

How Can Centre-Right Parties Hold Their Ground in Africa?

A Look at the Democracy Union of Africa

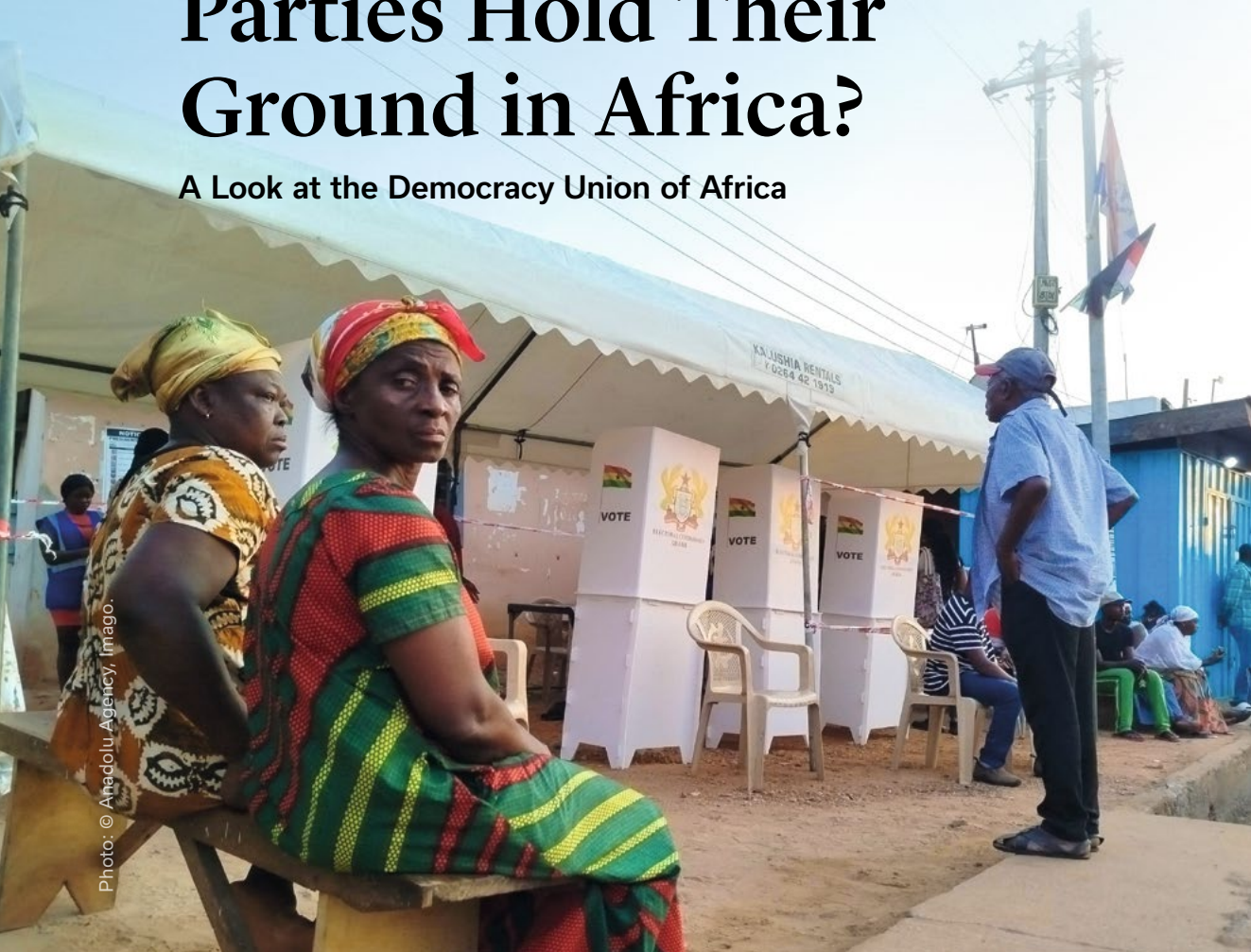


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In a Nutshell

Africa's democracies – and with them, the continent's democratic political parties – are facing major challenges. While democracy is still viewed by most as the preferred form of government, trust in the ability of elected governments to deliver solutions is waning. At the same time, Africa's autocrats are on the advance, in some cases emboldened by recent geopolitical developments.

Centre-right parties are also coming under growing pressure. In recent elections, some have lost power or been prevented from taking office through authoritarian practices and unlawful restrictions.

In response, these parties are strengthening regional cooperation in order to share ideas, to amplify the voice of the political centre across the continent, and to bolster the resilience of Africa's often-fragile democracies. The Democracy Union of Africa (DUA) has a key role to play in this regard.

The 2025 DUA Forum in Nairobi offers grounds for hope that the organisation will be able to perform its role more effectively in the future as a platform for exchange and ideas – although financing remains a key challenge.

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Africa¹ is undergoing dynamic political change shaped by shifting geopolitical influences and a young, increasingly politically engaged population. Centre-right parties face the challenge of asserting themselves in an environment marked by declining democratic norms and international standards as well as by growing youth dissatisfaction. Despite coups, wars, and numerous crises, a majority of people on our neighbouring continent continue to favour democratic forms of government. Given the economic difficulties facing many countries, high unemployment almost everywhere, and widespread corruption, this is a remarkable finding. In many African states, however, democratic structures are being eroded. Elections are being manipulated and constitutions amended in order to secure the continued rule of entrenched elites. Independent media are being silenced, while democratic opposition politicians are being killed, imprisoned, or otherwise repressed. Whether in East, West, North, or Southern Africa, autocrats are gaining ground – encouraged by a geopolitical environment in which freedom, democracy, and human rights are being increasingly sidelined.

Hegemony instead of democracy

Since Donald Trump returned to the White House in January 2025, Washington has focused primarily on deals and resources rather than on peace, international norms, or democratic governance. Sub-Saharan Africa has been hit particularly hard by the near-total withdrawal of US development assistance, which has been compounded by significant cuts on the part of European donors. This is especially evident in support for civil society initiatives and democratic engagement. Whereas until recently, there were numerous funding

programmes for organisations and individuals working to promote democracy, human rights, and freedom of expression, the number of Western institutions providing financial assistance and expertise has shrunk considerably. German political foundations are among the few remaining reliable partners.

At the same time, the political environment for democratic actors in Africa has become significantly more difficult. The influence of traditional Western actors – above all, the EU and the United States – is declining, while China, Russia, Turkey, and other countries are expanding their economic and political footprint. These states are pursuing pragmatic, resource-driven approaches that may in some cases reinforce authoritarian structures while at the same time expanding their own influence on the continent. They are doing so through intensified economic cooperation that spans raw material extraction (China), infrastructure projects (China, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates), education initiatives (particularly Turkish school projects in West Africa), military support (Russia and Turkey), and disinformation campaigns (Russia). The latter are demonstrably aimed at reducing Western influence in African societies.

Electoral manipulation and violence – And little criticism

Recent elections in several African countries have cast a harsh light on the erosion of democratic structures, on the disregard for democratic standards, and on the persecution of democratic opposition forces. In Côte d'Ivoire, President Ouattara secured a fourth term through both a controversial constitutional change and

the exclusion of leading opposition candidates, thereby consolidating his hold on power for the next five years.² In Tanzania, opposition leader Tundu Lissu has been detained since April of last year and charged with treason.³ During the elections at the end of October, protests were brutally suppressed and hundreds of demonstrators killed following what appears to have been extensive manipulation of the vote itself. In Mozambique, too, protests against alleged electoral fraud benefiting the long-ruling FRELIMO party were violently dispersed, with serious doubts existing as to the validity of the official results.⁴

The United States has largely abandoned a values-based foreign policy and no longer consistently advocates democracy and human rights worldwide. Other Western actors – not least in light of shifting geopolitical realities – are also increasingly reluctant to publicly demand adherence to democratic and rule-of-law principles. Reactions to the electoral manipulation and violence in the above-mentioned cases have therefore been muted, partly out of a desire not to jeopardise relations with the respective governments.⁵

More and more young people are mobilising against corruption, unemployment, and inadequate public services.

African states themselves also generally refrain from intervening in the electoral processes of neighbouring countries, regardless of the extent to which democratic standards are violated and people are oppressed. On the contrary: Regional organisations that typically deploy election observers have often issued *de facto* endorsements in the past. All the more noteworthy, then, is the election report by the regional organisation SADC on Tanzania, which stated in unusually clear terms that voters had not been presented with a genuinely free choice among candidates.⁶ There is, however, little indication that either regional or international actors will hold the

Tanzanian government and its president accountable for electoral manipulation and human rights violations. A broader climate of impunity appears to be spreading across Tanzania, Mozambique, and Côte d'Ivoire. The same applies to the military coup in Madagascar, which has thus far led to no major shifts in the island state's relations with Europe or with its neighbouring countries. Is democracy becoming obsolete?

Generation Z demands participation and accountability

Even though recent surveys still show that people across Africa prefer democracy over other forms of government, public dissatisfaction is growing – driven by manipulated elections, restricted freedoms, and above all, weak economic development and limited personal prospects. Protests led by Generation Z – which began in Kenya and have since spread across many parts of the continent – highlight in country-specific ways the notion that political and economic trajectories in many sub-Saharan states are not sustainable. The number of young people who see neither economic opportunities nor meaningful political participation is rising across the continent. Increasingly, these young people are mobilising through digital networks against corruption, unemployment, and inadequate public services. The perception that their interests are insufficiently represented in formal political systems is prompting more extra-parliamentary engagement – through social media activism, street protests, and civil society initiatives.

This dynamic poses a major challenge to political parties, including those of the centre-right: They must develop new political offerings and meaningfully integrate younger generations. The gap between an often-ageing elite and a youthful majority population will be crucial to the future viability of both the political parties and democracy itself. The erosion of democratic structures and processes driven by long-standing incumbents seeking to retain power on the one hand and the other growing demands from younger populations for political and economic participation on the other hand are two opposing trends

that indicate a turning point for political parties across the continent. This situation presents a particular opportunity for predominantly opposition centre-right parties to reclaim their role as key vehicles of democratic will-formation and to help break up entrenched power structures. Rejuvenating party membership and modernising decision-making structures through the meaningful inclusion of Generation Z could help make democracy on our neighbouring continent more future-proof. The opportunity is especially pronounced for centre-right parties as Africa's demographically young societies remain broadly conservative in outlook.

Conservative values – Left-wing policies

When examining the underlying values of African societies, many would typically be described as “conservative”, including the particular importance attached to family, widespread religiosity, and the preservation of traditions, to name just a

few. However, centre-right parties in Africa have thus far struggled to harness this value orientation for their political work. Public discourse, political rhetoric, and party platforms continue to be dominated by ideas rooted in the left. This worldview tends to hold the state as a welfare provider that intervenes heavily in the economy and creates jobs. It is often accompanied by latent scepticism towards markets, private enterprise, and free competition. By contrast, ideals closer to conservative thinking – such as individual responsibility, self-help, and subsidiarity – play a far smaller role in this paradigm.

This gap between societal values and political ideology is sometimes explained by the historical experiences of many African states, which are shaped by colonialism, exploitation, and unequal resource distribution. When independence was gained, social inequality was high, and large segments of the population lived in poverty. In such contexts, left-leaning approaches that emphasise



Hunger for power overrules democracy: In 2025, Alassane Ouattara first secured his candidacy for a fourth term as president in Côte d'Ivoire through a constitutional amendment – and then also his election victory by excluding the main opposition candidates. Photo: © Zuma Press Wire, Imago.

redistribution, state intervention, and social justice often appear more attractive than conservative or liberal approaches that rely on market mechanisms and individual responsibility. In many African countries, the state remains the primary provider of infrastructure, education, and healthcare because private markets are only weakly developed. Left-wing parties promise public investment, subsidies, and protection for the poorest segments of the population. This resonates with voters living in precarious circumstances who expect immediate improvements in their living conditions.

Political competition often appears to take place primarily between socialist and liberal ideas.

It should also be recalled that many African liberation movements maintained close ties with socialist states of the former Eastern Bloc, thereby contributing to the enduring influence of socialist ideas in their politics.

Less frequently discussed in connection with the dominance of “left-wing” thinking in African politics is the lack of compelling offers from centre-right actors built around the conservative value orientation of large parts of the population. Political competition often appears to take place primarily between socialist and liberal ideas. Exceptions such as Ghana’s New Patriotic Party (NPP) and South Africa’s Inkatha Freedom Party tend to confirm the rule.

This situation is reflected in the fact that there is still only a limited number of centre-right parties in government. Parties such as the NPP in Ghana and the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) have lost power in the wake of recent elections.⁷ Other prominent centre-right actors – including Côte d’Ivoire’s opposition Parti Démocratique de la Côte d’Ivoire – Rassemblement Démocratique Africain (PDCI-RDA) and Tanzania’s CHADEMA – have recently fallen victim

to authoritarian governance and been unlawfully prevented from assuming government responsibility, as outlined above. Internal party conflicts – for example, within Mozambique’s RENAMO, Uganda’s Democratic Party and the – also Ugandan – Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) – have further weakened the African centre-right camp.

Democracy Union of Africa

Almost 30 years ago, centre-right parties across Africa decided to strengthen their cooperation in order to amplify the voice of the political centre on the continent, to share their experiences, and to enhance the resilience of Africa’s often-fragile democracies. To that end, the Democracy Union of Africa (DUA; formerly the Democratic Union of Africa) was founded in 1997. The DUA operates as an alliance of African centre-right parties committed to democracy, freedom, and prosperity. The union views itself as a promoter of good governance, personal liberty, and the social market economy, which it regards as being key to sustainable development and stability in Africa. The organisation pursues these goals through annual forums, workshops, and election observation missions. The DUA is a member of the International Democracy Union (IDU), which is the global alliance of centre-right parties that also includes the European People’s Party (EPP). From the outset, the IDU played a key role in supporting the DUA’s development and was closely involved in its decision-making processes. The most important external supporter for many years was the UK’s Westminster Foundation; today, the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung is the primary partner that supports the DUA through its Regional Programme Political Dialogue Sub-Saharan Africa.

The DUA’s development was slow after its founding and at times even stalled, but in 2019, an IDU-backed initiative was launched in order to revitalise the organisation. This effort to resolve the DUA’s crisis initially failed, however. Although the newly elected leadership at the time developed a roadmap for the organisation’s future – including strengthening institutional

capacity, deepening cooperation among member parties, and positioning the DUA as an advocate for democratic principles in Africa – implementation remained limited. A dual leadership model introduced after the 2022 executive elections proved only partially effective because leadership responsibilities were in practice assumed by just one of the co-chairs. Following the most recent leadership elections in 2024, however, the DUA is now headed by a younger chair: Ghanaian politician Louisa Atta-Agyemang, who has approached her two-year mandate with clear priorities and effective communication. Atta-Agyemang benefits from strong backing from her party, the NPP – one of the DUA’s core pillars – and from the support of former Ghanaian President Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo, a prominent and influential advocate.

At its latest forum, the DUA expressed solidarity with democrats who face repression in their home countries.

New leadership, fresh momentum, and a clear commitment

The DUA Forum held in Nairobi in October 2025 offered a glimpse of this renewed momentum. Under the title “Navigating Africa’s Strategic Position in a Multipolar World – Towards Equitable and Mutually Beneficial Partnerships”, the event sought both to articulate Africa’s place in a changing global order and to further strengthen ties among member parties. One key focus was Africa’s future relationship with the Western community of values – undoubtedly one of the continent’s central geopolitical questions, but also of major relevance to Europe. At the forum, the DUA positioned itself clearly on the side of democracy, expressing solidarity with democratic actors who face repression or imprisonment for their political engagement, including Tanzanian opposition leader Tundu Lissu and Ugandan opposition figure Kizza Besigye. Another important step for the organisation’s

future development was the adoption of a new statute designed to clarify institutional procedures and prevent many of the conflicts that had previously hampered the DUA’s work. This work included the introduction of a regionally rotating chairmanship, thereby granting parties from less strongly represented regions a realistic opportunity to lead the organisation. Observers at the Nairobi conference – including the Secretary General of the International Democracy Union – assessed the DUA’s trajectory as clearly positive.⁸ However, the encouraging signals from Nairobi should not obscure the significant challenges that remain. These include expanding membership, deepening cooperation among member parties, and reducing dependence on external support.

The DUA currently has 21 member parties.⁹ Compared with other African party families, it is therefore lagging well behind the liberals (Africa Liberal Network; 42 parties) but is ahead of Centrist Democrat International (CDI; 19 parties) and African socialist party networks (15 parties), although the Socialist International itself has more than 37 members in Africa.

Limited electoral success among DUA members

Of the DUA’s 21 member parties, only three are currently part of a governing coalition or hold government responsibility (Istiqlal in Morocco, the Unity Party in Liberia, and the Inkatha Freedom Party in South Africa). Kenya’s KANU is currently preparing to join the governing coalition. The status of Uganda’s opposition Democratic Party is unclear as the party chair serves as Minister of Justice in the government. Following the NPP’s defeat in Ghana in 2024 and the MCP’s loss of power in Malawi in 2025, the DUA now has only a very limited presence in government across Africa. In addition, some DUA members – realistically speaking – have little prospect of gaining power in the short to medium term given their political weight or the situation in their respective countries.

With its statute adopted in 2025, however, the DUA created room to increase its membership.



A few months before his arrest: In January 2025, Tundu Lissu (left) was elected chairman of the Tanzanian DUA member party CHADEMA. In April, the government had him arrested for political reasons. Photo: © Xinhua, Imago.

Alongside full membership, it introduced an associate membership category for parties in countries where two DUA member parties already exist. Previously, admitting more than two parties per country had not been accepted. The DUA also created an accredited membership category for parties that do not meet all criteria for membership. This category allows also societal organisations to become members. In order to prepare future full members for the organisation, the DUA now also provides observer status for parties that are not yet members. In selecting future members, the DUA relies on rather vague criteria, such as a programmatic orientation towards the ideals of the centre-right and a commitment to democracy. Full members must be able to demonstrate participation in democratic elections in their country.

The necessary consolidation of the DUA's work primarily involves strengthening its programmatic political activity and reinforcing the organisation as a representative voice of the centre-right. Although the DUA is a network of highly diverse parties whose approach to politics is often more pragmatic than programmatic, it could provide important support as a source of

ideas for its member parties' political and policy work, thereby helping them strengthen their platforms and embed themselves more firmly in society, which would lead to improvements in their electoral prospects.

What still needs to be done

Deepening and expanding the DUA's work is not possible without a functioning structure, however. The DUA currently has no secretariat. The chair carries the main burden of the work, securing outside support for events and in some cases financing them herself. The current Secretary General is serving as his party's campaign manager, being based several thousand kilometres from the DUA's nominal headquarters in Accra. This lack of infrastructure fails to reflect the DUA's growing political importance. Thus far, the DUA has largely depended on the leadership drive and personal commitment of those at the top.

This lack of structure is primarily a result of insufficient funding. While the DUA's statute provides for membership dues, these dues have not been collected in the past, thereby leaving the organisation with no meaningful resources of

its own. The DUA's flagship activity – the annual DUA Forum – is largely funded by partners and sponsors. Some DUA member parties have sufficient financial resources to support DUA forums hosted in their respective countries, but funding for a DUA secretariat remains unresolved.

The crisis of democracy in Africa requires closer cooperation among democracies and democrats. With the withdrawal of traditional external actors in democracy support and the growing influence of actors promoting authoritarian social models, the conditions for cooperation among democrats in Africa have deteriorated. However, the main reason for the crisis of African democracies does not lie primarily in these external developments; rather, it stems above all from the fact that African democracies have not been able to generate sufficient political stability and prosperity – factors that are essential in fostering citizens' trust in both the state and democracy. Political parties are often part of the problem because they are not sufficiently well positioned in terms of substance and organisation and are not sufficiently rooted in society. What is more, political parties are not attractive enough to the key target group of young voters. As such, it is not surprising that young Africans are increasingly articulating their interests in the streets rather than through the political parties.

In recent years, the DUA has positioned itself clearly alongside democrats and democracies. In public statements, it has highlighted the critical situation in Tanzania, where DUA member CHADEMA faced severe repression around the 2025 elections. The DUA has also issued critical statements on political developments in Côte d'Ivoire – where the presidential candidate of DUA member PDCI-RDA was excluded from the elections – as well as on the unlawful detention of Ugandan opposition politician Kizza Besigye.¹⁰ In so doing, the DUA succeeded in feeding this mobilisation into the international political debate via the International Democracy Union. In the case of CHADEMA, this contributed to the successful introduction by the EPP in the European Parliament of a resolution that is critical of political developments in Tanzania.

The DUA's political weight – especially in comparison with that of other party-family associations in Africa – should be increased by admitting additional members. However, in expanding its membership, the DUA should avoid the mistake made by other international party associations of not sufficiently vetting new members for their commitment to democracy.

As part of this expansion, it is also important to do more to incorporate the continent's francophone countries. At present, only three francophone African countries are represented in the DUA through parties: Morocco, Côte d'Ivoire, and Togo. Anglophone Africa is far better represented, with ten countries, while two of Africa's five lusophone countries are represented in the DUA. Moreover, with the exception of Equatorial Guinea, the entire Central Africa region is absent from the DUA.

Deepening the DUA's work can make an important contribution to the success of its member parties in their respective countries. This should be achieved by supporting the programmatic work of the member parties and by focusing on areas where existing societal value orientations have not yet been sufficiently taken up by political parties. One option would be to establish a (virtual) DUA policy institute that develops policy concepts that can then be used in member parties' platforms. More intense sharing of campaign experiences and of how to deal with authoritarian regimes would also add value, thereby making membership in the DUA more attractive.

How can centre-right parties hold their ground in Africa?

Given political developments across Africa and the trend towards authoritarian governance, democratic parties are under considerable pressure. This situation calls for greater solidarity among democracies, democrats, and democratic political parties on the continent as well as for more structured cooperation. As international engagement in democracy support declines, solidarity among African democrats is becoming increasingly important. The Democracy Union

of Africa has a mandate from its member parties to play an active role in this process and has done so successfully in recent years. As an African umbrella organisation of centre-right parties and a member of the IDU, the DUA also has the potential to build bridges to other continents and to advocate for solidarity beyond Africa itself. The international networking of DUA member parties with other IDU parties and its strong partnership with Germany are of fundamental importance for all involved, especially in times of geopolitical change and renewed rivalries.

The political success of centre-right parties in Africa will depend above all on whether these parties can offer policies that reflect the interests of their populations. This requires a clear substantive positioning as a political force that represents conservative societal values and – building on that foundation – that develops political programmes that lead to tangible improvements in people’s living conditions. It will also become increasingly important for the success of centre-right parties to align these policy offerings with the needs of young people and to win them over to party-political engagement. When politically engaged young people are heard within party structures, when they can contribute to decision-making and programme development, and when they are able to represent their parties publicly, these parties become more representative, and democracy is strengthened as a result.

In terms of sharing ideas regarding political and policy challenges – as well as on important issues, such as party organisation, campaign management, political communication, and dealing with authoritarian governments – the DUA can serve as a platform for its member parties. In so doing, the DUA would make an important contribution to safeguarding and promoting democracy, to strengthening the centre-right in Africa, and to increasing its attractiveness to new members.

– translated from German –

- 1 For the purposes of the present article, the authors use the term "Africa" as a simplifying shorthand for a continent which consists of 54 states.
- 2 Brinkel, Stefanie 2026: Parliamentary elections in Côte d'Ivoire – Consolidation of Alassane Ouattara's power, Country Reports, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 9 Jan 2026, in: <https://ogy.de/snol> [10 Feb 2026].
- 3 European Parliament News 2025: Human rights violations in Tanzania, Iran and Tunisia, 27 Nov 2025, in: <https://ogy.de/06k2> [10 Feb 2026].
- 4 Global State of Democracy Initiative 2024: Mozambique - October 2024, in: <https://ogy.de/ngf8> [10 Feb 2026].
- 5 Observers cite several reasons for the restrained response of the international community. Some of these reasons can be found here: Nebe, Cai 2025: Is Western influence on African democracy fading?, Deutsche Welle, 14 Oct 2025, in: <https://ogy.de/x79a> [10 Feb 2026].
- 6 Msowoya, Richard 2025: Preliminary Statement, 3 Nov 2025, in: <https://ogy.de/twee> [10 Feb 2026].
- 7 SABC News 2025: Mutharika declared Malawi's President-elect, Youtube, 24 Sep 2025, in: <https://ogy.de/wz6o> [10 Feb 2026].
- 8 Conversation between Holger Dix and IDU Secretary General Tina Mercep, 2 Feb 2026.
- 9 National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA); Democratic Party of Côte d'Ivoire – African Democratic Rally (PDCI-RDA); Union of the Centre-Right (UCD), Equatorial Guinea; New Patriotic Party (NPP), Ghana; Kenya African National Union (KANU); Democratic Party (DP), Kenya; Unity Party (UP), Liberia; Malawi Congress Party (MCP); Istiqlal Party, Morocco; Mozambican National Resistance (RENAMO); Democratic Movement of Mozambique (MDM); Popular Democratic Movement (PDM), Namibia; Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), Nigeria; People's Movement for Democratic Change (PMDC), Sierra Leone; National Grand Coalition (NGC), Sierra Leone; African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP), South Africa; Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), South Africa; Party for Democracy and Progress (CHADEMA), Tanzania; Forces démocratiques pour la République (FDR), Togo; Democratic Party (DP), Uganda; Forum for Democratic Change (FDC), Uganda.
- 10 Democracy Union of Africa 2025: The Democracy Union of Africa strongly condemns the unlawful incarceration of Dr Kizza Besigye, X, 20 Feb 2025, in: <https://ogy.de/9hn5> [10 Feb 2026].