Digital governance for democratic integrity in West African electoral contexts

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Abstract
Digital technologies are transforming electoral processes across West Africa. Social media, digital ID systems, and online results interfaces offer new avenues for transparency and civic participation, but they also threaten democratic integrity. This article examines the region's digital-political ecosystem, focusing on how digital platforms are shaping electoral communication in contexts marked by democratic fragility, ethnic divisions, and political instability. Biometric voter registration and electronic results transmission have improved electoral administration, yet at the same time social-media disinformation, internet shutdowns, and surveillance undermine fundamental democratic freedoms. This article also draws attention to emerging digital-governance frameworks that are applicable in West Africa, including UNESCO's 2025 Model Policy Framework for Information Integrity in West Africa and the Sahel and the AAEA's 2023 Principles and Guidelines for the Use of Digital and Social Media in Elections in Africa. The effectiveness of digital governance, which requires a balancing of state security concerns against protections for human rights and free expression, will play a central role in determining whether West Africa's digital transformation strengthens or undermines electoral legitimacy and political stability.

Keywords
digital platforms, digital governance, elections, democratic integrity, information integrity, disinformation, West Africa

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1. Introduction

Digital technologies are transforming political and electoral communication across West Africa (Orembo, Schroeder & Timcke, 2025; Schroeder, Orembo & Batista, 2025). Social media platforms (chiefly Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, and X), digital ID systems, and online results-transmission channels offer significant pathways for political participation, voter education, and efficient election administration (Berger & Orembo, 2025; Panagopoulos, 2009; Safiullah & Parveen, 2022; Timcke, Orembo, Hlomani & Schültken, 2023). During volatile electoral periods in West African countries, digital platforms have become pivotal for entities and users seeking to shape electoral narratives, enhance civic engagement, and facilitate crisis communication (Omanga et al., 2023; Timcke, Orembo & Hlomani, 2023). However, while these platforms

provide many benefits during election periods, they also introduce risks to electoral integrity, including the potential spread of disinformation, the manipulation of public opinion, and the amplification of ethnic and religious divisions (Timcke, Orembo & Hlomani, 2023).

West Africa has been particularly affected by disinformation campaigns. Between 2019 and 2024, 72 campaigns were identified across 13 countries in the region, with Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Nigeria being the most heavily targeted (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2024). Foreign disinformation has been especially prominent, with West Africa accounting for around 40% of Africa's documented foreign disinformation operations. These external campaigns have originated from Russia, China, and Gulf states, including the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, alongside disinformation efforts by domestic political actors (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2024).

In a region where democratic institutions remain fragile—only six of the 15 Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) countries were, in 2024, classified as "free" by Freedom House (2025), it can be argued (see Schroeder, Orembo & Batista, 2025) that effective governance of digital platforms is increasingly necessary for maintaining (or restoring) electoral legitimacy and preventing conflict escalation. In this article, we set out the main features of West Africa's digital-political ecosystem, the dangers posed by that ecosystem during electoral processes, and some recent efforts to establish guidelines for national digital-governance responses.

2. The West African digital-political ecosystem

Digital electoral administration

Eleven West African countries—Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, and Sierra Leone—have implemented one or more of biometric voter registration, electronic results transmission, and digital voter education. For example, Ghana's Electoral Commission introduced biometric voter registration in 2012, specifically to eliminate duplicate registration and reduce electoral fraud (Aiyede et al., 2013). Sierra Leone implemented biometric voter registration in 2017 for the 2018 general elections, conducted by the National Electoral Commission in collaboration with the National Civil Registration Authority, using registration kits to capture fingerprints and photographs of voters (EU EOM, 2018).

Senegal's National Autonomous Electoral Commission uses a biometric registration system that collects fingerprints, photographs, and digital signatures from voters, with data transferred to a central processing site in Dakar where up to 80,000 voter cards can be produced daily (International IDEA, 2019). Beyond biometrics, Nigeria's Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC, 2025) introduced a Results Viewing Portal (IReV) and the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS), in 2020 and 2021 respectively, to assist with electoral administration.

Internet penetration and political engagement

West Africa is characterised by mobile-first internet adoption, with mobile-internet subscriber penetration reaching 54% across ECOWAS countries in 2023, and projected to grow to 83% by 2030, while fixed broadband access remains extremely limited (GSMA Intelligence, 2024). While some studies demonstrate positive correlations between mobile usage and political engagement, others reveal minimal impact, suggesting that effectiveness depends on factors that include political context, digital literacy, and socioeconomic status (Aker et al., 2013; Boulianne, 2020; Park & Zúñiga, 2019; Skoric et al., 2016).

Analysis of Afrobarometer data across 36 African countries revealed that access to the internet and mobile phones showed strong positive relationships with various aspects of political participation (Chirwa et al., 2023). Yet African countries' persistent digital divides create significant barriers to inclusive political participation. High internet costs, expensive devices, inadequate infrastructure, and low digital literacy limit citizens' ability to engage in political discourse and access critical electoral information—with rural communities, underserved populations, and marginalised groups disproportionately affected (Nanfuka, 2025).

Meanwhile, across multiple African countries, youth are increasingly leveraging social media platforms for political mobilisation, organising protests, and driving social change (Ajaegbu & Ajaegbu, 2024), with hashtag-driven campaigns serving not only to unite protesters domestically, but also to attract international attention and solidarity (Vandyck, 2024).

Dominant platform players

The two most powerful platform owners-operators in the region are Meta and Google. Meta's WhatsApp platform, due to a great extent to its encrypted nature, has been found to dominate political communication across West Africa, serving as a primary platform for campaign organisation, voter mobilisation, and information-sharing (Fisher et al., 2024).

Meanwhile, Meta's Facebook had an estimated 58 million users across West Africa in 2022 (Statista, 2024), with its strongest representation being in Nigeria—where Facebook was reaching an estimated 36.75 million users in 2024 (Kemp, 2024). Google's YouTube serves approximately 28.5 million users in Nigeria, making it the second-largest African market for YouTube after Egypt (Africa Facts Zone, 2024), and Google's services underpin the region's digital payments, mapping, and educational resources.

Outside the orbit of Meta and Google, social-media platform X (formerly Twitter) has been found to have significant power during electoral processes in the region, despite a much smaller estimated user base in West Africa—approximately 6.3 million users (Statista, 2025)—than those of WhatsApp, Facebook, and YouTube.

Digital exacerbation of democratic fragility

West Africa's digital transformation occurs within a context of democratic fragility and recurring political instability (Timcke, 2025a). Since 2020, the region has experienced nine successful or attempted military coups (Mali 2020, 2021; Guinea 2021; Burkina Faso 2022, 2024; Niger 2023; Gabon 2023; Sierra Leone 2023; and Guinea-Bissau 2025).[1] Successful and attempted military takeovers disrupt established (or prevent the establishment of) democratic norms and create power vacuums in which digital platforms became central arenas of contestation—and, in turn, potential arenas for manipulation, censorship, and political exclusion (Orembo, Schroeder & Timcke, 2025).

In Nigeria, the country's 2023 general elections demonstrated digital platforms' significant impacts—both positive and negative—on electoral integrity. INEC's aforementioned BVAS and IReV platforms enhanced transparency considerably, but not without encountering problems. BVAS achieved 98% accuracy in fingerprint and facial recognition, effectively preventing identity theft. However, IReV technical failures delayed real-time upload of results at 31% of polling units, with the delays disproportionately impacting rural constituencies with unreliable network connectivity (EU EOM, 2023). Nonetheless, despite this technical problem, the IReV system largely proved robust, with the first results appearing on IReV in the early evening of election day (25 February 2023), and with over 70% of total results uploaded by 28 February 2023, when the presidential winner was announced (INEC, 2024).

In those same Nigerian general elections, social media platforms were used for the systematic spreading of disinformation. The Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) documented "hashtag manipulation, the use of automated or controlled networks, deliberate mistranslation, false impersonation, and manipulated audio and video material" (CDD, 2023, p. 3). Twitter (re-branded as X in July 2023), Facebook, and WhatsApp, were all used for systematic disinformation campaigns (Praise, 2023). Analysis of 127 fact-checked claims by the Nigerian Fact-checkers Coalition (NFC) revealed that Twitter and Facebook were the leading platforms for spreading disinformation and misinformation during the 2023 presidential and National Assembly elections, with Twitter disinformation/misinformation generating 17,243 interactions and Facebook disinformation/misinformation receiving 4,454 interactions (Praise, 2023). In addition, WhatsApp emerged as a concerning platform during the 2023 Nigerian elections, becoming a major conduit for manipulated photos, videos, and text messages that spread rapidly among users (Egwu, 2023; Hassan, 2023).

1 As this article was being finalised for publication in early December 2025, there was an attempted coup in Benin.

AI deployments

The integration of AI technologies into electoral contexts introduces additional complexities. AI-generated content is increasingly shaping political discourse through automated systems. AI-application use documented in electoral contexts in West Africa includes automated content moderation systems (implemented by Facebook and X), WhatsApp chatbots for voter education (used in Nigeria's 2023 elections (Meta, 2023)), and real-time analytics for election-monitoring—as deployed by civil society organisations in Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire (OHCHR, 2022; UNDP, 2025).

Concerns involve AI's potential for use in voter manipulation or suppression, especially in politically sensitive environments (Bender, 2022; Timcke, 2025b). During Nigeria's 2023 elections, AI-generated content posed significant challenges, including "an AI-manipulated audio clip that falsely implicated a presidential candidate in plans to manipulate ballots" and "artificial intelligence-generated images and videos, as well as media posts, [that] falsely linked candidates to terrorist groups" (Ajakaiye, quoted in Davis, 2024). Such incidents represent a broader pattern of AI-enabled disinformation that influences voter preferences and contributes to "information disorders" during democratic processes (see Timcke, Orembo & Hlomani, 2023).

State abuses

Internet shutdowns have become a tool of electoral control across West Africa, with 23 documented shutdowns during electoral periods between 2020 and 2024, affecting over 67 million people (Access Now & #KeepItOn, 2025). In authoritarian and semi-authoritarian systems, social media is frequently perceived as threatening political stability, prompting governments to resort to internet shutdowns to control political expression (Freyburg & Garbe, 2018; Stremlau & Dobson, 2022). This approach, while ostensibly designed to prevent electoral violence, routinely violates fundamental democratic freedoms precisely when free information flow is most essential for electoral legitimacy (Stremlau & Dobson, 2022).

Recent West African cases illustrate the political economy of electoral shutdowns. Guinea imposed internet shutdowns and blocked social media during its March 2020 constitutional referendum and legislative elections, with authorities cutting access throughout the voting period, effectively preventing opposition coordination during a critical democratic moment (Access Now, 2020). Mali restricted internet connectivity and degraded access to WhatsApp and other social media platforms during its August 2018 presidential elections (NetBlocks, 2018). In 2024, Access Now documented 21 internet shutdowns across 15 African countries, with protests being the leading trigger (Access Now & #KeepItOn, 2025).

3. Governance responses

Regulatory frameworks have struggled to keep pace with technological developments, creating accountability gaps where platform companies can operate with minimal transparency requirements. In 2024, the UN Secretary-General's High-level Advisory Body on Artificial Intelligence recommended the formation of a dedicated UN secretariat to monitor AI systems. Such a body would offer opportunities for West African engagement, in synergy with the African Union's Continental Artificial Intelligence Strategy (AU, 2024).

However, it is regional coordination that potentially offers the most promising avenues for platform governance. Two 2025 instruments—the Model Policy Framework for Information Integrity in West Africa and the Sahel (UNESCO, 2025a), and the Praia Action Plan for Information Integrity in West Africa and the Sahel (2026–2036) (UNESCO, 2025b)—establish common standards for platform accountability, data protection, and content moderation while enabling collective negotiation with technology companies. Like the EU's approach with its 2022 Digital Services Act, regional harmonisation could create sufficient pressure to influence platform policies (EU, 2022).

At present, regional responses to electoral internet shutdowns remain inadequate. The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) adopted Resolution 580 in March 2024, calling on states to refrain

from ordering internet shutdowns before, during, or after elections, and ECOWAS protocols—including the Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security (1999) and the Supplementary Protocol A/SP1/12/01 on Democracy and Good Governance (2001)—guarantee freedom of expression. Howeverenforcement mechanisms face significant challenges, including weak legal foundations, inconsistent application of sanctions, and limited capacity to ensure Member State compliance (Bakare, 2022; Odubajo & Ishola, 2024). In the meantime, civil society organisations have developed responses. During Senegal's 2023 and 2024 electoral-period internet shutdowns, VPN use surged as citizens increasingly relied on circumvention tools to access online content (ARTICLE 19, 2024; Digital Watch Observatory, 2023), but these solutions remain limited in scope and accessibility.

Among the essential elements of platform governance are algorithmic auditing by independent local institutions and platform taxation based on local revenue generation (rather than on global headquarters location). Nigeria introduced a 6% tax on turnover for foreign digital services in 2022, establishing significant economic-presence provisions for platform accountability. Such taxation models could generate revenue while creating accountability mechanisms for platform operations in electoral contexts.

In 2023, the Association of African Election Authorities (AAEA) adopted its Principles and Guidelines for Digital and Social Media, which represent a multilateral effort to standardise digital governance in electoral contexts (AAEA, 2023). The framework establishes several key mechanisms. It calls for formalised cooperation between election management bodies and digital platforms to enable rapid content moderation during electoral periods; it mandates systematic monitoring and reporting of disinformation campaigns; and it emphasises proactive voter education to build digital literacy among electorates. By creating standard protocols for engagement between election authorities and digital platforms, the framework advances collective efforts by African election management bodies to negotiate with multinational platforms.

Notwithstanding the valuable mechanisms set out in the AAEA Principles and Guidelines, the implementation of digital electoral monitoring across West Africa remains uneven, with most countries still in the development stages of their approaches to platform oversight and disinformation management.

Access to information (ATI) laws hold some potential for disinformation monitoring, but significant implementation gaps impede effectiveness. More broadly, as of 2024, 29 out of 55 African countries had enacted ATI legislation (Muritala, 2025). Countries in West Africa that have adopted ATI legislation are: Liberia (2010), Nigeria (2011), Niger (2011), Sierra Leone (2013), Côte d'Ivoire (2013), Burkina Faso (2015), Togo (2016), Ghana (2019), The Gambia (2021) and Senegal (2025). Ghana's Right to Information Act, which became effective in January 2020, exemplifies both the promise and the challenges of ATI implementation, with civil society organisations noting persistent gaps in practical enforcement (Adjin-Tettey, 2023). Such implementation challenges create environments where digital platforms can operate with limited oversight.

With respect to AI use, while several West African countries—including Ghana, Nigeria, and Senegal—have developed national AI strategies, none have enacted comprehensive AI-specific legislation, instead relying on existing data protection and digital governance frameworks to address AI-related concerns (Nanfuka, 2025).

4. Conclusions

Digital platforms now sit at the heart of electoral processes across West Africa, making their oversight essential for democratic integrity and political stability. These platforms offer genuine opportunities to improve electoral transparency, boost civic participation, and give voice to marginalised communities. Yet they also bring enormous risks, from the rapid spread of false information (disinformation and misinformation) to the concentration of electoral discourse on a small number of platforms owned and controlled by global technology companies.

In West Africa, political, ethnic, and religious divisions create vulnerabilities that bad actors can exploit. Digital-governance challenges in West African states carry the risk of compounding democratic weaknesses resulting from ongoing conflicts, military coups, attempted coups, and disputed elections. Digital governance in the region must strike a fine balance—between the imperatives of state security

and stability and the imperatives of human rights protections and a free flow of information in support of democratic participation.

Responsible platform governance during electoral periods represents both a complex technical challenge and a democratic necessity that will determine whether West Africa's digital transformation strengthens or weakens democratic institutions. Early engagement with platform governance can prevent later crises, and regional coordination can amplify the limited leverage of individual countries. While collaboration between governments, civil society, international organisations, and platform companies remains vital, success ultimately depends on political leaders recognising that digital governance must not be a technical afterthought; it must be treated as a fundamental requirement for democracy in the 21st century.

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