s electoral democracy milestones and

less than a quarter in liberal democracies. These differences reveal serious challenges in Ethiopia's governance, including ineffective checks and balances, limited judicial independence, restricted freedom of expression, election postponements, questions regarding electoral credibility and ruling party dominance. Such issues undermine liberal democracy principles, which emphasise the protection of individual rights, the rule of law and the separation of powers.

Overall, Ethiopia scores approximately 28% (one-fourth) of South Africa's achievements. South African democracy has proven to be stronger and more robust than Ethiopia's due to distinct historical, institutional and political factors. South Africa's post-apartheid transition benefited from a negotiated settlement and a strong constitutional framework that enshrined democratic principles and human rights, supported by independent institutions such as the Constitutional Court and Independent Electoral Commission (Lyman, 2014; Masipa, 2018; Treisman, 2020; Lieberman and Lekalake, 2024; Steenekamp and Musuva, 2022; Everatt, 2024). This structure enabled effective conflict management and political accountability. In contrast, Ethiopia's ethnic federalism exacerbates tensions and impedes unity, whereas the history of authoritarianism stifles political polarisation and populism (Joireman, 1997; Mengisteab, 2014; Ayalew, 2020; Jima, 2021; Darge and Woldearegay, 2023; Gebrihet and Mwale, 2024; Seyoum, 2024). Ethiopia prioritises state control over institutional autonomy, compromising its democratic framework.

However, political polarisation and populism also strain South African democracy. In South Africa, rising polarisation divides the electorate, whereas populist leaders exploit grievances and erode trust in institutions. These dynamics have already destabilised Ethiopia (Michielsen, 2022; Sahledengil and Amsalu, 2023; Yimenu, 2024), indicating a potential trajectory for South Africa if these issues are not addressed (van Zyl-Hermann, 2018; Nyenhuis, 2020; Fölscher *et al.*, 2021; Morieson, 2024). The rise of divisive politics threatens democratic gains, weakens institutional credibility and makes the political landscape volatile.

5. Conclusion

This study presents a comparative analysis of democratisation in South Africa and Ethiopia during the first 10 years of AA2063. The study finds that both countries hold regular national elections and grant adult citizens the right to vote; however, the effectiveness of these democratic processes varies considerably. South Africa achieved 84% of its democratic governance policy goals, demonstrating a strong commitment to clean elections despite experiencing significant political polarisation and the rise of populist movements. In contrast, Ethiopia, with only 25% achievement of its goals, faces severe obstacles, including government restrictions on online freedom, Internet shutdowns and repressive laws.

The findings reveal that while South Africa has greater adherence to democratic principles, such as equality before law and government checks and balances, Ethiopia struggles with legislative oversight, judicial independence and respect for constitutional norms. In South Africa, declining civil society participation contrasts with Ethiopia's improvement from the lower baseline. Both countries face challenges in public deliberation and policy consultation, with setbacks in egalitarian democracy evident through unequal rights, opportunities and distribution of public goods. Gender disparities remain a significant issue, with inadequate protection of female rights in both contexts. Political polarisation and populist parties have impacted democratic governance in both countries, introducing divisive rhetoric and undermining established political norms.

To address these challenges, this study recommends reinforcing democratic institutions, such as electoral commissions, judiciaries and legislative bodies, to ensure their independence, transparency and effectiveness. Mitigating political polarisation through

inclusive dialogue and cooperation, addressing socioeconomic inequalities and promoting civic education and press freedom are essential. Upholding the rule of law and protecting human rights is crucial for building resilient democracies that meet the needs and aspirations of all citizens. This comparative analysis underscores the need for sustained efforts to strengthen democratic institutions and values in both South Africa and Ethiopia.

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