

MAKANDAY weekly

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15TH - 21TH MAY 2026



ISSUE. NO 0038

UPROOTED FOR PROGRESS:

• Inside Mongu's Compensation Delays



Since the interviews for this investigation were conducted, some affected residents have confirmed beginning to receive compensation payments, although many others say they are still waiting for clarity on when they will be paid.

By Situmbeko Sikuka | Mongu

At sunrise in Mongu, Nabiwa Imikendu wakes up on borrowed land, surrounded by the remains of a life he says was dismantled in the name of development. Just months ago, he had a home, fruit trees, and a yard built over decades in Greenview, an area cleared to pave way for the expansion of Mongu Airport. Today, he is among more than 600 families still waiting for compensation they say government promised would arrive within three months.

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UPROOTED FOR PROGRESS: Inside Mongu's Compensation Delays cont...

From front page

“We appreciate the development that the UPND government is undertaking, especially the expansion of Mongu Airport,” said Imikendu. “But the programme came at the wrong time. When it started, it was during the rainy season, and people could not do anything.”

The Mongu Airport expansion project includes runway rehabilitation, terminal renovations, and wider infrastructure upgrades, including the fencing off of the affected area. The project is being undertaken by Zambia Airports Corporation Limited (ZACL) in partnership with the Ministry of Transport and Logistics. While authorities say the first tranche of compensation for displaced residents alone is expected to exceed K67.5 million, the total cost of the overall project has not been publicly disclosed in available official documents.

A Radio Liseli investigation found that while construction and renovations at Mongu Airport continue to be celebrated as a major development milestone for Western Province, many displaced residents say they were left without clear agreements, without compensation, and without certainty about when—or whether—they will be paid.

Some families demolished their own homes after being told compensation would follow. Others abandoned fields, fruit trees, and businesses built over generations. Months later, many remain in temporary shelters, relying on relatives and neighbours for survival as frustration grows over what residents describe as delayed promises and limited accountability.

“We have lived in this place for about 50 years, and then someone comes today and tells you to move out,” said Imikendu. “It is very unfair, but we have succumbed to the pressure from government.”

According to testimonies gathered by Radio Liseli from multiple residents, the arrangement appeared straightforward: relocate first, receive compensation later. However, Imikendu said there are no minutes or written agreement

between the government and the affected residents.

“This has never been negotiated on both sides, but we were merely told, ‘government is doing this and you have to comply,’ he said. “Unfortunately, complying where there is not even a single paper of agreement or some minutes written, even to call it a gentleman’s agreement would be wrong because we never said anything ourselves.”

But months after leaving their homes, many residents say the promised compensation has not materialised.

“We waited from November to December last year, there was nothing. We were even asked to sign for the money which we never received,” another resident said.

The delays have left some families living in temporary shelters and relying on relatives or neighbours for accommodation. Others say they are struggling to rebuild their lives after losing farmland and sources of income tied to the displaced area, while some residents say they have yet to vacate the land altogether.

Under Zambia’s Constitution and the Lands Acquisition Act, compulsory acquisition of land by the state requires compensation for affected persons. Land governance experts say international best practices further require free, prior and informed consultation with communities before displacement.

“When a developer intends to displace people, there should be consultation under the principle of free, prior and informed consent. This principle means that before people are displaced, they must be consulted freely, without coercion or intimidation,” said Patrick Musole, Director of the Zambia Land Alliance, a Zambian civil society network that advocates for equitable land governance, land rights protection, and fair access to land, especially for vulnerable and marginalised communities.

Residents have repeatedly taken their concerns to the provincial administration office seeking clarification on when payments will be made.

However, affected families say responses have been slow and, in some cases, unclear.

Radio Liseli sought clarification from Zambia Airports Corporation on whether compensation funds had been allocated, when the money was disbursed, and why many affected residents had still not been paid months after their displacement. However, the corporation did not respond to the questions or reply to emails and phone calls.’

The provincial administration, through the chairperson of the committee overseeing compensation for the displaced families, Richard Mulwanda — who is also Deputy Permanent Secretary — confirmed that all 643 affected persons would eventually be compensated.

Mulwanda said the Ministry of Finance had already released part of the funds, and that some beneficiaries were expected to start receiving compensation soon.

“The first tranche is in the tune of K67.5 million, and that will help us attend to the first beneficiaries,” he said. “...so we will be in a position to cater for a specific number which I think will be known after our department of finance has concluded the compilations.”

Even as compensation concerns remain unresolved, government officials have publicly praised the airport project as a major development milestone for Western Province.

In a recent statement, Western Province Permanent Secretary Simomo Akapelwa welcomed the renovations at Mongu Airport, describing the upgraded facility as a boost to tourism and investment in the region. He further urged the Zambia Airports Corporation, the Zambia Tourism Agency, and private stakeholders to work together in marketing Mongu and Western Province as a viable destination for tourism and business.

Residents say the contrast between visible progress at the project site and their own unresolved situation has deepened feelings of abandonment.

“We understand that this is development, yes, the expansion of the airport,” said Imikendu. “But we are also human beings. Look at this place, where will I find another property like this, as big as it is? I will not find one. Now I will be compelled to stay in a shanty compound. My life won’t be the same.”

The dispute has raised broader questions about how major infrastructure projects are being implemented and whether affected communities are receiving adequate protection during displacement processes.

This article was produced for MakaanDay’s Local Reporting Network. Sign up to get stories like this one as soon as they are published.



Nigeria | Technology 0, politicians 1

By Theophilus Abbah

How new machines did not help Nigerian voters

“I was so frustrated and exhausted,” Josephine Ochadamu says when asked about her experiences as an Assistant Presiding Officer at a polling unit in Nasarawa State during Nigeria’s 2023 elections. Connected through a mutual acquaintance, she has agreed to a telephonic interview to share her struggles with the new technology that was meant to deliver, in the words of the then-national electoral commission chair, the “best election ever.” Through state-of-the-art machines, the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) was intended to upload votes directly to a connected Result Viewing Portal.

But when it came to the crucial presidential vote, it did not do so.

“The BVAS machine performed perfectly well at first,” Ochadamu explains. “We scanned and uploaded the parliamentary result sheets on the portal. But we just could not upload the results of the presidential election.” The elections officer wracked her brain, asking herself what she was doing wrong. What technical aspects of the European Union-funded BVAS training programme had she failed to apply?

A countrywide malfunction

“The crowd, made up of all parties, was watching us. I was worried that they might assume that we had some game up our sleeves, and I began to feel foolish,” she adds. “There was tension in the air, because the (opposition) Labour Party candidate, Peter Obi, had secured huge votes at our polling unit. His supporters might suspect us of a plot to manipulate the results. But then we learned that the technical problem in uploading the presidential result sheets was nationwide.”

The same had happened at my own polling unit in Lugbe, Abuja. Even as [the Labour Party candidate in the Senatorial Election was winning](#), and the ruling party APC candidate trailed behind, with their hopes of victory seeming buried,

the system began to malfunction nationwide. That evening, [the phrase ‘technical glitches’ appeared on television](#) as a precursor to the results of the presidential election. Although parliamentary results had been uploaded smoothly, the far more crucial presidential results consistently encountered technical barriers.

Amid massive outrage, ruling party candidate Bola Tinubu [was declared the winner](#).

“We already know the outcome”, the ruling party agent had said. Seeing the news, I recalled my conversation with an APC ruling party agent in Lugbe on election day. While many supporters of his party at the polling station were growing anxious as votes mounted in favour of the opposition, he told me he did not share their concern. “We’ll still win,” he confided, speaking to me privately under a large neem tree where we sheltered from the scorching sun. “We already know the outcome of the polls; even if everybody votes for Peter Obi, we’ll still win.”

“The best election ever”

Ironically, the introduction by Nigeria’s Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) of BVAS technology, along with the INEC Results Viewing Portal (IReV), was intended to correct the [defects in previous elections in which the results of parliamentary, governorship, and presidential contests in Nigeria](#) were disputed due to a lack of credibility and transparency. For the 2023 elections, INEC spent the local Naira equivalent of €70 million on 200,000 BVAS machines to be deployed across the country’s 8,809 wards and 119,973 polling units.

The European Union’s Support to Democratic Governance in Nigeria (EU-SDGN) programme contributed €13 million to the training of INEC staff and other ad hoc election personnel on how to use technological innovations during the elections. Earlier EU electoral support to the controversial 2019 elections, under Phase 1 of the SDGN programme, was of a similar amount.

In Phase 2, intended to cover the 2023 elections, the lion’s share of the funds was spent on technological capacity building and training for the use of BVAS machines.

“Human interventions by politicians were responsible”

In the run-up to the elections, new technologies and the EU’s technical support were introduced with enthusiasm by Nigeria’s then INEC Chairman, Mahmood Yakubu, who promised the electorate that [“the 2023 general election will be our best election ever \[...\].”](#)

Afterwards, however, amid widespread protests around the election of incumbent President Tinubu, widely seen as fraudulent, the INEC boss would [blame ‘technical glitches’](#) for the failure to upload presidential election results from the BVAS machines to the IReV portal.



Concerned groups protesting flawed election results in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria. Image by Onyekachukwu Obi

Tonie Iredia, former director at Nigeria’s now-defunct Federal Electoral Commission, strongly doubts that it was a mere “technical glitch” that affected BVAS machines countrywide. “The technical support didn’t fail. Voters were accredited; the results of the senatorial and House of Representatives elections were uploaded on IReV, but not those of the presidential run.” Iredia says he can only conclude that “human intervention by politicians was responsible for the technical glitches, not electronic. It was manipulation.”

In his view, new technology is simply no match for Nigeria’s political machinations.

“Even previous election results were never based on real votes, but on concocted figures. The ‘technical glitches’ once again allowed for figures to be concocted. That’s it. It was not about a failure of technology.”

Gaps between the numbers

The many reported flaws in Nigeria’s 2023 elections appear to support Iredia’s view that the real problem may lie in manipulation by the powerful, and that such manipulation remains evident even when technology functions properly. In many places where systems did not glitch and results were correctly uploaded to the iReV portal, inexplicably wide gaps between the number of accredited voters and votes recorded on result sheets were nevertheless reported. [In a 2023 report by The Insight about the governorship election in Kogi State, North-Central Nigeria, supposed voters surpassed accredited voters by more than 100 per cent.](#) In Kogi State’s Adavi Local Government Area, BVAS accredited 28,070 voters, but the recorded votes totalled 88,413—a 300 per cent increase. In the Okehi Local Government Area, BVAS accredited 29,995 voters, but the total votes cast were 57,678, close to double the number of accredited voters. Though prohibited by the Electoral Act, the electoral umpire validated the disputed figures by declaring a winner. [Other media investigations of the 2023 polls](#) also found that political interests frustrated the use of technology.

In Rivers State, BBC journalists who counted the votes in the IReV portal from [6,000 polling station tally sheets](#) found that opposition candidate Peter Obi had won by a “wide margin.” The electoral commission, INEC, nevertheless officially declared ruling party candidate and now President, Tinubu, the winner. [Reports of alterations on result sheets, rewriting of figures, fraudulent miscalculations, and even mutilation of result sheets](#) were generally rampant in many parts of the country.

Local gangs threatened violence

Nigeria | Technology 0, politicians 1 cont...

Smart card

A technological innovation was also promoted as a cure-all for electoral problems on a previous occasion. In 2019, INEC assured Nigerians that “lessons learned” from dubious elections in the past had now led to a sure-fire solution. That year’s elections would be supported by a new Voter Smart Card Reader, with “better calibration and training for officials” to “reduce technical failures”.

However, **during the polls, the device did not function in many parts of the country**, leading to widespread delays and forced manual accreditation in many polling units, once again creating room for the manipulation of figures. While government spokespersons blamed the failure on technical malfunctions, poor internet connectivity, battery issues, and inadequate training of election officials, many reports pointed to the repeated occurrence of longstanding problems such as a lack of transparency at collation centres, intimidation of opposition figures by security agencies, and abuse of the process by incumbent authorities. This now included the suspension of the **Chief Justice of Nigeria, Justice Walter Onnoghen**, whom the ruling party mistrusted because it considered him close to the opposition party, the PDP. As the highest judicial officer, Onnoghen’s position was crucial should the election dispute be referred to the Supreme Court of Nigeria for adjudication.

That the elections were never likely to be very fair in the first place was also clear from the many recorded incidents of intimidation and violence against the opposition. In several polling units across Lagos, political thugs attacked voters suspected of supporting Peter Obi. In Kano State, local gangs threatened violence against people if they were seen supporting Obi’s candidature at the polls.

The end result was a historically low voter turnout of 26%, even lower than the 34.7% recorded in the 2019 elections. Campaigns to elect more women, targeting an informed and committed electorate, also failed, with only 15 women winning seats in the National Assembly: just 3.5% of the 423 declared seats. This represented a sharp decline compared to 2019, when 29 women were elected.

“Abuse of incumbency”

While official state sources attributed the dismal election process and outcomes mainly to “misinformation, disinformation and biased reporting” in the media, the EU Election Observation Mission reported that there had been a “lack of transparency and operational failures (that) reduced trust in the process and challenged the right to vote”; that the elections “did not ensure a well-run, transparent, and inclusive democratic process as assured by the Independent National Electoral Commission”; and that “abuse of incumbency by various political office holders distorted the playing field and widespread vote buying detracted from the appropriate conduct of the elections.”

The report did not question why the EU had predominantly relied on technological support to address such issues.

Civil society

While close to 40 per cent of the total €65 million EU-SDGN funds have been allocated to Nigeria’s election commission, INEC, the programme’s website also shows that the remaining 60 per cent is allocated to civil society organisations (CSOs). This civil society funding, totalling €39 million in the EU SDGN programme for the years between 2023 and 2027, appears substantial. However, a closer look at the EU’s CSO list reveals that the EU’s definition of “civil society” also encompasses funding for political parties and parliament, presumably including the ruling party. There is no itemisation of what exactly is funded for these entities.

SOS Children’s Village

Another question arising from the EU’s “civil society” list is why certain CSOs are selected over others. Why is SOS Children’s Villages included, given that children do not vote and the organisation is unlikely to engage in voter education? Why are UK-based entities such as the Westminster Foundation for Democracy included? Real CSOs such as ElectHER, the Nigerian Women Trust Fund, the Justice, Development and Peacemakers Centre, and the Civil Society Legislative Advocacy Centre, which work to inform and mobilise the population in exercising their right to vote, are also included on the list. However, it is once again not clear how much funding each organisation received, or for what purpose.

A request for an interview was not granted

When asked for a breakdown of the SGDN Phase 2 funding for CSOs, the EU office in Abuja, through its spokesperson, responds that “we will find everything needed there (on the EU-SDGN website), except the amounts to civil society.” The office only responds to a question about the EU’s technical assistance to the electoral commission’s voting machinery, stating that “it may be important to point out that we don’t give INEC money, but work with partners who provide technical support to INEC.”

A direct approach by Netherlands-based ZAM colleagues to the International Partnerships department of the European Commission in Brussels, made under an EU regulation that grants EU citizens access to EU information, achieves what I, as a Nigerian, could not. A detailed Excel sheet on SGDN funding for both phases is received.

The largest share of EU funding went to a Belgian tech company

It shows that the largest share of EU funding for Nigeria’s elections went to DAI Global, a tech company based in Belgium. DAI received €18 million (38.3%) to provide technical support to the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). This must have covered the training that Josephine Ochadamu and her colleagues received before they were defeated by the “technical glitches.”

The Excel sheet further shows that the second-highest grant, €7 million (15.7%), puzzlingly went to the International Organization for Migration,

which assists displaced people and migrants returned to Nigeria from Europe. Why funds intended for “democratic governance” are allocated to this organisation under the budget line “elections” remains unclear.

Elections funding went to migration projects

More understandable, and probably welcomed by most Nigerians, is the EU funding of around €5 million each for two respected Nigerian non-profits. The Kukah Centre, which works to persuade politicians to commit to non-violence, has had a measurable impact: election-related deaths dropped from over 800 in 2011 to just 84 in 2023. The second, Yiaga Africa, is best known for its advocacy on inclusivity and constitutional reform.

Independent media

But funding for independent media — the one thing that all involved in Nigeria’s elections agree is a crucial condition for an informed and empowered electorate — sadly lags far behind. While the International Press Centre, a media-supporting NGO, received €3 million, the Premium Times Centre for Investigative Journalism, widely regarded as one of the most capable and energetic watchdogs on corruption, governance, and transparency in Nigeria, received only €255,000. Grassroots-focused organisations such as the Nigerian Women Trust Fund (NWTf) also received relatively small allocations.

I had wanted to ask our EU office why over half of the funds for democracy go to a Belgian company and the IOM, the organisation the EU liaises with when it wants to send migrants back to Nigeria, but my request for an interview was not granted. My emailed questions about the EU office’s work with CSOs in Nigeria, and any impact research it may have conducted on this, also went unanswered.



Nigeria | Technology 0, politicians 1 cont..

Institution	Funding (€)	Share (%)
DAI Global Belgium	18,011,000.00	38.30%
International Organization for Migration (IOM)	7,380,044.04	15.70%
Kukah Centre for Faith and Leadership Research	5,250,000.00	11.20%
Yiaga Africa Initiative	4,970,173.10	10.60%
Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre (PLAC)	3,200,000.00	6.80%
International Press Centre	3,000,000.00	6.40%
Nigerian Women Trust Fund	3,000,000.00	6.40%
The Albino Foundation	1,400,000.00	3.00%
Niger-Delta Stakeholder Initiative (NDSI)	744,772.94	1.60%
Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung	500,000.00	1.10%
SOS Children's Villages Nigeria	492,237.00	1.00%
Justice Development and Peace Maker's Centre	367,119.00	0.80%
Premium Times Centre for Investigative Journalism	255,047.49	0.50%
(Unspecified/Blank)	400,000.00	0.90%

Total EU funding = €47,028,393.57

Sources: EU Excel sheet and the European Union Support to Democratic Governance in Nigeria website [EU-SDGN](#)

“Politicians want to win elections and loot the treasury. That is all”

Professor of History and former Vice-Chancellor of [Adamawa State University](#), Alkasum Abba, who has monitored Nigeria's elections from the military-ruled era in the 1990s up to the 2023 elections, does not mince his words. “To me, EU funding of our elections is unnecessary and changes nothing. Our political parties are not built on any ideology. Politicians want to win elections and loot the treasury. That is all.”

Barrister Festus Okoye, former INEC Commissioner and Chair of INEC's Information and Voter Education Committee from 2018 to 2023, likewise blames the political class for sham elections and suggests that EU support for Nigeria's elections should exclude the top levels of the state electoral agency and instead be directed towards the political grassroots. “Nigerian political parties are poorly organised. Funding should be directed towards organising parties at the grassroots level.” The same, in Okoye's view, applies to civil society organisations. “They need capacity building

for their staff on how to manage elections. Support should also be directed to auditing the 774 electoral agency's local offices.”

Learned it from the colonists

The manipulation of elections in Nigeria dates to the colonial era, when British district officers and lieutenant governors supported the Northern People's Congress (NPC) against rival political parties. Professor Abba, who has addressed the matter in his PhD research, recalls a confession by Sir Bryan Sharwood-Smith, the first Governor of the Northern Region of Nigeria (1954–1957), who oversaw the transition toward self-government. “Sir Bryan admitted that he actively ensured voters supported the NPC rather than other northern, radical, and populist parties and that for the 1951 election, he personally prepared the NPC's manifesto, slogans, and campaign strategies.” Sir Bryan's remark, “In the case of more than a dozen, I had to hold and guide the pen hand, after cajoling from them in the names of those for whom they wished to vote.”

From front page

**OPINION | What
Zambians Expect
After August 13**

On Friday, President Hakainde Hichilema is expected to dissolve Parliament ahead of Zambia's August 13, 2026 general election.

When the national assembly closes, many Zambians will not remember it for great laws, transformative debates, or bold oversight. They will remember the empty benches, suspended MPs, rushed legislation, and growing frustration over whether parliament still reflects the people's priorities.

The next parliament will likely be larger, more expensive, and politically more contested than any before it. One of the most significant electoral changes ahead of the 2026 elections is the creation of 70 new constituencies, increasing the number of elected Members of Parliament from 156 to 226.

The new electoral system now combines the first-past-the-post electoral model with 40 proportional representation seats reserved for women, youths and persons with disabilities. Added to this are up to eight presidential nominees, further reshaping the final parliamentary balance.

When the speaker and vice president are included, Zambia's next parliament could have close to 276 people sitting in the national assembly — making it the largest legislature in the country's history.

But the debate around [the new electoral map](#) has also exposed deeper concerns about unequal representation and whether some votes may now carry more political weight than others depending on geography.



The Electoral Commission of Zambia defended the exercise, citing population growth and the need to improve representation. But the process has drawn criticism over limited consultation and lack of transparency.

The [National Democratic Institute \(NDI\)](#) described the reform as having “mixed implications” — bringing representation closer to citizens on one hand, while raising concerns about cost and fairness on the other.

The real question after August 13 will not simply be who wins. It will be whether the next group of MPs understands what ordinary Zambians now expect from leadership.

And the signs are clear.

Across the country, citizens increasingly appear less interested in political slogans and more concerned about competence, accountability, and results.

They want leaders who spend less time fighting in parliament and more time fixing broken hospitals, incomplete Constituency Development Fund projects, youth unemployment, water shortages, rising food prices, and collapsing local infrastructure.

For many voters, parliament has gradually become associated with privilege rather than public service. MPs continue to receive significant salaries and allowances in a country where many young people remain unemployed and public services struggle.

Publicly available parliamentary data shows that MPs receive salaries, allowances, and multiple benefits tied to committee sittings and parliamentary operations.

But citizens are increasingly asking a difficult question: what exactly has parliament delivered in return?

That frustration may shape the 2026 vote more than political parties realise.

The next parliament is also likely to be far more fragmented and tense.

OPINION | What Zambians Expect After August 13 cont...

Delimitation has created dozens of new constituencies, opening space for new alliances, independent candidates, and unpredictable contests. Even if one party secures a majority, governing may become more politically fragile because expectations are now much higher.

At the same time, Zambia is entering an era where public trust in institutions is under strain. Debates around constitutional reforms, electoral fairness, and the concentration of political power have left many citizens uneasy. The danger after August 13 is not simply political conflict. It is public disillusionment.

If the next parliament continues to behave like a battlefield for political survival rather than a platform for national problem-solving, citizens may disengage even further from democratic processes altogether.

But there is also an opportunity. The next parliament could become one of the most important in Zambia's democratic history if leaders choose humility over arrogance and service over entitlement. Citizens want MPs who attend parliament consistently, debate seriously, consult communities honestly, and explain how public money is being used. They want fewer scandals and more solutions.

Young people, especially, are watching closely. Many first-time voters are entering this election cycle carrying economic frustration, but also high expectations. They are digitally connected, politically aware, and increasingly impatient with leadership that appears disconnected from everyday struggles. After August 13, the celebration rallies will end quickly. What will remain are the realities of governance.

Zambians are not simply voting for politicians. They are voting for whether parliament can once again become a place where national problems are confronted honestly, competently, and in the public interest.

The next MPs will inherit more seats, more power, and more public scrutiny than ever before. The question is whether they are prepared for that responsibility.



From front page

Kenya | Sound and fury

By Eric Mugendi, Africa Uncensored

Kenya's electoral theatre runs on Western software

As Kenyan voters, we have become used to experiencing, every five years, a high-stakes drama full of sound and fury, in which the stage is set years in advance, the actors are meticulously costumed, and the script is written in a language only the elite truly speak. EU funds provide the software for the show.

At the reception area of Anniversary Towers, the headquarters of the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC), the body tasked with organising elections in Kenya, I deliver a letter centred on a simple question: why, in the IEBC's view, has increased investment not translated into electoral trust?

The script is written in a language only the elite truly speak. That electoral confidence has been declining rapidly cannot be contested. A 2024 survey revealed that 60% of Kenyans believe the IEBC lacks transparency, and as of March 2026, only 216,000 new voters had registered against a target of 6.3 million. That the IEBC's sky-high budget, now the equivalent of €420 million, and to be spent on next year's elections,

has done nothing to mitigate this apathy is also a fact. I want to know what the IEBC's response to this reality is.

A revolving door

Kenya's government is a revolving door, consistently returning one of two dominant parties, both representative of the political and business elite, to power. They face off at the ballot; one is declared the winner, while the other disputes the result, often citing irregularities.

In the high-stakes battle that decides who will benefit from access to power and state coffers, violence and other forms of trauma have often occurred. For instance, the 2007–2008 Kenyan post-election violence, the annulment of the 2017 Kenyan presidential election, and the contested outcome of the 2022 Kenyan general election. Each cycle has reinforced a sense of déjà vu rather than progress. The Office of the Auditor-General of Kenya has repeatedly flagged gaps in the use of election funds, raising questions about accountability. For many Kenyans, the issue is no longer just who wins, but why the same problems persist, election after election.

Opaque expenses



Image by Jimmy Kitiro. Design by ZAM

Documents presented to Parliament by the IEBC in January 2026 include requests for the equivalent of €255 million for election management, €44 million for voter education, €81 million for ICT, and €2.5 million for boundary delimitation. Given that past elections have been marred by nullified contracts, reports of tender scams, and allegations of pre-arranged outcomes, it is reasonable to ask where this funding will be allocated this time. Why does the Commission need to procure new, costly digital voter ID kits rather than reuse those deployed in the 2017 and 2022 elections, particularly from a company such as Smartmatic, which has been the subject of scrutiny regarding opacity and unidentified local partners?

I ask all this because election time in Kenya is also the time for the

politically connected to secure large chunks of taxpayers' money, supplying ever-new machinery for our voting processes. Declaring previous equipment obsolete becomes a justification for new contracts in 2027. The memory of the French Morpho tablets, bought in 2017 at a cost of €37 million from a French-Dutch company, is fresh in my mind. These devices could not be properly operated by Kenyans, as the company retained control over the data. This debacle ultimately led to the procurement of yet newer machines in 2022. Opposition candidate Martha Karua, a former minister who has become increasingly vocal against state oppression and corruption in Kenya and the wider East African region, has already called for an audit of the IEBC, stating that: "This is budgeted corruption. Kenyan elections are more expensive than any other elections in the world."

Kenya | Sound and fury cont....

The reply to my letter from acting IEBC Secretary Moses Sunkuli states that the Electoral Commission is an “institution bound by law”, “transparent by design”, and “unfairly maligned by allegations”. Sunkuli denies all reports of tender manipulation and emphasises that the new digital voter kit supplier, Smartmatic, submitted a bid of over €21 million, which was the lowest compared to its competitors. On the question of why Kenya needed to purchase new kits in the first place, Sunkuli states that the old ones were “obsolete”, but offers no further details. The contract between Smartmatic and the IEBC is not publicly available, and there is limited information on the Public Procurement Information Portal regarding this tender, Smartmatic’s directors, or its beneficial ownership.

I do not receive a response to my request for a breakdown of the total cost of the Smartmatic contract, nor to my question regarding what percentage of the IEBC budget is covered by Kenya itself and what proportion by election donors. Sunkuli states only that donor funds support “incidental” areas.



IEBC team with Smartmatic Voter ID kits. Image by Jimmy Kitiro

Software

Trying to find out what the EU funds are in which “incidental” areas is an almost impossible exercise. From the projects it publishes, it appears to generally stay far away from the technological hardware used in our elections, in all likelihood precisely because material procurement is so vulnerable to corruption. It is, after all, in the juicy million-dollar contracts that a chain of connected intermediaries

takes its share. Endeavouring to keep its hands clean, the EU appears more comfortable providing the software: the trainings, the conferences, the surveys, the reports, the observer missions, all interspersed with an endless cycle of workshops.

So far, with the 2027 elections still 16 months away, the familiar signs of campaign mode are already showing in Nairobi: from billboards featuring “aspirants” to the occasional speech by a candidate at a funeral that somehow makes it into the nightly news bulletin because the speaker has said something they knew would grab headlines and earn them free visibility. Press announcements on training opportunities and surveys have already landed on my desk.

I am navigating a complex maze of intermediary recipient structures and published donor reports, many of which do not provide itemised budget expenditure for their specific projects. After long and arduous research, I find that we are probably talking about around €18.5 million from 2017 onwards. A key project from that time, called Strengthening Electoral Processes

in Kenya (see below) brought in €5 million. According to EU accounts received by ZAM, it thereafter channelled over €10 million into our elections machinery between 2019 and 2024 (including €4.7 million for a 2022 elections project called Consolidating Democratic Dividends for Sustainable Transformation in Kenya). There has also been an EU-funded “Pro-Peace” project aiming to mitigate conflict during the 2022

elections at a cost of €3.5 million, which was not captured in the EU accounts sheet. And there has probably also been some additional funding from other projects, but I cannot trace the EU share in those. So let’s say €18.5 million.



Image by Jimmy Kitiro

Coins in a basket

The search is all the more difficult because this funding does not go into Kenyan government accounts. The main intermediary, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), is not even Kenyan. In the world of international aid, this is called a basket fund. In it, multiple donors—the EU, the UK, the USA— all toss their coins. The UNDP then stirs the pot and doles out the funds. UNDP’s “multi-donor” reporting structure then records expenditure under ambiguous categories such as “Outcome 1: Institutional Strengthening”, which may refer to anything from conferences attended by state institutions to capacity-building workshops for electoral staff.

While leaving journalists in agony, this “basket” approach also enables donors to shield themselves from accountability. Kenyan voters still remember “Chickengate”, a 2010 case in which the elections commission CEO used British funds to award lucrative printing contracts to pals under the code name “chicken”, thereby severely embarrassing the UK. Basket funds are intended to prevent further “Chickengates”, as funds can no longer be traced to individual donors.

Printing remains an outcome, though. Monitoring, surveying and consultancy firms still produce dozens of glossy forecasts before elections, and evaluations afterwards.

The basket funding also protects Kenyan authorities. While the IEBC is, at least in theory, subject to the scrutiny of the Auditor-General and Parliament, UNDP’s internal books

are a fortress, audited only by the UN Board of Auditors. Detailed line-item expenditures—who received consultancy contracts, how much was spent on luxury hotel workshops in Naivasha, and what exactly was achieved through a “strategic planning retreat”—are hidden behind a veil of international diplomacy. Pressed on itemised expenditure within UNDP programmes, a senior IEBC staffer tells me, on condition of anonymity, that the “receipts are kept at the UNDP office” in Nairobi’s Gigiri suburb. He adds that even the IEBC itself receives only project outcomes, not details. Kenya’s Auditor-General’s office did not list the UNDP funds in its most recent audit of the electoral commission.

Awareness drives

My quest to track EU funding, and what it has contributed, or not, to Kenya’s democratic processes begins in early 2017. The memories of the 2013 election, which saw a petition challenging its validity, are still fresh, and the international community is anxious. The EU has contributed €5 million to a UNDP project titled “Strengthening the Electoral Processes in Kenya” (SEPK): (1), alongside similarly sized contributions from the USA and the UK. The goal includes legal reforms and civic education.

The project hires trainers, runs awareness drives, and upgrades the registration IT. It is building the “software of democracy,” the headlines read. But on election day, 8 August 2017, that software meets the hardware of Kenyan reality.

The millions spent on strengthening the process have not protected these elections from turning out even worse than in 2013; this time, they are cancelled for real. The 2017 election becomes the first in African history to be nullified by a Supreme Court, with judges citing “irregularities and illegalities” and slamming both a manipulated vote transmission system that was a “black box,” and a commission that failed to follow the very laws the EU-funded consultants helped draft.

In the aftermath, foreign observers from donor countries call the cancellation a victory for

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the rule of law. They point to the “technical assistance” they have provided to the justice system through initiatives such as the Programme for Legal Empowerment and Aid Delivery (PLEAD), which had included training for judges. The judges had made the historic ruling to “refer these elections to the rubbish bin”, so that was good, they said.

The Kenyan taxpayers foot the bill for a repeat election.

Doubtful outcomes

Five years later, in the run-up to Kenya’s next elections in 2022, the EU continues its basket fund support approach, this time funding the UNDP for two projects. One, costing €4.7 million (US\$5.5 million), is the above-mentioned Consolidating Democratic Dividends for Sustainable Transformation in Kenya. It is described as developing “policy research and aide-mémoires to inform the national recovery and prosperity agenda, contributing to strengthened institutional capacity and compliance as well as increased gender inclusion, transparency, and accountability.” It also “aims to increase the knowledge of governance processes among citizens, fostering civic and media engagement for accountable service delivery.” Another €3.5 million is spent on a “Pro-Peace Kenya” project, also mentioned above, which involves a familiar pattern of consultancy company contracts for “conflict mapping”, media campaigns, and the setting up of “early warning systems” in case of violence.

Whether the outcomes, if any, of legal empowerment, access to justice, and peace will be sustainable is, overall, doubtful. Human Rights Watch will later report that “Kenyan authorities failed to investigate or prosecute any police officer or government official over the killing of at least 31 people during the 2023 cost-of-living protests”, a pattern repeated in 2024 when around 60 pro-democracy protesters were shot in the streets by security forces.

Low turnout

In 2022, the projects do seem to work for a while. There is little violence. Voter registration climbs to 22.12 million, and more women win elective seats than ever before. But the turnout figures then tell a different story. While in 2017, 78% of registered Kenyans showed up to vote, in 2022, even after years of civic education and voter awareness, turnout drops to 64.77%. In some areas, particularly among young people, apathy regarding elections is reportedly massive, while street protests are on the increase.

In its Post-Election Evaluation Report for the August 2022 election, the IEBC blames “misinformation” and COVID-19 for the low turnout. It forgets to mention that various pre-election reports have found that Kenyans had even less confidence in the IEBC in 2022 than they did in 2017.

During the five months this investigation took, receiving tangible input from those in charge of Kenya’s electoral assistance projects has remained difficult. An email and phone calls to the European Union Delegation in Nairobi finally result in a representative requesting an in-person interview. Sadly, due to busy schedules on both sides, this interview cannot be arranged in time for our deadline, but the delegation maintains that it will not comment in any other way.

The UNDP office in Nairobi has no contact for journalists. In an emailed response from its USA-based headquarters, a spokesperson only states that its electoral support in Kenya “prioritises the inclusive participation of women, youth and persons with disabilities in the electoral process, alongside civic stakeholder and voter engagement; voter information and education; capacity building support to electoral authorities; and strengthening media capacity.” The email does not engage with asked questions regarding expenditure opacity or Kenyan state violence.

Campaign finance

In its report on the 2022 elections in Kenya, the EU Observer Mission called into question the “institutional independence”

of the IEBC, saying that its administration of the elections was challenged by, inter alia, a “dearth of proper communication that undermined transparency, as well as political divisions that became fully apparent as the process developed.” It also said that “the elections were marred by the lack of a proper campaign finance framework” and that “numerous allegations of corrupt resources being used by political contestants and of voters being paid for their consideration were rife.”

In apparent agreement with this last point, IEBC Chair Erastus Edung Ethekeon has recently called on Parliament to comprehensively reform the Election Campaign Financing Law, warning that the current legal vacuum has exposed elections to “unchecked spending” and “illicit funds”. He also argued that greater transparency in election financing would help curb “foreign interference”.

Agents of change

Surprisingly, youth voter registration has recently surged, driven largely by unfunded youth movements such as Niko Kadi, which is mobilising peers and the wider public into political engagement. The phrase Niko Kadi, meaning “I have the card”, is now sweeping across the country as Gen Z voters document their journey towards the 2027 general election on TikTok, X, Instagram, in matatus, on university campuses, and even in casual conversations among friends.

The movement may not yet receive much gratification from the upcoming polls; our two-party elite system is still firmly established. But many Kenyans are already welcoming it as a possible agent of change.

(1) This article from the EU’s diplomatic service, the EEAS, is dated 17 January 2017 but reports on support for elections that took place in October 2017.

This week in the Bulletin & Record

Powerful, often drunk, the “Jimbos” are now a major cause of increased political violence

Politics is often as much about myths and illusions, smoke and mirrors, as it is about policy-making. One such myth often repeated in Zambia is that we have peaceful elections. We do not. The recent presidential election is a case in point.

Charles Mafa reports.

Political violence is not new in Zambia’s history, but there is an alarming trend of increasing political violence spearheaded by youth cadres for hire – sometimes more bluntly referred to as “hire-a-thug”. It is a serious concern.

In the January presidential election there were violent clashes mainly between elements favouring the ruling Patriotic Front (PF) and the opposition United Party for National Development (UPND). Police reports show that a majority of people arrested for these clashes, and those appearing before the courts as a result, were from the ruling Patriotic Front (PF).

It is not difficult to notice the many young people who have flooded political parties in Zambia. They are powerful and very often drunk. In some circles they are known as “Jimbos”.

‘Jimbos,’ is a short form for Gym Boys, meaning muscle men, young men who are out to take action against anyone standing in their party’s way. They constitute an unofficial militia of political parties, and certain leaders within those parties pay them “wages”. They can often be identified by the way they dress. Their “uniform” is either green overalls and a green beret or the same attire but in black. Their style of dress and political harassment is similar to that used by

Powerful, often drunk, the “Jimbos” are now a major cause of increased political violence cont...

followers of Julius Malema, now leader of the Economic Freedom Fighters party in South Africa after his expulsion as leader of the ANC Youth League.

An example of the “new” violence often cited is that which occurred in Shiwa Ng’andu constituency, when PF supporters stoned a helicopter carrying supporters of the UPND.

Other cases of violence that took place during the campaign period and resulted in court appearances included:

- Eight suspected PF cadres armed with machetes and stones attacked a Mahogany luxury coach bus in Lusaka.
- Seven suspected PF cadres armed with machetes and stones attacked and assaulted fellow cadres who were lodging at Garden House Motel in Lusaka.
- 11 suspected PF cadres were accused of damaging a Toyota Spacio using planks as well as assaulting the driver who was dressed in UPND regalia.
- Nine PF cadres were found in possession of 11 machetes and two axes along Kasangula Road in Lusaka’s Mandevu area.
- One UPND cadre was accused of stealing K10,000 from a vehicle that was being used by PF cadres after a fight ensued between the two groups in Chipata.
- Four PF cadres were accused of assaulting UPND cadres who had gone to receive their campaign team, which included Maureen Mwanawasa among others.
- Three UPND cadres were found in possession of offensive weapons in Kasama.

There were many such incidents, most of which did not receive court attention. The nasty rivalry between supporters of the two political parties continued even after the election and it cast a shadow over the entire process.

It seems that some members of the political elite pay cadres to threaten and actually engage in violence. Poor enforcement of the law enables them to get away with it.

Many Zambians believe that a root cause of such political violence is

poverty and lack of opportunities for youths, and unless these are addressed the problem will continue. The cadres are, after all, paid to be disruptive. It becomes their job, presumably in the absence of any other work. But who are their paymasters?

Antonio Mwanza, spokesperson for FDD (1) says it is difficult to deal with political violence because it has become part of the political institution. He said violence is being used by some politicians to prolong their stay in power and scare off opponents.

“Violence is sponsored and orchestrated by senior members of political parties. It is not because of these young people overzealously believing in the ideals of their political parties.”

Mr Mwanza believes that violence in Zambia has become an economic activity because people get paid to be involved in violence.

“They become tools of violence because they are vulnerable and they can use violence to raise money to sustain themselves.”

“Those young people are being mentally militarised. You make them believe that their job is to be militia members of the party. Their job is to harass and intimidate people. That is their job. Even when you meet them, you realise that even the way they carry themselves, it is in a brutal manner.”

The former student union leader recalled a youth day celebration in 2013, when a group of cadres from the ruling party marched in front of army officers, wearing military uniforms. He said that to this day, police had taken no action to arrest violent youths. He charged that ruling party cadres had infiltrated police, thereby rendering law enforcement ineffective.

The police, however, say there is no basis for these allegations. “I would say no,” said Mrs Esther Mwaata Katongo, police assistant spokesperson. “For how long has the PF been in power and how many times have we recruited?” she asked. “Unless maybe, they say, they’re coming from MMD because MMD was in power for a long time.”

She said the failure by individual police officers to act did not represent

the position of the institution as a whole. “We’re not saying that this (failure to act) is common to the police, because if it were common, there was not going to be peace in this country.”

Official statistics from the Zambia Police indicate that between November and January, 98 people were arrested from 30 cases reported to the police. The cases covered ranged from assault, malicious damage to property, possession of offensive weapons, theft, destroying campaign materials and conduct likely to breach the peace. Among the reported cases during that period, just seven were taken to court.

“The challenge we have in dealing with these cases is that people don’t want to give evidence in court,” said Mrs Katongo “It is up to the people who are complaining to take the lead. People would just come and report and they would go without coming back.”

Mr Mwanza said this country needs to take serious examples from Kenya, from Libya and the entire Arab Spring for what happens to young people who are trapped in poverty, unemployment and lack of opportunities. They were a danger to society, and “there are no levels of appeasement that the current government is going to do to please these youth.” They need to deal with real issues affecting the youth,” he says.

He observed that young people, both educated and uneducated, have let the country down. Those who have been to school, he said, use their education to obtain favours for appointments. “They use their education for blind loyalty. The uneducated use their muscles. They can be hired to beat up people, chant slogans and cause confusion.”

Experts say political violence has deep roots in Zambian history. They say some of the earliest forms of youth cadres appeared shortly after independence in 1964, and began moving throughout the Copperbelt and the separatist Barotseland area of Western Province, attacking groups and individuals perceived to be part of the opposition.

Through the Youth League of the United National Independence Party (UNIP),

these cadres were known to attack and burn down houses of people it suspected as being members of the opposition Zambian African National Congress (ZANC). This intimidation caused many citizens, especially those perceived to be supporting the opposition, to hide out and sleep in the bush.

The churches are worried too. Catholic bishops have called for legal reforms that would give the Electoral Commission of Zambia and police the powers necessary to deal with offenders. “In this regard, the police service must be above board in their non-partisan and professional conduct, thereby engendering and sustaining public confidence in the electoral process,” the Zambia Episcopal Conference said through a statement.

It all comes down to what kinds of signals are given to party supporters – what is encouraged, tolerated, rewarded, and condemned. Mr Mwanza notes that as long as the critical issues of youth unemployment, poverty, and delinquency are not addressed, the violence will not end. “And as long as these politicians who hire young people are not named and shamed. This violence will never end,” he said.

1. Smart, intelligent, amiable

Antonio Mwanza, 35, spokesperson for FDD, appears to be that rarity – a young politician with the ambition and vision to succeed. He is smart, intelligent and amiable. His boss, FDD leader Edith Nawakwi, spotted his talent early on and made him the party’s spokesperson, and he is also FDD’s youth leader.

During the recent election he was busy on social media, posting and tweeting campaign messages for FDD. It seems that this paid off. Although the vote was small, FDD actually beat MMD – which ran the country for 20 years – into 3rd place behind PF and UPND. Furthermore, FDD was spared the violence that rocked the major parties.

Mr Mwanza’s interest in politics dates back to his days as student union leader at UNZA. Regarding the violence carried out by disaffected young people he observed “it doesn’t matter whether you have six points or not, you’re going

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to be equally worse off as any other person who doesn't have education because both of you end up on the street. They (young people) become tools of violence because they're vulnerable and they can use violence to raise money to sustain themselves.”

This story first appeared in the March 2015 edition of the Bulletin & Record Magazine.

Some of the people featured in this story have since passed away.



Antonio Mwanza



Esther Mwaata Katongo