



REFLECTION

Regional blocs can safeguard democracy

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AS WE CELEBRATE another International Day of Democracy on September 15, a reflection on the state of politics across the world, including Africa, is in order. In 2024, several events, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Russian-Ukrainian war, the resurgence of violence in Sudan and the Sahel region, as well as the rise of right-wing authoritarianism in countries like Turkey, the US and Germany, have tested the resilience of democracy.

Multilateral ties are also being frayed after varied responses to the conflicts. With compelling forces threatening the democratic structures of so many nations, it is worth considering what bulwarks are in place to safeguard liberal democratic institutions. The nature of such features will vary from place to place. Analysts have made linkages between the age of a democracy and the quality of its governance, with predictions indicating that the longer a country has been democratic, the more politically stable it is and the stronger its institutions are.

Having most recently democratised, African nations have acutely faced the challenges of consolidating democracy while establishing legitimacy. Arguably, the dependence of African economies on agriculture, mining and tourism has inhibited growth and innovation, requiring a shift towards economic diversification. The growing importance of Regional Economic Communities (RECs) in Africa is palpable. The continent has eight recognised RECs — the Arab Maghreb Union (UMA), the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa, the



AN extraordinary session of the Economic Community of West African States (Ecowas) heads of government was held in Abuja, Nigeria, in February. In Africa, regional blocs such as Ecowas are the most practical path to regional democratic consolidation, says the writer. | AFP

Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD), the Economic Community of Central African States, the East African Community (EAC), the Economic Community for West African States (Ecowas), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development and the Southern African Development Community (SADC).

According to the AU, the primary role of RECs is to facilitate regional economic integration between members of the individual regions but they are increasingly involved in wider areas such as peace and security and development and governance. These organisations have enhanced much-needed intra-continental trade and fostered a “locked-in” effect among young democracies to mitigate the backslide into authoritarianism.

The locked-in effect models a practice of democracy on the supra-

national scale where democracy is consolidated regionally, beyond the borders of nation states. Having the safety net holding together individual democratic states has, in many ways, been adapted and carried out by RECs in Africa. However, the success of the RECs in integrating member states, enhancing political stability and promoting democracy has differed widely, depending on the region.

A collaborative study conducted by the AU and New Partnership for Africa’s Development showed that the EAC made the most progress in regional integration. A key feature of the success is the presence of a dedicated Ministry to East African Community Affairs in each member state that institutionalised commitment to the grouping’s core values. The advantages of belonging to multiple RECs are constrained by limited resources that

hinder full participation in more than one grouping.

The Our World in Data’s Electoral democracy index maps member states of the SADC, EAC and Ecowas as having higher levels of democracy compared to African nations outside the groupings. Features of democracy considered in the index include the extent to which representatives are elected, the holding of free and fair elections and the degree of personal freedoms. However, compared to democracy on the global scale, African nations fall short when factors such as open, competitive multiparty elections, strong political institutions and political participation are taken into account. In this regard, RECs lack the capacity to influence politics on the domestic front.

While Ecowas previously played a major role in combating military juntas by imposing sanctions and had a history of successful military interventions in Sierra Leone, Mali and The Gambia, among others, the 2023 coup in Niger brought with it a host of delicate geopolitical tension that necessitated a more diplomatic approach from the West African REC.

Supranational democracy is a budding concept and it can be argued that in Africa, the RECs are the most practical path to regional democratic consolidation. The hope embodied by the organisations is tempered by the considerable responsibility they carry to bolster not only the economies of African nations, but also safeguard their democracies.

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