

2025 Report on Democracy in Central Africa

THE ROLE OF
THINK TANKS AND
CIVIL SOCIETY



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List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

AFRICOM:	United States African Command
ALCT:	Association for the Fight Against Corruption in Chad
ARCAI :	African Research Center on Artificial Intelligence
ASF-Cameroon:	Lawyers Without Borders Cameroon
ATPDH:	Chadian Association for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights
CAFOB:	Collective of NGOs and Women's Associations of Burundi
ECOWAS :	Economic Community of West African states
ECCAS :	Economic Community of Central African States
CEMAC :	Economic and Monetary Community of Central African
REC :	Regional Economic Community
CEREDDA:	Center for Research on Democracy and Development in Africa
CEREG :	Center for Studies and Research in Economics and Management
CERF-DEV:	Center for Studies, Research and Training for Development
CESBC :	Centre d'Études Stratégiques du Bassin du Congo
CHRDA :	Center for Human Rights and Democracy in Central Africa
CIVICUS:	World Alliance for Citizen Participation
CLC :	Lay Coordination Committee
CNOE :	National Commission for Elections Observation
CNSC:	National Council of Civil Society of Cameroon
MOE_OSC :	Civil Society Organizations for Election Observation Mission of Gabon
CRG :	Congo Research Group
DFJ:	Women Lawyers Dynamics
EDI :	Electoral Democracy Index
EGTC :	School of Governance and Transformation

EIU:	The Economist Intelligence Unit
ELECAM:	Elections Cameroon
GRAMP-TC:	Group for Alternative Research and Monitoring of the Chad-Cameroon Oil Project
IDEA:	International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance
IGAC:	Institute for Governance in Central Africa
IIAG:	Ibrahim Index of African Governance
IPAR Rwanda:	Institute of Policy Analysis and Research Rwanda
ISS:	Institute for Security Studies
LDI :	Liberal Democracy Index
LICOCO:	Ligue Congolaise contre la Corruption
LTDH:	Ligue Tchadienne des Droits de l'homme
LUCHA:	Fight for Change
MWP:	More Women in Politics
OCDH (CAR)	Central African Observatory for Human Rights
OCDH (Congo)	Congolese Observatory for Human Rights
OCDH E (Congo)	Congolese Observatory for Human Rights and the Environment
ODEP:	Public Expenditure Observatory
NGO :	Non-Governmental Organization
OSC :	Organisations de la Société Civile
UNDP :	United Nations Development Programme
PLANOSCAM:	Plate-forme Nationale des Organisations de la Société Civile du Cameroun
CAR :	Central African Republic
DRC :	Democratic Republic of the Congo
REDHAC :	Réseau des Défenseurs des Droits Humains en Afrique Centrale
REFELA-Cameroon:	Réseau des femmes élues locales d'Afrique – Section Cameroun
AWLN_CA :	African Women Leaders Network of Central Africa

REPONGAC :	Réseau des Plateformes d'ONG d'Afrique Centrale
ROTAB :	Réseau des Organisations pour la Transparence et l'Analyse Budgétaire
SADC :	Southern African Development Community
SCATT BRIDGE:	Strengthening Central Africa Think Tanks to Boost Resilience in the Democracy and Governance Ecosystem
SCC:	Société Civile Congolaise
TLP-Gabon:	Tournons La Page Gabon
AU :	African Union
EUAS :	Economic Union of Central African States
UNECA:	United Nations Economic Commission for Africa
USA:	United States of America
WWF:	World Wide Fund for Nature

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Foreword



Dr. Denis A. Foretia

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The consolidation of democracy remains one of the most important governance challenges facing Central Africa today. More than three decades after the political transitions of the early 1990s, the region continues to navigate a complex landscape characterized by institutional reforms, evolving political systems, growing civic engagement, and persistent governance constraints.

While important progress has been recorded in the establishment of constitutional frameworks, electoral processes, and democratic institutions, significant challenges remain. Across the region, questions relating to accountability, civic participation, political inclusion, institutional effectiveness, and the protection of civic space continue to shape public debate and influence governance outcomes.

It is within this context that the Nkafu Policy Institute is pleased to present this flagship report, **“Democracy in Central Africa: The Role of Think Tanks and Civil Society.”** Produced under the SCATT-BRIDGE project, the report examines the evolution of democratic governance in Central Africa and explores the critical role that civil society organizations and think tanks play in strengthening accountability, promoting civic engagement, generating policy-relevant evidence, and supporting democratic resilience.

The report highlights both the achievements and limitations of democratic reform efforts across the region. It also demonstrates that sustainable democratic progress cannot rely solely on formal institutions. Strong civic actors, independent research organizations, active citizen participation, and meaningful policy dialogue remain essential components of democratic consolidation.

Importantly, the report does not seek merely to diagnose challenges. It also identifies opportunities and proposes practical recommendations for governments, civil society organizations, think tanks, regional institutions, and development partners committed to advancing democratic governance across Central Africa.

We hope that this publication contributes to informed policy discussions, stimulates constructive dialogue, and serves as a useful resource for policymakers, researchers, development practitioners, civil society actors, and citizens working to strengthen democratic governance in the region.

The Nkafu Policy Institute remains committed to supporting evidence-based policymaking and fostering inclusive dialogue that contributes to peace, prosperity, and democratic development in Central Africa.

Executive Summary

Central Africa has not remained on the sidelines of the wave of democratization that swept across every continent following the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989. After more than three decades, it seems worthwhile to assess the progress made in order to draw a number of lessons. This is the objective of this Report, which is part of the SCATT-BRIDGE project initiated by the NKAUFU Policy Institute. Analysis of the collected data highlights the degree of consolidation of the democratic process within the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS).

The state of democracy in ECCAS

In ECCAS, the state of the democratic process appears mixed. While significant progress has been made on the legal and institutional fronts, numerous obstacles hinder its development. Therefore, the degree of democratization can be measured using indicators developed by the Mo Ibrahim Foundation in the domain of governance in general, and democracy in particular. Through these indicators, the ranking of African states in terms of governance and democracy reflects both achievements and challenges. According to the Mo Ibrahim Index, Central African states are among the lowest-ranked on the continent, with an average score of around 40%. An analysis of governance indicators reveals that these are fragile states are characterized by a lack of political transition. Several countries in the region continue to experience prolonged political leadership, coupled with restrictions on civic space, media freedoms, and opportunities for independent policy engagement.

Yet, normative progress in the consolidation of democracy is evident. At the regional level, an

African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance was adopted in 2007 by the African Union. It lays a solid foundation for promoting transparent elections, strengthening participatory democracy, and prohibiting any authoritarian exercise of political power. This law has been ratified by most Central African states, even though it is not legally binding. Building on this, other regional or national laws safeguard democratic gains, such as constitutions, electoral laws, and laws relating to civil liberties. These laws have served as the basis for the creation of institutions that foster democracy, whether participatory or adjudicatory. However, despite a proliferation of legal texts and institutions, the practical entrenchment of democracy remains problematic. This disconnect between theory and practice stems from the obstacles that stand in the way of this process.

Persistent obstacles

Talking about obstacles, a twofold trend sufficiently explains the weak roots of democracy in Central Africa. On the one hand, it appears that governing authorities exploit the legal framework of democracy to retain power by neutralizing the opposition and civil society. In this regard, it is worth noting the widespread manipulation of electoral law, sometimes through biased enforcement to eliminate certain competitors, and sometimes because the rules are not established by consensus. Similarly, there has been a proliferation of constitutional amendments aimed at removing term limits. Cases of non-enforcement of the law are also evident through a weakened judiciary and a worsening of impunity, which contributes to a drastic curtailment of civil liberties. This hostile environment has had negative

consequences for democracy, such as the shrinking of civic space, the repression of movements and other political demonstrations, the use of tribalism, and the rejection of reforms that promote transparency and accountability.

An active contribution from Think tanks and Civil society

Civil society organizations intervene in diverse areas such as: human rights advocacy, good governance, democracy, protection of environment, humanitarian aid. In the domain of democracy, Civil society organization led activities such as: observing political elections, combating corruption and promoting transparency, promoting gender equality and women's participation in political activities, media independence and promoting freedom of opinion, of the press and of communication, and freedom of association, assembly, and demonstration.

Think Tank also involve in the field of democracy and “play a vital role in generating policy research, promoting ideas, and fostering discussion between the public and policymakers”. For Théophile NGUIMFACK VOUFO, Think tank are important for strengthening democracy in central Africa. Therefore, Democracy think tanks and civil society organizations are increasingly active in the field of democracy. Through intellectual pursuits and practical actions, they contribute to raising awareness, strengthening civil society advocacy and leadership vis-à-vis the institutions responsible for public policy. Their actions also reinforce accountability, inclusion, and civic and political dialogue.

Challenges and opportunities

Analysis reveals numerous obstacles to the actions of think tanks and civil society, including the shrinking of the civic space, political repression, a lack of financial resources and cumbersome funding procedures, scarcity of data tracking the activities of public institutions, and the unavailability of human resources trained in advocacy. Faced with these difficulties, think tanks and other civil society organizations must:

- Strengthen their internal governance and institutional management systems; adapt their programming and engagement strategies to evolving governance challenges and emerging policy priorities,
- Diversify their sources of funding; diversify funding sources by putting in place mechanisms of raising funds in the aim to reduce dependency on external donors. They can develop hybrid funding models combining local private sector partnerships, membership-based contributions, and targeted international grants.
- Prioritize strong collaboration with other civil society organizations, as well as public institutions.



Introduction



Understood as the power (kratos) of the people (demos), democracy is a system of political organization whose original political experience was in the ancient Greek city-state of Athens. In this context, it refers to the direct participation of citizens in the government of the city. Originally implemented as a direct democracy, democracy was defined by Abraham Lincoln as “government of the people, by the people, and for the people.” This idea of democracy, as expressed by Abraham Lincoln in his 1963 speech, seems more like an ideal than a reality. Georges Gurvitch points out that it is important to distinguish between the essence of democracy and the forms of its implementation. The essence of democracy lies in the organization of the distribution of power. The forms of democracy are so varied, yet they share common characteristics that constitute its essence: the sovereignty of the people, which forms the foundation; the participation of the people; and the rule of law. Considering those common characteristics, African states at the first years of independence had tried to implement democracy but rapidly regarding their fragility, most of the leaders turn to instore authoritarian regime and non-democratic system till 1990 where the continent enter to a waste of democratization.

Africa began its transition to democracy after the fall of the Berlin Wall with the Sovereign National Conference of Benin, held from February 19th to 28th, 1990. A pioneer in this area on the African continent, Benin is cited as a model of democracy. Following Benin’s example, other African states embarked on the path of democratization, notably the member states of the Economic and Monetary Community of Central African States (CEMAC).

In Central Africa, the first steps toward a “return to democracy” were taken firstly by Gabon where Omar Bongo decided under the pressure of Civil society and students’ contestations to organize a National Conference which took place from 23th March to 19th April 1990. For the others countries, following the June 1990 La Baule speech, in which France made development aid contingent on “the efforts that states would make to move toward democracy,

“Central Africa states consequently embarked on political transitions that followed different paths. While Chad as Gabon did earlier, organized national conferences, Cameroon opted for a tripartite meeting, and the Central African Republic plunged into a cycle of endless crises marked by a few moments of “democratic experiments.” Equatorial Guinea, for its part, proceeded with a controlled opening of the political scene, and Congo-Brazzaville opened up slowly to democracy. The processes set in motion led to constitutional reforms and the organization of elections. Those process of transition to democracy was supported by an emerging Civil society which played a role of catalyzing democratic transition. In fact, with democratic transition, emerge new actors in the political scene named as “forces vives” (syndicates, churches, associations of human rights defense, academic experts) and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO). Globally refers to the collective of non-governmental organizations, community groups, and associations that operate independently of the state and the market, civil society fosters civic engagement, promotes social justice, and advocates for public interests.

But very quickly, the “democratic” institutions put in place struggled to function “democratically.” With the diversity of forms of democratic implementation, democracy becomes increasingly difficult to define. It is measured primarily by democratic indices that determine whether a regime is democratic by assessing citizen participation in political life, governance (Mo Ibrahim Index), and respect for and guarantee of human rights (Freedom House Index). The assessment considers five dimensions: (i) free and transparent elections (the reliability of the electoral process);

- i. The rule of law (protection and guarantee of human rights and civil and political freedoms);
- ii. Citizen political participation;
- iii. Citizen engagement in public debate and civil society (democratic culture); and
- iv. Legitimate government.

Considering these different dimensions of democracy and examining the 2025 reports from various institutes and foundations on democracy in Africa, it is clear that the states of Central Africa are ranked among the least democratic countries in Africa (Table 1).

The rigidity of electoral systems and the control of the political scene by a political class largely opposed to democracy were factors in a subtle return to authoritarianism.

Table 1: Ranking of African States in the 2024/2025 Democracy Reports

Country	Mo Ibrahim	EIU Democracy Index 2024	Freedom House 2025 Report	IDEA'S GSoD 2025 report	V-Dem
Cameroon	42.9	2.56	15	0.337	0.21
Congo	39.7	2.79	17	0.302	0.18
Gabon	46.6	3.40	21	0.000	0.20
Equatorial Guinea	30.1	1.92	5	0.260	/
RCA	31.5	1.43	5	0.322	0.20
Chad	34.8	1.67	15	0.266	0.14

Source: Data compiled by the authors after consulting the websites of the cited institutes and foundations.

According to the EIU Democracy Index report published in 2025, the five least democratically developed African countries are the Central African Republic (CAR), Sudan, Chad, Equatorial Guinea, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Three of these countries are members of the CEMAC (Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa). The V-DEM, which measures the Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) and the Electoral Democracy Index (EDI), places Chad at the bottom of the rankings, demonstrating that Central African states are among the least democratic on the continent.

Various reports on democracy highlight that globally, democracy is in sharp decline, and this phenomenon is even more pronounced on the African continent.

Reports on democracy in 2025 published by the EIU, Freedom House, and IDEA all note a significant decline in democracy worldwide. The measurement indicators they use suggest that freedoms are in sharp decline and that the shrinking of civic space undermines the activities of civil society and think tanks. Faced with the threat of a return to authoritarianism in several states, it is important

to revisit the original definition of democracy, civil society, and think tanks.

This report argues that democratic stagnation in Central Africa is not primarily the result of a lack of formal democratic institutions, but rather of a persistent gap between institutional design and political practice. While constitutions, electoral systems, and democratic institutions have multiplied across the region since the 1990s, their transformative potential has frequently been constrained by entrenched political interests, limited accountability, weak enforcement of democratic norms, and the shrinking of civic space. In this context, civil society organizations and think tanks have emerged as critical actors in sustaining democratic dialogue, promoting evidence-based policymaking, strengthening accountability, and helping preserve democratic gains. The report therefore examines both the obstacles facing democratic consolidation and the contribution of civil society and think tanks to strengthening democratic governance in Central Africa.

While this report adopts a Central African perspective and refers broadly to the ECCAS region, the empirical analysis focuses primarily on CEMAC member states. This reflects the geographic focus of the SCATT-BRIDGE project, the availability of comparable governance data, and the concentration of partner institutions and documented civil society initiatives within this sub-region. References to Central Africa should therefore be understood within this analytical scope.

General and specific objectives of the Report

The overall objective of this report is to conduct an in-depth analysis of the contribution of civil society and think tanks to preserving the gains of the democratization processes initiated since 1990 and the impact of their actions on consolidating these processes. It aims to identify the specific areas where civil society actors and think tanks working in the field

of democracy and governance need to strengthen their leadership capacities. The goal is to develop resilience that will enable them to increase their impact and influence within the civic space in Central Africa.

The specific objectives are of three kinds:

- Evaluate the role of civil society and think tanks in supporting democratization processes. Assess their ability to develop a relevant and coherent action plan, generate new ideas, and effectively influence public decision-makers.
- Assess the impact of their actions on consolidating the democratic institutions established. To this end, to develop a map of the ecosystem of democracy and governance for a better understanding of their actions and their effects.
- Analyze the difficulties encountered in the current political configurations which suggest that the states of Central Africa are gradually returning to authoritarianism.

Methodological framework of the Report

The data collected for this Report are secondary data from literature reviews. Scientific articles provided the theoretical framework for the Report. For the assessment of the democratization processes, the 2025 Democracy Reports produced by institutes and foundations such as EIU, Freedom House, Mo Ibrahim, V-Dem, and IDEA were consulted and analyzed from their websites. By comparing the data collected from those reports which do not have the same criteria of appreciation, the report aims to evaluate a wide range of practices which refers to democracy. The authors' practical experience was also taken into account (elections observers, discussions with representatives of think tanks partnering with the SCATT-BRIDGE Project).

This report relies primarily on secondary data sources, including democracy indices, governance assessments, academic literature, policy reports, and documentary reviews. While these sources facilitate broad regional comparison, they may not fully capture informal political practices, localized governance dynamics, and context-specific realities across all Central African countries.

The mapping of civil society organizations and think tanks combines documentary analysis with consultations conducted within the SCATT-BRIDGE ecosystem and partner networks. Consequently, certain organizations operating outside these networks may not be fully represented. In addition, democracy indices produced by international institutions provide valuable comparative perspectives, but may not always capture the full complexity of local political contexts.

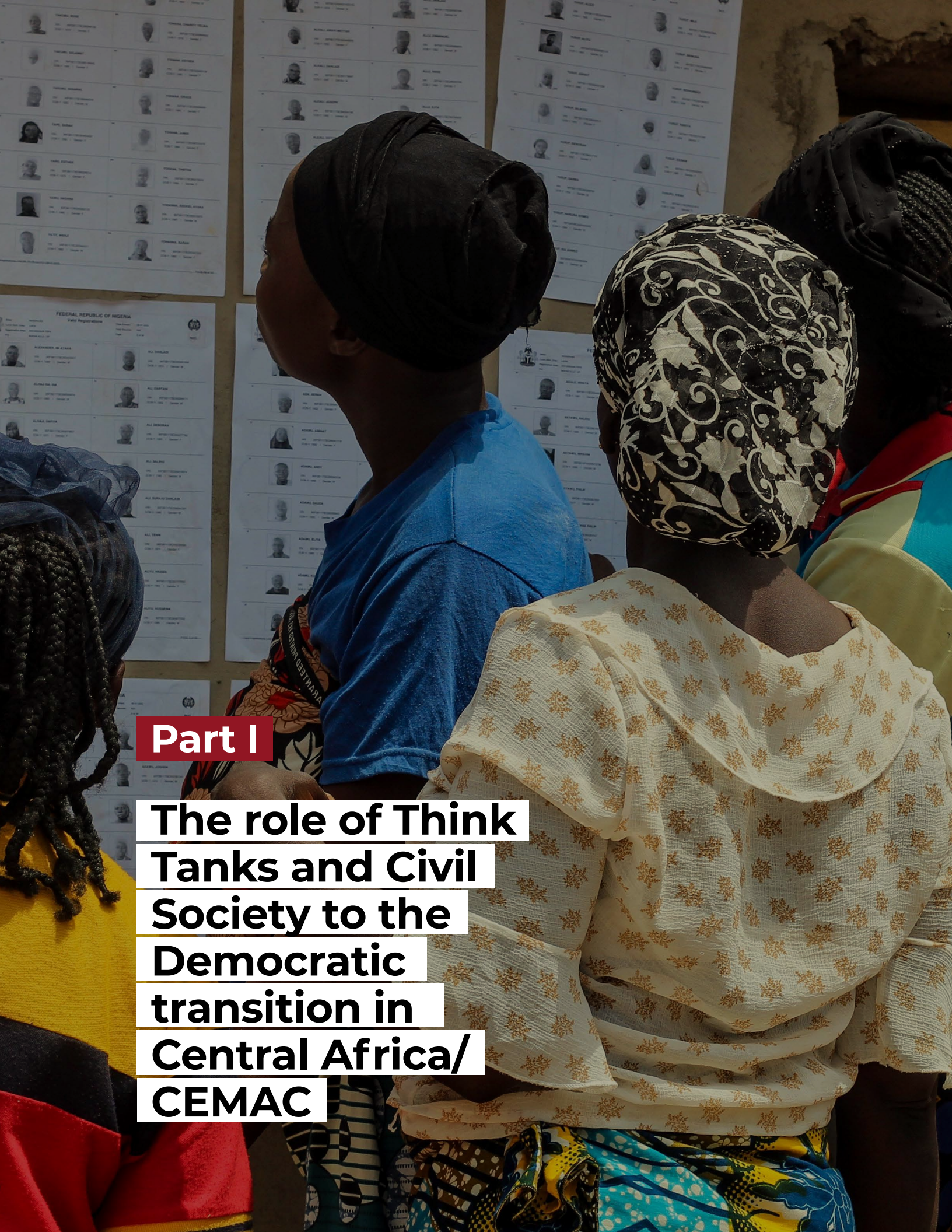
Finally, given that the Nkafu Policy Institute is itself an active participant in the governance and policy ecosystem under review, efforts were made to triangulate information through multiple independent sources to strengthen objectivity and analytical balance.

The qualitative and quantitative data collected from Scatt-Bridge partners are interpreted in a systemic analysis for a better understanding of the institutions and ecosystem in which the African member states of the ECCAS evolve. The systemic analysis of the political context and institutions of the Central African states makes it possible to determine the essential issues relating to the progress of the democratization process on which civil society actors and think tanks can be trained to make a better contribution to evident progress towards democracy.

Report Outline

This report is divided into two main parts. The first part focuses on a critical analysis of democratization process in Central Africa since the early 2020s. Several

significant events paint a grim picture: the contested elections in Gabon, which resulted in a military coup and the organization of a new presidential election; the death of former Chadian President Idriss Déby and the subsequent rise to power of his son, Mahamat Déby; the fact that Equatorial Guinea and Cameroon have not yet experienced political alternation since the 1980s; and the Central African Republic, which is struggling to emerge from a cycle of recurring crises. The aim is to take stock of the progress made in this process. The second part assesses the contribution of think tanks and civil society to the consolidation of democracy in Central Africa. In fact, a political transition to democracy follows a path that leads from the effective exit from authoritarianism with the establishment of democratic institutions (transition) to the socio-cultural entrenchment of these institutions in the political practices of citizens and leaders (consolidation). Consolidation implies the effective functioning of democratic institutions and a reduction in the risk of political change through violence. It presupposes constitutional and institutional conditions favorable to political alternation and public debate. But upon observation, the states of Central Africa seem far from consolidating their democratic process.



Part I

**The role of Think
Tanks and Civil
Society to the
Democratic
transition in
Central Africa/
CEMAC**

In his book “Civil society”, Michael Edwards notice that concepts of civil society have a rich history. Initially, the term became popular in the 80s of the previous century, when the citizens’ union, the movement opposed authoritarian regimes, especially in European states. After the fall of the wall of Berlin, the idea and involvement of civil society became more and more relevant all around the world. For Pampa Mukherjee, Civil society is essentially regarded as an integral feature of liberal democratic system where citizens have a freedom to organize, deliberate, participate and affect policy decisions on lines of securing the rights and interests of the members of the society.

The democratization process in Cameroon, Gabon, Chad, Equatorial Guinea, Congo and CAR began at the end of the Cold War after the fall of the wall of Berlin in 1989 and took diverse trajectories. This major event led to many protests and demonstrations by civil society organizations, disgruntled students and clandestine political parties. The Baule discourse the 20th June 1990 have been mythically presented as the discourse trigger which constraints government to engaged significantly in the process of democratization. In Gabon, following the example of Benin, Omar Bongo on the pressure organize in Libreville from march 23th to April 19th 1990, the National Sovereign Conference. Congo–Brazzaville organized his National Sovereign Conference in 1991 from February 25th to June 10th. Observing the political scene of Africa, political leaders and civil society in Cameroon claim also an organization of National

Sovereign conference but the President Paul Biya answer at the National Assembly in June 27th that “la conférence nationale souveraine est sans objet pour le Cameroun”. At the place, he had convened at the place a tripartite, an encounter between government, political parties and members of civil society. The tripartite took place from October 30th to November 15th 1991. Chad organized a National Sovereign Conference in 1993 from January 15th to April 7th. In CAR, the President André Kolingba rejected the idea of National sovereign conference claim by political leaders of opposition but conceded to reform the Constitution in 1991 in such a way to end with monolithic system and adopt a pluralism. In Equatorial Guinea, there wasn’t such experience. Facing pressures both international and internal, the President Theodoro Obiang Nguema Mbazogo, in power since 1979 concede a signature of a “National Pact” in march 18th 1993 between Government and opposition in the aim to legalize political parties and end with the monolithic system, but the process was highly control by the government. So in analysis, Gabon, Congo and Chad have organized National Sovereign Conference, Cameroon a tripartite and CAR and Equatorial Guinea just made some adjustments in the Constitution. All those procedures used to engage the country to democratic process are determined to explain the state of democracy in each of those state today. All those states had ratified the African Charter of Democracy, Elections and Governance¹ adopted in Addis Abeba on 30th January 2007.

Country	Date of Signature	Date of Ratification	Date deposited
Cameroon	-	24/08/2011	16/01/2012
CAR	28/06/2008	24/04/2017	06/03/2019
Chad	22/01/2009	11/07/2011	13/10/2011
Congo	18/06/2007	-	-
Equatorial Guinea	30/01/2011	11/07/2017	08/10/2019
Gabon	02/02/2010	-	-

1. According to African Union statistics, out of 55 African countries, 46 have signed the Charter, while 39 had ratified it as of 8 July 2024. In Central Africa, only two countries have not ratified the Charter; Gabon signed it on 2 February 2010, but has not yet ratified it. The Democratic Republic of Congo has neither signed nor ratified the text. For the rest, there has been spontaneous adherence to the principles, norms, and values enshrined in the Charter.

The adoption of this Charter seventeen years after the beginning of the process was explained by the “concerned about the unconstitutional changes of government” presented as “one of the essential causes of insecurity, instability and violent conflict in Africa”. The Charter has as first objective to “promote adherence to the universal values and principles of democracy and respect for human rights”. According the chapter 3 of the charter article 3, African Union enounce eleven principles of democracy that we can resume: respect for human rights, rule of law, regular,

transparent, free and fair elections, pluralism, respect of the Constitution. Three decades after the “wave of democracy” of the 1990s, undeniable gains have been made – formally recognized political pluralism, regular elections, emergence of an independent press, enshrinement of fundamental rights and freedoms in the constitution – while glaring democratic deficits remain: excessive presidentialism, constitutional amendments to allow unlimited terms, contested elections and sometimes marred by massive fraud, and progressive shrinking of civic space.

CHAPTER 1

The Catalytic role of Civil society and Thinks Thanks in the Democratic transition

The emergence of organized and politically engaged civil society in Central Africa is part of a long historical dynamic. Since the resistance to single-party regimes in the 1980s, the national conferences of the early 1990s established the central role of civil society in Central African political systems. Organization of Civil society were involved in the process of democratization since 1990. There were members of National Conference held in Gabon, Chad and Congo and also members of Tripartite held in Cameroon. Civil society in Gabon made a high pressure to the Omar Bongo's regime to organize a sort of Etats généraux of the pluralism. The National Conference where not sovereign as that of Congo. Civil society combined their forces with political parties, movement of students to constraints government to made a diagnostic of the governance of state and to advocate for a new institutional framework and a return to democracy with an institutionalized of Etat de droit and effective pluralism. But all the recommendations made and conclusions held were not obligatory for the government since the conference had not a sovereign character. The issue of This National Conference was the adoption of National Charter of Liberties

adopted in 26th July 1990, which led to the abolition of the monopartism The Charter was adopted as the fundamental Law of Gabon and has been promulgated as the 4th Constitution of the Gabon since independence by the law n° 3-91 du 26 mars 1991. It was put in place a National Council of democracy in charge to watch over the respect of the decisions of National Conference. Many NGO was created in 1990 in Gabon to participate to the National Conference. It is estimated of 500 NGO associations and NGO participating to this conference but many of them has not develop activities after the Conference.

At the Tripartite led in Yaoundé at Palais de Congrès from 30th October to 15th November 1991, the civil society were represented by influents personalities: Cardinal Christian Tumi and Bishop Jérôme Owono Mimboé of Catholic Church, Prof. Aletum Tabuwe as academic expert

The civil society represented in the tripartite did not include Organizations such as NGO or associations of civil society but corporatists representations such churches, syndicates, commercial chamber, order of

advocate, traditional authorities, academic experts and influents personalities of civil society

1.1. Civil society in the democratic transition

Civil society in Central Africa is diverse. In terms of promoting democratic governance, the rule of law, and citizen participation, it is subdivided into several distinct areas of intervention: knowledge and expertise production, human rights advocacy, elections observation, fight against corruption, gender promotion, press freedom, and citizen mobilization.

1.2. The dynamism of Think Tanks

Despite lack of clear traceability on the origin and evolution of think tanks, popular opinion among research communities suggest that think tanks emerged in the United States in the early twentieth century as institutions dedicated to producing independent, policy-oriented research to inform government decision-making. Initially rooted in academic rigor and technocratic expertise, American think tanks played a central role in shaping public policy by translating complex research into actionable recommendations for policymakers. Over time, this model expanded beyond the United States, spreading to Europe and eventually to the Global South, where it was adapted to different political, social, and economic contexts.

In Africa, the think tank model evolved in response to distinct historical and governance realities. Rather than functioning solely as policy advisory bodies, African think tanks increasingly combined research with advocacy, civic engagement, and capacity building. Their emergence was closely linked to periods of political liberalization, structural adjustment, and democratization, particularly from the late 1980s onward. As a result, African think tanks became key actors in supporting democratic transitions, strengthening accountability, and amplifying local policy voices in national and regional debates. Today, African think tanks reflect a hybrid evolution of the

original American model retaining a commitment to evidence-based policy analysis while responding to constrained civic spaces, limited access to data, and pressing development challenges. In this adapted form, think tanks serve not only as generators of knowledge but also as advocates for inclusive governance and democratic reform, ensuring that locally grounded evidence informs policy across the continent. Generally registered and authorized to operate as nonprofit research organizations, these knowledge hubs act as intellectual strongholds, promoting educated discussion, driving discourse through dialogues and debates and providing crucial evidence-based information to decision-makers. Governance think tanks within the context of this report should best be understood as independent knowledge hubs and research organizations focused on improving policies, governance structures and operational practices by developing new ideas, producing evidence-based analysis and influencing decision-makers in government, diplomatic spaces, development partners, business executives, and civil society through evidence-informed reports, events, and expert communication, aiming to bridge academic research with practical policy solutions for public benefit.

Within the Central African Region, Central African think tanks have moved beyond their role as static actors to more adaptive, innovative, and increasingly influential actors despite numerous structural constraints further highlighting their dynamism across the political and economic spheres. This dynamism has been greatly triggered by political and governance pressures, a shrinking civic space which breeds opportunities and serves as catalyst for innovation. At the core of governance think tanks in Central Africa is a commitment not only to produce knowledge, but to challenge ineffective policies, expose governance failures, and amplify evidence in defense of democratic accountability. In contexts where public decisions are often made with limited transparency, the strategic use of data becomes a powerful advocacy tool for transforming research into credible evidence that can influence policy debates, protect civic space, and promote inclusive governance.

Progress in the Democratic Process in Central Africa

As presented by the African Charter of democracy, the key democratic features centering on respect of human rights, separation of power, regular elections that are free and fair, fight against corruption, media freedom, gender equality, political stability, good governance. The Mo Ibrahim Foundation has also developed the Ibrahim Index of African Governance (IIAG) to measure democracy and governance in Africa. It is an extensive list of indicators covering security and rule of law, participation, rights and inclusion, economic opportunity and human development. By progress, this report refers to the positive evolution of mechanisms contributing to the strengthening of democratic culture in Central Africa. Although it may seem worrying to observe certain anti-democratic practices in some states since the 2000s (coups d'état; civil wars), the general trend is toward consolidating the gains of the democratic renewal of the late 20th century in Africa. This progress can be grouped around two main themes: a strengthening of normative instruments (1.1) and a reinforcement of the institutional architecture (1.2.).

2.1– Legal and normative progress

The Constitution of the states of CEMAC all guarantee in their preamble their adherence to all the Convention of Human Rights. They formally argue that the State promote and guarantee all the rights and liberties signed in regional and international conventions. Also, Constitutions implemented in the form the separation of power.

Democratic Constitution and rule of Law

African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance emphasizes the separation of powers among the three branches of government. In most ECCAS countries, the presidential system has

been manipulated such that the other branches of government – the parliament and the judiciary – are at the beck and call of the presidency. It is a trend aptly captured in the Institute for Security Studies' (ISS) report by Handy and Djilo. In the ECCAS region, according to these authors, this system grants the president excessive powers and the tendency has been that they do not account to anyone. Such a system often disregards the law and the constitution. Power under the presidential system practiced in ECCAS typically changes hands not through elections but through military coups or dynastic succession. Partly because of the excessive power of the president, we further witness that incumbent leaders revise the constitution, extending presidential terms, after weakening checks and balances mechanism guaranteed by independent judiciary and legislative arms of the government. It is through such a strategy that the region hosts Africa's longest-serving presidents such as Obiang Nguema of Equatorial Guinea (46-year rule), Paul Biya of Cameroon (43-year rule), and Denis Sassou Nguesso Republic of the Congo (41-year rule). These leaders have terminated presidential term limits.

Government representative bodies have been strengthened. Alongside the parliaments established in all Central African states since independence, we see the creation of decentralized local authorities, which enjoy administrative and financial autonomy based on the councils elected by local citizens. In unitary states such as Cameroon, Chad, or Gabon, local populations are represented within municipalities, regions, departments, or cities. In a federal state such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, citizen participation in the management of local affairs takes place at the level of cities, sectors, and even chiefdoms. Local elections have become a democratic imperative, as the Central African Republic had to reconnect with them on December 28, 2025, after decades of inactivity,

to demonstrate its commitment to a strengthened democratic system.

Human rights and gender equality

Within the African Union, several conventions have been signed to guarantee the protection of human rights and democratic governance in member states. However, alongside the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, adopted on 27 June 1981 in Nairobi, and its four protocols relating respectively to the rights of women, the rights of older persons, the rights of persons with disabilities, and the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights, African states have resolved to address the issue of democracy specifically in separate texts:

This is particularly in line of making sure that women participate in the democratic process. Gender equality is not about tokenism, but about women actively involved in decision-making. The political visibility of women increases the perception of women as leaders, which in turn benefits the society. ECCAS countries have the challenge of normalizing the visibility of women within the political sphere. In this regard, governments need to develop policies that address women's political representation, needs, and human rights. ECCAS countries have recognized the importance of women participating in the democratic process, the reason the ministers in charge of gender and family harmonized a gender policy in 2019. The gender policy aims at enabling women to exercise their political rights and development, and to advance women's effective participation in policy and decision-making circles.

In Chad, the Constitution of 29 December 2024, reaffirms that Chad is a democratic republic where sovereignty belongs to the people, and its government is managed by the people and for the people. Furthermore, it includes an entire section on freedoms, fundamental rights, and duties. The separation of powers is structured there, and the legislature is responsible for legislating on civil liberties and fundamental rights under the control

of a constitutional judge. These progress, which are found in the constitutions of all other Central African states, are consolidated by specific laws on the freedom to create and operate political parties the freedom of demonstration and assembly (Law No. 1/28 of 5 December 2013, regulating demonstrations on public roads and public meetings in Burundi), and the freedom of association (Law No. 90/053 of 19 December 1990, relating to freedom of association in Cameroon, amended by Law No. 2021/022 of 16 December 2021).

The media plays important roles in a democracy: monitors political processes and decision-makers, mobilizes and informs the public, as well as provides platform for public debate, opinion and deliberations. The media offers important platforms for leaders and the citizens to interact, thus fostering civil debate on issues. For the media to play the role as the fourth arm of the government, it must be free, independent, and ideally impartial. The media landscape in most ECCAS is unfree; many reports, including those from Reporters without Borders, describe controlled media landscapes in most ECCAS countries.

Electoral Law

Most Central African states have focused on codifying electoral law. Previously, the rules governing electoral law were scattered across several laws, with some provisions overlapping and others appearing contradictory. To address these shortcomings, legislators deemed it necessary to consolidate all these laws into a single electoral code. This was achieved by dividing the electoral legislation into two parts: one containing provisions common to all elections, and the other containing provisions specific to each type of election, whether presidential, legislative, or local. The advantage of codifying electoral law lies in the transparency of the process through equal understanding of the rules. Apart from the term "electoral law" retained by the Democratic Republic of Congo, several Central African states now have an electoral code, such as Cameroon with Law No. 2012/001 of 19 April 2012, establishing the Electoral

Code, amended and supplemented by Law No. 2012/017 of 21 December 2012; Gabon with Organic Law No. 001/2025 of 19 January 2025, establishing the Electoral Code in the Gabonese Republic;

2.2. Institutions and democratic practices

Democracy manifests itself through institutions tasked with promoting or protecting it. In Central Africa, the creation of various institutions has significantly contributed to strengthening democratic culture in most states. It is important to distinguish between institutions that work towards the effective participation of citizens in the management of public affairs and those that perform an arbitration function.

Regular elections and “independent” electoral commissions

The first elections were held in Cameroon in March 1992, first legislative elections followed in October by the presidential election. For local elections the first pluralistic one was held in 1996. Since 1992, Cameroon regularly organizes pluralistic and concurrent elections. In Cameroon, Gabon, Congo and Equatorial Guinea, elections are regularly organized but they failed to be free, fair, and transparent. In fact, elections in CEMAC are often tense, with voting irregularities, in which political parties specifically the ruling parties buy votes and offer gifts to people, as a means to influence voter choice. This is in a context of mistrust, where opposition political parties and civil society organizations often accuse the incumbent power structure of corruption and vote rigging during and after the elections. In some CEMAC countries, the state responds to this by creating independent electoral commissions, defined by UN as “an organization that operates independently of political pressures and external interferences to manage elections”. CEMAC’s countries must aspire for a time when elections and electoral institutions contribute to political stability and transition, rather than contentions and suspicion. This is because in most cases, regular and

fair elections are indicators of healthy democracies. In some African countries, impartial electoral systems ‘have facilitated the emergence of democratic government’, says International Peace Institute. There are many Independent Electoral Commissions in Central Africa. In Cameroon, Government first put in place ONEL (Observatoire National des Elections) created on December 19th was so criticized in the way he organized the double scrutiny (legislative and municipals) on 30th June 2002 and the presidential elections of 2004. Facing the critics, the President instituted Elections Cameroon (ELECAM) in 2006. Since this date, ELECAM organized all the elections in Cameroon. But in 2018, around the Presidential elections, certain candidate of opposition such as Maurice Kamto and Cabral Libii denounced some statements of the Law relative to ELECAM. The denunciation of the fact there is specifically written in the law that, only the verbal process of ELECAM are authentic opening a way of manipulation of other verbal process coming from the field. In CAR, in 2009, President François Bozize signed a presidential decree to put in place the independent Electoral Commission, for the organization of general elections of March 2010. The Commission comprises representatives of the ruling party, parties of opposition, civil society and armed group joining the peace process

Democracy brings together actors with sometimes divergent interests, necessitating the creation of arbitration institutions. It is important to emphasize that arbitration most often occurs in contexts where conflicting objectives exist, and where advantageous or detrimental consequences may ensue. The institutions that play this role in consolidating democracy are sometimes jurisdictional, sometimes non-jurisdictional.

Judicial and non-judicial institutions for justice

The African Union Convention on Preventing and Combating Corruption, adopted on 11 July 2003, has garnered significant support across the continent. Statistics compiled in June 2021 show that out of 55 countries, 49 have signed the convention and 45 have

ratified it. Regarding Central African states, only the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of Congo had not yet ratified the Convention. Its aim is to end the opacity that characterizes the management of public affairs. This objective is particularly reinforced in directly applicable legislation.

🕒 **Judicial institutions**

Constitutional reforms issues from the transition process instore Constitutional council rule by the constitutional judge established as the guardian of civil and political rights within the framework of constitutional review of laws, but more importantly as the censor of their violation by the administration in states such as Gabon and Cameroon. Furthermore, the high constitutional court rules on the regularity and integrity of legislative and presidential elections, as well as on the proclamation of the results of these elections. The status of the constitutional judge, which grants him independence from other public authorities and powers designed to limit the arbitration of the latter, establishes him as a true guarantor of democracy.

Next, the administrative judge controls the regularity of local elections and sanctions the abuse of power by the administration when it violates the public freedoms guaranteed to citizens.

Finally, the jurisdictional judge, usually considered the guardian of liberties, is endowed with powers enabling him to protect the manifestations of certain rights and freedoms.

The tendency is toward the widespread adoption of accountability mechanisms and the enforcement of their responsibilities. This is what emerges from the mismanagement which is recognized in virtually all Central African states. Under Article 75 of Directive No. 01/11-UEAC-190-CM-22 of 19 December 2011, on finance laws, mismanagement is characterized by the fact that for example, any person, in the exercise of their duties or powers, causes serious harm to the State or a public body through actions visibly incompatible with the interests of the State or the

body, through serious failures in the exercise of the powers vested upon them, or through repeated omissions or negligence in their managerial role. It also sanctions violations of the rules governing the execution of revenues and expenditures of the State and other public bodies. Moreover, the classification of mismanagement brings Central African states into alignment with a key requirement of the democratic rule of law in Article 15 of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 26 July 1789, which states that every society has the right to hold any agent of its administration accountable. Achieving this objective requires strengthening the institutional framework.

🕒 Non-jurisdictional arbitration institutions

It is worth noting the creation of various bodies supporting democracy in Central Africa States.

The first category consists of national human rights commissions, which raise awareness and advocate for the protection of rights, including those that promote citizen participation in the management of public affairs. It is their responsibility to denounce violations of these rights and report them to the competent authorities so that sanctions may be imposed or the violations brought to an end, as is the case in Congo-Brazzaville.

The second category consists of bodies in charge of organizing elections, namely the Independent Electoral Commission or its equivalent and its branches, as well as all other related commissions tasked with adjudicating disputes related to voter registration or vote counting.

The third category refers to consultative frameworks such as those known as the Grand National Dialogue (Cameroon) or the Inclusive and Sovereign National Dialogue (Chad). These forums are venues for the realization of deliberative democracy that help to overcome the limitations of representative democracy.



Part II

The role of Think Tanks and Civil Society to the Consolidation of Democracy in Central Africa

In the process of democratization, after the first stage which is transition, the most important next stage is consolidation. Consolidation of democracy after a long-term transition from authoritarianism to liberal democracy is the stage where new democracies are stabilized and democratic institutions function regularly and democratically. Juan Linz and Alfred Stephan speaking about “consolidated democracy” identify 5 conditions which led to consolidation after transition: the first condition, is dynamic civil society which can operate as a counter power to the state power. Others conditions are: stable political society where all parties are agreeing to the rule of political game, rule of law, neutral bureaucracy and a stable economic society. For Linz and Stephan, the democracy is consolidated when democracy has become “the only game in town”. Analyzing the effectiveness of those conditions in CEMACs Countries, it is really difficult to find just one among them which is consolidated. Chad and RCA faced several crises including military coup d’Etat and recently, Chad experienced a Military Council of Transition after the death of Idriss Deby the President, from the 20th April 2021 to 6th may 2024 when Presidential elections were organized. Mahamat Idriss Deby Itno, the President of the Military Council of Transition was elected as President of the Republic. In Gabon, after presidential elections held in 2023 and after results, the general Brice Clotaire Oligui Nguema lead a coup d’Etat in the night from 29th to 30th august 2023. He created a committee of transition and restoration of Institutions and designated himself president of this committee. He organized presidential elections the 12th April 2025 and was elected president of the Republic with 94,85% of suffrage. More than elections, it seems as a plebiscite. After a long-term of security crises, CAR now experienced a stable sociopolitical situation with the reelection of Faustin Archange Touadéra after the presidential elections of the 28th December 2025 for a third mandate. For Cameroon, Congo and Equatorial Guinea, even if there is no coup d’Etat and the coalition between civil and military, the longevity of the president in the

power do not lead to a stable political society since the parties of opposition always denounce massive fraud, subordinate electoral institutions and ambiguous electoral code.

Beyond the theoretical and doctrinal difficulties surrounding the definition of the concept, Civil society are cited as a solution to social, economic and political dilemma by politicians and thinkers. Regardless of the political contexts and the laws governing its activities, Civil society is essential for strengthening democracy. The relative political opening that followed led to the creation of thousands of associations. According to data from CIVICUS, the Global Civic Space Monitor Index, Central Africa now has several thousand formally registered civil society organizations, in addition to countless informal structures and citizen movements. These organizations are highly diverse: think tanks producing in-depth analyses of public policies, human rights organizations documenting violations and assisting victims, elections observation platforms deploying observers during polls, gender equality movements advocating for women’s political participation, media organizations defending press freedom, etc. How do CSOs and think tanks concretely contribute to improving the democratic ecosystem?

In Central Africa, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), including think tanks, are emerging as essential pillars for consolidating democracy. Therefore, they have to found issues for several obstacles to consolidation (Chapter 3) and elaborate innovative strategies to relieve challenges there are facing in their actions for consolidation democracy (Chapter 4).

Progress in the Democratic Process in Central Africa

The consolidation of democracy in Central Africa—a region encompassing states such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Cameroon, Gabon, Chad, the Central African Republic (CAR), and Equatorial Guinea—faces a unique set of structural impediments. While the 1990s ushered in a “third wave” of democratization across the continent, Central Africa has remained one of the most resistant sub-regions to genuine democratic deepening. Scholars often characterize these states as “hybrid regimes” or “competitive autocracies,” where the outward forms of democracy (elections, parliaments) exist but the substance of democratic governance is hollowed out by entrenched elites. The legal frameworks in Central African states often serve as instruments of power preservation rather than mechanisms for accountability. This phenomenon, frequently termed “autocratic legalism,” involves using the law to undermine the spirit of constitutionalism. Political obstacles on its part in Central Africa are rooted in the “Big Man” syndrome and the legacy of neo-patrimonialism, where the state is treated as the private property of the ruler. The socio-economic landscape of Central Africa presents structural challenges that make the “doorstep conditions” for democracy difficult to achieve.

Many scholars across Africa acknowledge that establishing democracy on the continent is a challenging and formidable endeavor. Evidence suggests that during the initial fifteen years, numerous new democratic governments remained unstable, and some of the optimism from the early 1990s had diminished. Democratic consolidation involves more than mere procedural adjustments—it necessitates profound changes in political culture, economic frameworks, and social dynamics. When these deeper changes do not take place or meet with significant opposition, the process of democratization can stagnate, regress, or even fail completely.

The consolidation of democracy in the Central African region faces significant challenges. The region is characterized by a high level of political instability, prolonged periods of authoritarian rule, and civil conflicts. Countries like Cameroon, Chad, the Central African Republic, Gabon, The Republic of the Congo, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Equatorial Guinea rank low on key democratic indicators, such as the rule of law, civil liberties, and the availability of free and fair elections.

3.1. Key Obstacles to Democratic Consolidation in Central Africa

The democratic landscape of Africa is intricate, influenced by a combination of swift changes and enduring challenges. As nations across Africa adopt democratic governance, these shifts signify an essential route toward lasting growth, stability, and enhanced institutions. Nevertheless, this journey is frequently obstructed by entrenched issues like authoritarianism, economic volatility, and weaknesses within institutions. In spite of these hurdles, numerous African countries shine as beacons of hope through their successful democratic transitions, fostering both internal and regional advancement. A part from the established political, legal, economic and sociological obstacles to consolidating democracy within Central Africa, there are several legal, political and socio-economic challenges and obstacles to democratic consolidation which limited and hinder the impact of the Civil society and think tank’s activities.

Legal and political obstacles

Rather than acting as neutral arbiters, legal and institutional frameworks are routinely manipulated to entrench incumbents and weaken political opponents. Beyond electoral bodies, criminal law and regulatory

provisions are also weaponized. Media and civil society actors face libel prosecutions, heavy sanctions, and regulatory crackdowns that restrict their ability to hold governments accountable.

* Legal obstacles

Legal obstacles refer to the practice of hindering efforts of activists, civil society and political parties in advocating and acting for change using law as barriers. Lawfare — the use of legal instruments and proceedings to marginalize opposition — is increasingly common. Across Africa, including states in or near Central Africa, governments apply ambiguous laws selectively to disqualify opposition parties, throttle dissent, or restructure rules to favor incumbents while maintaining a veneer of legality.

Constitutional revisions: Constitutional term limits on a president's tenure are common features in modern democracies, and term limits are a tool that help ensure periodic turn-over of power and, if adhered to, prevent the emergence of "electoral dictatorships" or incumbents becoming pseudo-monarchs. But in Central Africa, all the countries have amended or manipulated their constitutions to extend a president's rule:

— Cameroon's constitutional revision in 1996 extended the president rule from 5 to 7 years limited to two mandates. In 2008, before the presidential election of 2011, the Constitution was revised to suppress the two-term limit on the office was removed through a parliamentary vote in April 2008, to permit President Paul Biya to be candidate one more time.

— In Chad, Idriss Déby extended his rule for over 30 years through constitutional reforms and was succeeded by his son, Mahamat Idriss Déby Itno, who has also manipulated the constitution to stay in power. After the suspension of the constitution in 2001, the constitutional revision in 2025 has suppress the limitation and extended the presidential's rule from 5 to 7 years.

— In Central African Republic's François Bozizé

seized power in a 2003 coup and later amended the constitution to allow him to run for president. After the crisis running from 2013, Faustin-Archange Touadéra attempted to amend the constitution in 2022 to allow him to run for a third term, but the Constitutional Court rejected the move. Nevertheless, he made another temptation in 2023 by organizing a referendum. 2023 constitutional referendum removed presidential term limits and extended term length from 5 to 7 years, allowing the incumbent to potentially rule indefinitely, a classic example of formal legality masking democratic backsliding.

Those constitutional manipulations are observed in Congo (Constitutional revision of 2015), in Gabon where the new constitution adopted by referendum in 2025 extended the presidential tenure from 5 to 7 years and limited to two mandates. In Equator-Guinea, since 2011, a Constitutional revision extended the tenure from 5 to 7 years limited to two mandates. But despite the limitation, the current President are always reelected. Most Constitutions often don't guarantee fundamental rights or are easily manipulated. Leaders altering constitutions to extend term limits or consolidate power. Leaders in Central Africa have been known to manipulate their countries' constitutions to consolidate power. When constitutions can be easily manipulated to favor incumbents, democratic consolidation is defeated.

Also relative to the Constitutional organization of checks balance powers between executive, legislative and judicial, in most of the central African countries, there is no clear separation of power. When this separation is not clear, democracy which has as one of pillars separation of power is defeated. Judiciaries vulnerable to political influence or corruption. Majority of the judicial systems in Central Africa are not independent, consequently cannot be seen as being transparent, fair and unbiased. Most judges are being appointed by the executive branch of government.

Restrictive laws and legal restrictions

The Central Africa region has several restrictive laws that hinder democratic consolidation, including.

For example, laws adopted to fight against terrorism include some activities of civil societies and target activists to limit their access to civic space. Those laws limit civil liberties such as: freedom of speech, opinion, expression and manifestation. There also restrict opposition parties' activities, criminalize online "dissident", impose media censorship. Laws against terrorism adopted in some Central Africa Countries are manipulate in such a way that they restrict Civil society activities, limits the freedom speech of activists and restricts online freedom of expression. In Cameroon, the Law n° 2014/28 of 23 December 2014 of the suppression of Acts of terrorism had been denounced by the Committee to Protect Journalists as a tool to arrest and intimidate media. Boris Bertholt, an online activist had written an article on this [political uses of the anti-terror Law in Cameroon](#). Counter terrorism and cybersecurity legislation are often use to silence or limit legitimate reporting or criticism. On December 5, 2024, The Minister of territorial administration issued a decision suspending the activities of the Central Africa Human Rights Defenders Network (REDHAC) for three months for "illicit and exorbitant funding" and lack of compliance with the legislation regulating the activities of non-profit organizations. Four other civil society organizations have been suspended for three months. REDHAC claim for an "abuse of power" and violation of the 1990 law on freedom of association. In Central African Republic, the 2012 Law on Freedom of Assembly and Public Meetings is restrictive for public gatherings. In Republic of Congo, the 2017 Law on Cybersecurity and Cybercrime criminalizes online dissent. In Chad, the 2018 Law on Cybercrime restricts online freedom of expression. In Equatorial Guinea, the 2016 Law on Freedom of Expression and Information restricts media freedom.

Laws favor ruling parties and limit opposition participation. Within the central African sub-region, the oppositions are not given a fair share or space to exist. Opposition suffer for inadequate campaign finance regulation, and this unregulated funding influences their efficiency in elections.

Restrictive electoral laws: Elections are keystone, a

foundation of democracy. Despite global expansions of multiparty elections in Central Africa, there is no transparency, competitive, free and fair elections. Electoral malpractice corruption and fraud Elections — the essential mechanism through which democratic legitimacy is claimed — are frequently manipulated through legal and administrative strategies that skew competition towards incumbents.

The ways election's timing is managing lack transparency and even if in Cameroon for example, the time of revised electoral list is known (from 1st January to 31st July), the electoral processes remain opaque. Presidential discretion over election timetables and constituency boundaries — as seen in Cameroon — creates uncertainty for opposition parties and can disadvantage challengers. Also, the control of the executive over electoral bodies limits their independence and neutrality. Appointments of members of electoral commissions by sitting presidents, without cross-party consensus, jeopardize the perceived neutrality of electoral management.

Regarding to the complains of the parties of opposition, which denounce massive fraud and malpractice, Government do not made reforms. In Cameroon, the reforms of 2011 changing ONEL to ELECAM had not been substantial. The process remains strongly control by the power and law are favorable for the ruling party. Therefore, lack of electoral reform maintains an outdated electoral laws and biased processes which constitute a significant barrier to democratic consolidation in Central Africa.

In Cameroon, the Electoral Code and the law governing Elections Cameroon (ELECAM) have been criticized for embedding ambiguities that benefit the ruling party and not adapted to changing political landscapes. Since its members are appointed by the president, ELECAM lacks independence and is perceived as biased against opposition parties, raising questions about the credibility of electoral processes. Commissions of ELECAM often favor ruling parties and in the process of voters' registration, there is a lot of barriers unable citizens to register and participate to the elections.

These issues lead to: Unfair election, Disputed results, Opposition boycotts, Instability. Countries like Cameroon, Central African Republic, and Republic of Congo have seen electoral disputes fuel conflict. Electoral laws are manipulated to kicked out opposition leaders of the presidential race as the example of Maurice Kamto in Cameroon in the 2025 presidential election. When an opposition leader succeeds to run like Issa Tchiroma Bakary in 2025 presidential election in Cameroon, electoral outcomes were contested by opposition parties, civil society actors, and some independent media organizations, which raised concerns regarding the transparency and credibility of the electoral process. This situation is similar in Chad and Gabon, where military juntas transform to civilians just to stay in power and silence all opposition. The situation in Equatorial Guinea is the same. Those practices across African states illustrate how electoral laws and regulations are used to exclude, delay, or weaken opposition competition even when formal multiparty systems exist.

* Political obstacles

Political obstacles refer to various challenges and barriers that can hinder the effectiveness and consolidation of democracy due to political factors such as impunity, corruption, distrust on political institutions, authoritarian tendencies of political leaders, who prioritizing power over democratic principles, restrictions of civic space, etc...The most important obstacles examines by this report are authoritarian tendencies and distrust on political institutions. The obstacles facing the consolidation of democracy within the Central African sub-region can further be explained looking at legal and political obstacles independently.

Authoritarian tendencies

Authoritarianism poses a significant barrier to Africa's democratic advancement, as regimes resist reforms to preserve their entrenched power. Leaders stifle dissent, manipulate institutions, and weaken opposition to maintain control, which undermines

elections and press freedoms. When political leaders resist to democracy and develop authoritarian tendencies to maintain control, suppressing dissident and manipulating institutions, some effects such as shrinking civic space and digital authoritarianism.

Digital Authoritarianism: Digital authoritarianism is a strategic way for government to conduct mass surveillance, run campaigns of disinformation and implement internet shutdowns. According to the Institute for Security Studies (ISS), at least 15 internets shut downs are been recorded in Africa in 2025 and 6 of them are been registered in Central Africa: Angola, Cameroon, CAR, Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo and Equatorial Guinea. As seen the CEMAC countries (4) are more involve in internet blackout. Chad holds the regional record: 472-day social media shutdown between 2018 and 2019. Governments in the region have increasingly used “kill switches” during elections or periods of civil unrest to prevent opposition mobilization As digital connectivity has increased, states in Central Africa have adopted digital repression to maintain control. Digital repression should be understood not as a standalone phenomenon but as an extension of existing authoritarian strategies into the digital sphere, reinforcing surveillance, controlling narratives, and limiting mobilization. Between 2023 and 2024, the region saw a rise in internet shutdowns and the use of surveillance technology to monitor activists. In Gabon, following the military coup attempt on January 2019, there was an Internet shutdown, also in august 2023, after the closing of poll the 26th of august, authorities shut down the internet. Internet access was restored on august, 30 2023 following a military coup which cancelled the results of presidential election and dissolve state's institutions.

This digital crackdown creates a chilling effect, where the internet—once seen as a tool for liberation—is transformed into a mechanism for state surveillance and social control, further obstructing the path toward democratic consolidation

Political Distrust

When there is corruption, impunity, no transparency and accountability, when institutions do not function democratically, citizen distrust the government, politicians, political parties and representative institutions. Distrust of political authorities, distrust in political institutions leads citizens to withdraw from politics. Specifically, it leads to youth disengagement in politics. Institutions that are weak or manipulated can undermine transparency and accountability, making it difficult to establish a stable democratic framework.

The worry behind state fragility is that poor governance and weak institutions may make the state appear distant from the citizens. The laxity on the political front in ECCAS, their unwillingness to focus on democratic consolidation in the region, partly encourages poor governance.

Political distrust include distrust in political institutions and youth disengagement. Relative to distrust in political institutions, Weak institutions are according the African Development Bank an indicators defining fragile countries. For IMF, 'poor quality of policies, institutions and governance [that] substantially impairs economic performance [and] the delivery of basic social services' characterize fragile states. Weak institutions obstruct democratic governance throughout Africa, often permitting political manipulation that compromises transparency and accountability. Judicial, electoral, and legislative bodies frequently struggle to function independently. It is crucial to strengthen these institutions to ensure democratic resilience and uphold the rule of law. Achieving this goal requires targeted funding, training, and partnerships with international organizations.

Relative to Youth Political Disengagement, Central Africa possesses some of the youngest populations in the world, yet political leadership remains overwhelmingly gerontocratic. This has led to a profound participation-performance gap. Youth in the region often view elections as fixed and formal political parties as vehicles for elite enrichment.

Consequently, engagement has shifted from the ballot box to informal protests or, increasingly, to total political apathy. This disengagement is a major threat to democracy, as it hollows out the legitimacy of state institutions.

The period between 2023 and 2025 has highlighted two emerging and contradictory trends: a burgeoning youth population that is increasingly disillusioned with formal politics, and a state apparatus that is becoming more sophisticated in its use of digital repression.

Youth are the most involved in electoral violence. For example, post-electoral crisis in 2025 in Cameroon, young people were on the front lines.

Sociological and Economic Obstacles

In Africa, the dawn of political independence, which many countries experienced in the late 1950s and the early 1960s, ushered in political freedom but not economic prosperity. It was for this reason that the onset of the third wave of democratization, which culminated into the end of the Cold War in 1989, came to be hailed by the African masses as a second form of liberation. The Africans hoped that democracy, once consolidated, would be the basis for economic development on their continent. This report observes, nevertheless, that democracy in many African countries has not proceeded to the expected phase of democratic consolidation due to several challenges that the report outlines. The report explains further that despite the uninspiring picture of political instability on the continent; Africa is actually home to at least six of the fastest growing economies in the world.

* Instrumentalization of ethnic divisions

The manipulation of ethnic divisions is a significant challenge to democratic consolidation in Central Africa. Politicians often exploit existing ethnic tensions to mobilize support, creating divisions and undermining national unity. They appeal to ethnic

identity to garner support, often using divisive rhetoric by create narratives of threat from other ethnic groups, justifying authoritarian measures.

Politicians use ethnic affiliations to allocate resources, creating unequal access and fueling tensions. In this way, Elections become ethnic censuses and voting patterns follow ethnic lines, undermining democratic legitimacy. Political rivalries, ethnic tensions, and manipulated sentiments frequently incite violence during elections, deterring voter participation and diminishing trust in democracy. Manipulated ethnic tensions can escalate into violence. In Cameroon, inter-communitarian conflicts opposed Arabe Choa and Musgum, or Kotoko and Arabe Choa are some of examples of violences lead by instrumentalization of ethnic division.

* Economic obstacles

Economic instability undermines democratic transitions, fostering exploitation and corruption. High unemployment, poverty, and inflation diminish trust in democratic institutions, redirecting citizens' focus toward survival. Joseph Siegle notice that economic challenges facing democratic transitions are high. The structure of economy in Central Africa Countries seems to be incompatible with the model of democracy. Economic infrastructure is inadequate and lead high levels of poverty and income inequality. Citizen's perception of poverty and inequalities shape attitudes towards institutions and political authorities.

Political repression, government control, security challenges, and political instrumentalization represent a hostile environment for CSOs and think tanks in Central Africa. In reaction to such a setting in Cameroon, Chad, the Central African Republic, Gabon, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, resilience and ingenuity on the part of civil society have not brought into question its ability to support democracy. These factors create a structural hindrance to civil society's ability to contribute positively to democracy. Dealing with such a setting involves more than simply being resilient and ingenious on the part of CSOs and think tanks. In other words, political and structural changes

are needed to create an environment that guarantees a positive outcome.

3.2. Building resilience in a Shrinking civic space

In many countries in sub-Saharan and central Africa, civic space has been shrinking since the early 2000s – mirroring a global trend of restrictions being imposed on civil society organizations. Governments intimidate and arrest activists, and publicly criticize their advocacy work. They also promulgate restrictive policies, such as laws that curtail the foreign funding of domestic civil society groups, and resort to subtle ways of restricting civil society's operating space – for instance, via cumbersome registration processes for civil society organizations. The shrinking civic space is a pressing concern for democratic consolidation.

The shrinking of civic space in Africa poses significant challenges to democratic consolidation. It restricts the ability of civil society organizations (CSOs) to promote transparency and accountability, and limits the participation of citizens in national and local affairs. This has led to a decline in the visibility and visibility of human rights defenders and a potential erosion of democratic values. The situation is compounded by government strategies to stifle voices and the need for CSOs to find resilience mechanisms to continue their work. The global trend of democratic recessions, with restrictive legal measures in many countries, further exacerbates the problem. CSOs play a crucial role in safeguarding human rights and amplifying the voices of minority groups, but their efforts are hindered by the constraints they face. The urgency of addressing the erosion of civic space is underscored by the global emergency it represents, with Africa being one of the hardest-hit regions.

In 2019, Amnesty International expressed its concern about “the global repression of civil society organizations. The repression denounced is carried out through repressive laws, who's clearly stated objective is to prevent the full enjoyment of freedom of association, to curb the work of CSOs and their

partners. The phenomenon thus observed by Amnesty International, already alarming in 2019, has spread widely and taken on dramatic proportions since then with restrictive and repressive measures resulting in the muzzling of civil society, arbitrary arrest and even assassinations of civil society members. Criminalization of civic engagement has become one of the hallmarks of governance in some Central African countries. The legislative systems governing the right to association, assembly, media, and NGOs remain poorly defined, restrictive, or discriminatory in their selective application in public order, national security, or morality, among other grounds, for suspending, banning, or refusing registration for NGO's viewed as politically significant or oppositional.

A case in point is Cameroon, where a law against terrorism adopted in 2014 in reaction to Boko Haram threats in the Far North has been employed extensively against political activists, journalists, trade unionists, and civil society leaders. Peaceful protests about governance reforms, electoral controversies, cost-of-living issues, and/or the Anglophone conflict have been qualified as acts of terrorism, rebellion, or insurrection. Civil society activists engaged in support of electoral democracy, human rights documentation, or dialogue in the Anglophone regions have been prosecuted in military tribunals, with trials resulting in overly harsh penalties that damage the neutrality and authority of civil justice and the rule of law.

A strengthened repression of civil society has characterized the transitional phase in the aftermath of the demise of President Idriss Déby in the Republic of Chad in 2021. Citizen groups calling against the Transitional Military Council have suffered from random banning, administrative shutdowns, suspension of activities, as well as the forceful crackdown of protests in the country. Laws against maintaining public order, emergency decrees, and government restrictions on public gatherings have their purposes in criminalizing the protests of citizen groups in the country.

Structuration and organization of CSO in Network

When governments restrict freedoms of assembly, association, and expression, it hampers citizens' ability to engage in the democratic process. In this context there is an urgency for CSO to structure and organized themselves in network. Limited civic space reduces checks on government power, enabling corruption and abuse. To enhance resilience, CSO need increasingly diversifying funding sources, strengthening internal governance and ethical standards, investing in leadership renewal and youth engagement, and adopting flexible research and engagement strategies that align with shifting political contexts.

There is in Gabon a Network of OCS, which are active on the field of elections: Consortium des organisations de la Société civile pour la transparence électorale (COTED) members of Réseau des organes de gestion des élections en Afrique Centrale (ROGEAC) created in may 2025 at Bujumbura, Burundi.

Conflicts among CSOs also act as a hindrance to their effective role in promoting democracy. For instance, the case of Cameroon, where Survival International (SI) filed a case against the World-Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), alleging human rights abuses of Indigenous people in Cameroon. These inter-NGO rifts challenge the very essence of a united civil society in promoting democracy in the Central African sub-region. For think tanks, proximity to power represents a direct threat to their intellectual independence. When the agenda and conduct of their research, or their access and funds, come to depend on their political alignment, their analysis and independence become compromised in the long run. Think tanks could become a simple technical appendage of the government rather than an independent forum for policy discussion.

Strengthening Collaboration with Think Tanks

Private research institutions, Think-tanks are non-governmental institutions; intellectually, organizationally and financially autonomous from government, political parties or organized interests; and set up with the aim of influencing policy.

According to Eldor Tulyakov, Think tanks serving as intellectual intermediaries between government authorities, civil society, and academia, assume those core functions: policy research, development of policy recommendations, public communication and dialogue facilitation. Think tanks have been growing significantly in Central Africa since the 2020s. Their importance is reflected in the Global Go To Think Tank Index, which highlights their strategic role in foresight and their contribution to the development of a Central Africa facing the challenges of insecurity, resource exploitation, and ecosystem preservation.

Think tanks in Central Africa are increasingly emerging as dynamic actors at the intersection of knowledge production, policy influence, and civic engagement. Operating in complex political, economic, and security environments, these institutions are adapting their strategies, expanding their thematic focus, and leveraging new tools to remain relevant and impactful. Their dynamism lies not only in the diversity of ideas they generate, but also in their capacity to respond to evolving governance challenges, amplify local perspectives, and contribute to more informed and inclusive public decision-making across the region.

Diverse forms and Democratic Roles of Think Tanks in Central Africa

The nature and type of think tanks in Central Africa does not differ much from other think tanks across the globe. Across the continent and in Central Africa specifically, think tanks vary in between independent policy research think tanks which are autonomous in character and non-partisan such as the Cameroonian-based think tank, Nkafu Policy Institute, CAR Center of research such as CCRAAG (Centre Centrafricain de Recherche et d'analyse Géopolitique), civil society embedded think tanks which operate more closely with CSOs and advocacy groups such as Gabon-based, Institut Concorde. In Central Africa, think tanks are increasingly adapting to a complex governance environment marked by political sensitivity, data scarcity, and constrained civic space. One clear trend is

the shift towards timely, problem-driven research that responds directly to unfolding governance challenges such as electoral processes, constitutional reforms, decentralization, security governance, and public finance management. Rather than relying primarily on long academic studies, many think tanks now prioritize policy briefs, rapid assessments, and scenario notes that can inform decision-makers and public debate during critical political moments.

A second emerging pattern is the growing integration of research, advocacy, and public engagement. Central African think tanks are moving beyond closed policy circles to engage journalists, civil society actors, and citizen groups, particularly during elections, governance crises, or reform debates. Collaboration has also become a defining feature of think tank dynamism in the region. Faced with limited funding and political pressure, think tanks increasingly work through regional networks and coalitions to conduct joint research, issue collective policy positions, and engage regional institutions. This collaborative approach not only reduces institutional vulnerability but also amplifies policy influence by presenting evidence as a shared, regionally grounded voice rather than isolated national critiques. Finally, Central African think tanks are responding to financial and political uncertainty by strengthening internal governance, diversifying funding sources, and investing in leadership renewal and institutional resilience. These adaptations reflect a broader trend toward more agile, networked, and impact-oriented think tank institutions that are redefining how locally grounded evidence can shape governance debates, support democratic norms, and sustain civic engagement in challenging political contexts.

The Distinctive Role of Think Tanks in Central Africa's Governance Landscape

The legitimacy and influence of Central African think tanks stem from the strength of their evidence. Data-driven analysis enhances the precision and credibility of advocacy messages, enabling think tanks to speak with authority when engaging governments,

regional institutions, and international partners. By grounding advocacy in empirical evidence and locally generated data, think tanks reduce the space for political denial and reinforce their role as trusted, independent voices in public discourse. In fragile and rapidly shifting political environments, advocacy must be forward-looking. Data analysis has allowed think tanks to identify emerging governance risks such as electoral manipulation, institutional capture, or growing inequalities before they escalate into crises. By anticipating trends and warning of policy failures early, think tanks strengthen preventive governance and contribute to more responsive and accountable decision-making. As popularly observed, advocacy is most effective when it mobilizes citizens. Central African think tanks play a critical role in translating complex data into accessible narratives that resonate with the public. Through clear visualizations, policy briefs, and public engagement platforms, data becomes a tool for civic empowerment enabling citizens, civil society actors, and the media to demand accountability, participate meaningfully in democratic processes, and defend democratic norms. In doing so, think tanks help turn evidence into action and research into democratic change.

Highlighting the role of Central African think tanks in shaping sub-regional governance

Central African think tanks play a critical role in shaping sub-regional governance by generating locally grounded evidence, fostering policy dialogue, and bridging the gap between citizens and decision-makers. Through research, advocacy, and convening power, they contribute to addressing shared challenges such as democratic governance, security, and regional integration, while strengthening cooperation among states and institutions within the sub-region.

1. Contribution of think tanks to evidence-based policymaking

Central African think tanks contribute to evidence-based policymaking by producing locally grounded research that fills critical data gaps and reflects

national and sub-national realities often absent from official sources. They translate this evidence into policy-relevant formats such as briefs and scenario notes and engage policymakers through trust-based, often low-visibility channels suited to politically sensitive environments. Beyond advising governments, they strengthen democratic accountability by equipping civil society, media, and citizens with credible data, while also anticipating governance risks and informing preventive policy responses. Through regional collaboration, they link national evidence to regional policy processes and, over time, help build a culture in which public decisions are increasingly informed by facts, local knowledge, and long-term governance considerations. By way of illustration, the Center for Research on Democracy and Development in Africa (CEREDDA) play roles in framing debates around democracy, development, and governance from African-centered perspectives. These organizations often collaborate with civil society, universities, and policy actors to promote locally rooted, context-specific policy analysis. The African Research Center on Artificial Intelligence, ARCAI, established in 2022 through a landmark partnership between the Government of the Republic of Congo and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), represents Africa's first purpose-built artificial intelligence research center. The initiative reflects a strong Pan-African vision by placing human values at the center of technological innovation and challenging narratives that reduce Africa to a passive source of data rather than an active producer of knowledge and solutions. Since its establishment in Yaoundé in 2016 under the Denis & Lenora Foretia Foundation, the Nkafu Policy Institute has transitioned from a primary focus on health and economic research to emerge as a leading actor in public policy, aligning its work with Central Africa and the African Union's policy priorities. This transformation mirrors Cameroon's position as a regional bridge in Central Africa, where Anglophone and Francophone traditions intersect within a broader Pan-African vision of cooperation and unity. Projects such as the Strengthening Central Africa Think Tanks (SCATT 3i) initiative supported by the Nkafu Policy Institute in collaboration with CCRA in CAR and CONCORDE in Gabon aim to generate

joint research on inequality, informality, inclusive economic growth, and democratic governance. This effort builds networks among independent think tanks across the CEMAC region, enhancing evidence generation, dissemination, and engagement with policymakers at national and regional levels. As part of the organization's capacity building component, think tank networks have organized leadership and advocacy immersion programs and capacity-building workshops to strengthen research quality, strategic leadership, and advocacy skills for policy engagement. For example, the Nkafu Policy Institute has run two-day leadership and advocacy immersions for CEMAC think tank researchers, including women, aimed at improving research and policy outreach in areas such as governance, peace, and regional integration.

ii. **Role of think tanks in strengthening accountability, inclusion, and civic dialogue**

Central African think tanks strengthen accountability, inclusion, and civic dialogue by acting as bridges between evidence, decision-makers, and citizens in contexts where governance is often opaque and civic space constrained. They strengthen accountability by producing research on public budgets, institutional performance, anti-corruption measures, and electoral processes, equipping both policymakers and civil society with credible evidence to monitor government action and demand transparency. In terms of inclusion, Gabon based think tank, Institut Concorde actively integrates perspectives from marginalized groups such as women, youth, and rural communities into research design, policy recommendations, and advocacy, ensuring that governance reforms address diverse needs rather than elite interests alone. To foster civic dialogue, they translate complex data into accessible formats like policy briefs, infographics, media engagements, and public forums, creating spaces where citizens, civil society actors, and decision-makers can engage in informed debate. By combining rigorous analysis with strategic communication and engagement, Central African think tanks enhance participatory governance, amplify citizen voices, and promote more responsive and accountable policy processes.

Central African think tanks matter for the future of governance and democracy because they serve as indispensable bridges between evidence, public institutions, and citizens in contexts where decision-making is often opaque and accountability mechanisms are fragile. By generating locally grounded analysis, anticipating governance risks, and translating complex evidence into policy-relevant and publicly accessible forms, they help ensure that reforms are informed by facts rather than political expediency. Their ability to engage policymakers while simultaneously empowering civil society and citizens strengthens accountability, inclusion, and civic dialogue over the long term. As the region confronts evolving challenges from political transitions and security pressures to social inequality and climate stress, resilient and independent think tanks will remain essential to sustaining democratic norms, shaping responsive policies, and anchoring governing reforms in the lived realities of Central African societies.

Despite their significant contribution to strengthening democratic governance, civil society organizations and think tanks in Central Africa face several internal and structural weaknesses that limit their impact. Firstly, many suffer from limited institutional capacity, namely in applied research, strategic communication, and organizational management. Secondly, the sector is characterized by a fragmentation of messages and initiatives, with organizations often operating in isolation, which reduces their capacity to collectively influence public policy. Furthermore, a heavy reliance on international funding undermines their strategic autonomy and makes it difficult to sustain certain initiatives. Finally, in some political contexts, political co-optation or state pressure can weaken the independence of some organizations, eroding their credibility with citizens. These challenges underscore the need to strengthen the institutional capacity, regional coordination mechanisms, and financial independence of civil society actors.

In this context, regional initiatives such as SCATT BRIDGE can play a crucial role by strengthening synergies between think tanks and civil society

organizations, facilitating knowledge sharing, the production of joint analyses, and networking among stakeholders. By promoting transnational cooperation and institutional capacity building, the program can

contribute to increasing the resilience and collective influence of democratic governance actors in Central Africa.

CHAPTER 4

Challenges of Civil Society Organizations and Think Tanks in Supporting Democracy in Central Africa

Despite the ever-greater prominence and relevance that civil society organizations (CSOs) and think tanks have come to have in the realm of governance, they operate in an environment characterized by persistent political authoritarianism, democratic stagnation, and complex, multidimensional security crises. Although the early 1990s presented a moment of political transition and opening in all the countries in the region, symbolized by the national sovereign conferences and the multiparty reforms, as well as the revival of civic activism. The past decade may be characterized by the erosion of gains and the establishment of dominant political parties or personalized regimes, and the progressive securitization of politics. Elections are periodically organized, and the constitutional order recognizes the principles of pluralism and commitment to the rule of law and democratic values; however, political competition is tightly controlled, and the rotation of power is a privilege achieved by a few elites.

Most of the Central African States are classified as electoral autocracies, as documented by the V-Dem Institute in the 2025 Democracy Report. This is because the states use elections to suit the governance challenges that are plaguing them, including the shrinking civic space. This section analyzes the main political and security challenges that CSOs and think tanks encounter in their role as catalysts of democracy. The focus will be on four categories, including political repression and the restriction of civic space, excessive

state control of the civic space, the security challenges faced by civil society actors in conflict situations, and the political instrumentalization and co-optation of CSOs and think tanks.

4.1. Repositioning and Adaptation Strategies of Civil Society Organizations and Think Tanks

Les OSC bénéficient avec les technologies de l'information et de la communication (TICs) de nouvelles formules de travail et peuvent de ce fait développer de nouvelles méthodes et stratégies de travail. En effet, les TICs permettent aux OSC de poursuivre leur rôle de contrôle citoyen de l'action de l'État en utilisant des plateformes en ligne pour assurer une surveillance efficace des services publics, lutter activement contre les pratiques frauduleuses, sensibiliser, mobiliser et informer le public. Les réseaux sociaux, en particulier, sont devenus des outils incontournables pour diffuser des messages de plaidoyer, organiser des campagnes et attirer l'attention sur les causes qui risquent d'être marginalisées. Les lanceurs d'alerte emploient en priorité ces outils de communication numériques pour attirer l'attention sur les violations des droits et libertés des citoyens.

Une meilleure connaissance des processus en jeu dans le développement d'une société solidaire entraîne une prise de conscience dans la nécessité de travailler et de coopérer. En ce sens, les Think

tank, institutions privées de recherche qui pour certains auteurs sont au cœur de la société civile, se positionnent de plus en plus comme des «catalyseurs» de la mise en réseau des OSC.

Les Think Tank ont prioritairement pour rôle de superviser l'information politique et économique de l'État et éventuellement de la contredire. Le travail des Think Tanks est en grande partie « un mélange entre la recherche d'informations et d'enquête des journalistes et celui plus approfondi des chercheurs ». Leur expertise les positionne sur l'espace civique comme des laboratoires d'influence .

Transformation of repertoires of collective action

The cumulative effect of repression is a profound transformation of civil society's repertoires of action. CSOs and think tanks start practicing self-censorship and risk aversion to avoid sanctions and repression. Systematic critical position is not a pertinent strategy in a context of high repression. The trend is for organizations to turn from confrontational advocacy and rights-related mobilization to less politically charged areas such as humanitarian aid, social service provision, and generic civic education.

In Gabon, especially in the period preceding the political transition of 2023, think tanks and advocacy CSOs tended to avoid taking a critical stance on the issues of dominance in the executive branch, electoral manipulation, or constitutional engineering. On the contrary, research agendas were layered in technocratic, economic, or development contexts, arguing in effect that nothing was challenged. However, they did help sustain the existence of civil society organizations as actors in decision-making circles.

Besides the visible forms of repression, the governments of Central African states exert significant regulation of the civic environment through legal, administrative, financial, and informal channels. These regulation efforts not only penalize but also discipline civil society so that it can be controlled and channeled along state lines.

In the sub-region, the majority of states require that CSOs and Think Tanks obtain official authorization or registration to authorize them to operate. Despite the opacity or discretionary procedures, CSOs have to maneuver in the aim to have a legal authorization to hold activities and then elaborate soft strategies to influence public opinion.

In Cameroon, such organizations remain active for years without legal recognition, thereby leaving them susceptible to either closure by the administration or court suits at all times. In Chad and Gabon, the deadline for renewing registration is often used as leverage to punish organizations that are critical as well as to ensure political compliance. CSOs, which lack legal recognition, also face significant hurdles, including difficulties in opening an account and securing funding.

Financial regulation is another strong control tool. Through financial regulation, governments exercise strict regulation on foreign funding reporting requirements, require approval before foreign funding is received, or limit foreign funding transfers. Though this is done under the guise of funding transparency or money laundering regulation, this practice is selectively applied against financially vulnerable organizations that can be considered counter to their governments' policies.

4.2. Financial autonomy by diversifying sources of financemnt

Think tanks and civil society organizations (CSOs) engaged in promoting democracy within the sub-region suffer from the critical absence of national funding mechanisms. A significant factor contributing to this situation is the frequent perception by Central African states of CSOs and think tanks as adversarial or critical entities, rather than as collaborative partners in development. This perception directly contributes to a lack of financial support from government bodies, including the provision of grants. Some nations in the region have even imposed strict legal limitations on the funding that CSOs can obtain for their activities related to human

rights, which is a principle of democracy. The initial suspension and eventual banning of the Central Africa Human Rights Defenders Network (REDHAC), a civil society organization in Cameroon accused of illicit and exorbitant financing, is a clear example of this. Furthermore, private sector involvement in financially supporting democratic initiatives by CSOs is remarkably minimal. This limited engagement is often attributable to concerns regarding potential government retaliation or a lack of awareness concerning the importance of a strong and active civil society. Consequently, these organizations are predominantly connecting on external, international funding sources to sustain their operations and programs.

In addition, the reliance of Central African CSOs on external funding sources, including from foreign governments, multilateral organizations, and international foundations, presents a complex array of challenges and implications. This donor dependency significantly impedes the financial sustainability of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and think tanks within the region. In the year 2025, the global landscape of donor funding experienced a substantial decline owing to shifting geopolitical priorities, economic downturns in donor countries, and evolving aid policies.

The prevailing global financial landscape, coupled with intensified competition among Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) for donor funds, is not only a financial issue, but also presents a significant challenge regarding the alignment of CSO programmatic efforts with donor thematic priorities. Donors typically articulate specific strategic objectives that may not consistently converge with the most pressing local needs identified by CSOs operating within their respective communities. Consequently, CSOs, driven by critical funding requirements, frequently find themselves compelled to adapt their project proposals and operate rational frameworks to conform to donor agendas. This often results in the potential marginalization of crucial local issues that do not readily fit within predefined funding parameters. Such a dynamic can engender a discernible disconnect

between the activities undertaken by CSOs and the authentic demands and aspirations of the populations they aim to serve. Ultimately, this can erode the perceived legitimacy and relevance of CSOs within their own communities, as they may be viewed as instruments for implementing external agendas rather than as responsive entities addressing genuine local concerns.

External donors frequently impose rigorous reporting, monitoring, and evaluation frameworks, driven by accountability requirements and a need to demonstrate impact to their own stakeholders. While some level of accountability is undeniably crucial for transparent and effective operations, the volume and complex nature of these donor-imposed requirements can disproportionately affect CSOs and think tanks, causing them to divert time and resources away from programmatic work, and dedicate more time on administrative tasks, financial reporting, and proposal writing. In most cases, even before the shortlisting stage for funding is reached, a number of lengthy and tedious paperwork has to be completed and compiled. This takes a significant amount of time away from program execution. This can stifle innovation and adaptability, as organizations become more focused on compliance rather than on effective problem-solving. Additionally, most donors do not allow CSOs and think tanks to retain any surplus funds for future initiatives after project completion, rather leftover funds are expected to be returned to the donor, and this affects sustainability of most organizations.

The Race for Calls for Project Proposals and Competition between CSOs

The race for calls for project proposals and competition among CSOs and think tanks is another implication of donor reliance. With limited funding opportunities and the large number of civil society organizations and think tanks working in the democracy and governing ecosystem in Central Africa, the competition for grants can be fierce. The scarcity of resources fosters a dynamic where organizations pursue similar initiatives, resulting in the duplication of efforts to secure funding. Such competitive

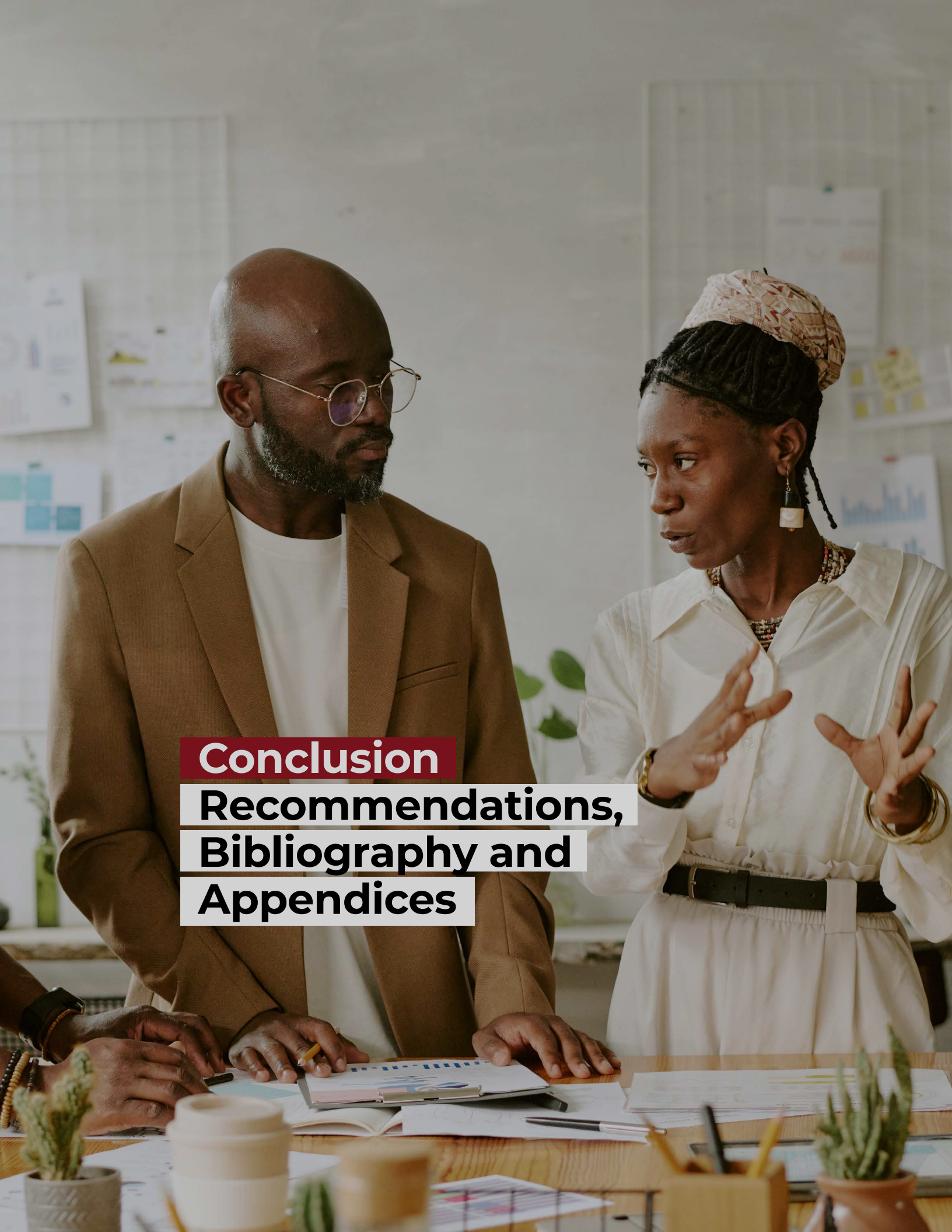
pressures can also erode the spirit of cooperation and knowledge exchange among CSOs, which is fundamentally important for advancing democratic principles and governance reforms within the region. In some cases, the pressure to secure funding can lead to organizations compromising their principles or exaggerating their capabilities to appear more attractive to donors.

In addition, many think tanks and CSOs in Central Africa, particularly smaller and grassroots organizations, lack administrative and financial reporting capacities required by donors, making it difficult for them to acquire donor grants.

Moreover, international donors are increasingly cautious about funding in environments perceived as risky. The central African sub region is characterized by a high level of political interference, and a persistent shrinking civic space which directly impacts CSOs and think tanks' ability to operate effectively. Consequently, CSOs working on sensitive issues such as democratic reforms find it difficult to attract and even retain donor funds due to the donor perception that funding such initiatives may attract political backlash against the CSOs or reputational damage to the donor organization itself.

Table 5: Summary Table of Economic Challenges

Key challenges	Consequences for CSOs	Consequences for donors	Opportunities for reform
The absence of national funding for CSOs and Think tanks in Central Africa	- Lack of funds to finance their programs and operations - Impedes financial sustainability of CSOs	Donor fatigue due to over-reliance	Available alternatives to raise funds. Such as, through crowdfunding, offering paid consultancy services, building partnerships with private sector actors so they can co-fund initiatives.
Financial Dependence on External Donors	- Forced Alignment with Donors' Thematic Priorities - Excessive Bureaucracy in grant management - The race for calls for project proposals and competition between CSOs	Funding certain initiatives like democratic reforms and human rights promotion can attract misconceptions as a tool used to interfere with domestic politics	Creation of reserve funds can sustain CSO operations for a considerable amount of time in the event of any unforeseen financial occurrences.

A man and a woman are standing in a meeting room, looking at documents on a table. The man is on the left, wearing a brown blazer and glasses. The woman is on the right, wearing a white blouse and a patterned headwrap. They are both looking at the documents on the table. The background shows a wall with various papers and charts.

Conclusion

Recommendations, Bibliography and Appendices

This analysis of the evolution of democracy in Central Africa highlights a paradox that has characterized the region since the democratic transitions of the early 1990s.

While important legal, constitutional, and institutional reforms have been introduced across many countries, these formal advances have not always translated into meaningful democratic consolidation. More than three decades after the launch of the democratization process, several countries in the region continue to face persistent governance challenges, including contested electoral processes, restrictions on civic liberties, weakened accountability mechanisms, prolonged concentration of political power, and shrinking civic space.

At the same time, the report demonstrates that democracy in Central Africa has not remained static. Political pluralism has expanded when compared to the pre-1990 period, electoral processes have become institutionalized, constitutional and legal frameworks recognizing fundamental freedoms have been adopted, and a growing number of actors now contribute to governance debates. Civil society organizations, think tanks, media actors, faith-based organizations, and citizens' movements have increasingly positioned themselves as important contributors to democratic governance, accountability, and public policy dialogue.

The findings also demonstrate that civil society organizations and think tanks occupy a critical position within the democratic ecosystem. They contribute to knowledge production, citizen engagement, policy advocacy, accountability, electoral observation, and the promotion of civic participation. Their contribution has become even more important in contexts where institutional checks and balances remain weak. However, these actors are themselves confronted with significant challenges, including political pressure, shrinking civic space, donor dependency, limited institutional capacity, fragmentation, and financial sustainability concerns.

The report further highlights that democratic consolidation is not only a question of institutional design. It requires political commitment, respect for

constitutional norms, protection of civic freedoms, effective accountability mechanisms, and sustained citizen participation. Formal democratic institutions alone cannot guarantee democratic governance when political incentives and governance practices remain inconsistent with democratic principles.

Consequently, strengthening democracy in Central Africa requires coordinated action by governments, civil society organizations, think tanks, regional institutions, and development partners. While the challenges identified in this report remain significant, they also present opportunities to strengthen democratic resilience, reinforce civic engagement, and promote more inclusive and accountable governance systems across the region.

Recommendations for Governments

- 🕒 Strengthen the independence and credibility of electoral institutions

Free, fair, and regular elections remain one of the defining characteristics of a healthy democracy. Elections conducted in a transparent political environment, where political parties can campaign freely and citizens can participate without intimidation, contribute significantly to democratic legitimacy and political stability. Governments should therefore strengthen the independence, neutrality, and credibility of electoral management bodies and undertake reforms that enhance public confidence in electoral processes.

- 🕒 Promote media freedom and access to information

Governments should recognize media organizations as essential partners in democratic governance rather than as political adversaries. Independent media play a critical role in promoting transparency, accountability, and informed citizen participation. Protecting freedom of expression, ensuring access to information, and safeguarding digital rights are essential components of democratic consolidation.

- 🕒 Reform restrictive legislation affecting civic participation

Counter-terrorism, public order, cybersecurity, and emergency legislation should be reviewed to ensure that they are not used to criminalize legitimate civic engagement. Legal frameworks should clearly distinguish between peaceful civic action and genuine security threats, while guaranteeing due process and the protection of fundamental freedoms.

- 🕒 Strengthen protection mechanisms for human rights defenders and civic actors

Governments should establish effective national mechanisms to monitor threats against civil society actors, journalists, and human rights defenders. These mechanisms should include reporting systems, protection measures, and appropriate responses to violations of civil and political rights.

Recommendations for Civil Society Organizations and Think Tanks

- 🕒 Strengthen institutional governance and coordination

Civil society organizations and think tanks should invest in strengthening internal governance systems, ethical standards, transparency mechanisms, and accountability procedures. Greater coordination among organizations can reduce fragmentation, strengthen collective advocacy efforts, and improve policy influence.

- 🕒 Expand collaboration and regional networking

Given the increasingly complex challenges facing democratic governance in Central Africa, CSOs and think tanks should strengthen regional cooperation, knowledge sharing, and joint advocacy initiatives. Collaborative platforms can help amplify voices, strengthen resilience, and facilitate the exchange of lessons learned across countries.

- 🕒 Invest in capacity strengthening

Civil society organizations and think tanks should continue developing expertise in policy analysis, advocacy, digital security, strategic communications, research methodologies, and organizational management. Building these capacities will enhance their ability to engage effectively with policymakers and citizens.

- 🕒 Diversify funding sources and strengthen financial sustainability

Heavy dependence on external donors remains a major vulnerability. CSOs and think tanks should explore diversified financing mechanisms, including consultancy services, partnerships with the private sector, membership contributions, endowment funds, crowdfunding initiatives, and other innovative resource mobilization approaches. Organizations should also seek to establish reserve funds that can support operational continuity during periods of financial uncertainty.

Recommendations for Regional Organizations (ECCAS, CEMAC, and the African Union)

- 🕒 Strengthen regional monitoring of democracy and civic space

Regional organizations should establish or strengthen mechanisms for monitoring democratic governance, electoral integrity, and restrictions on civic space. Regional reporting and peer-review mechanisms can help encourage compliance with democratic commitments and regional governance frameworks.

- 🕒 Promote peer learning and exchange among governance actors

Regional institutions should facilitate exchanges among governments, think tanks, civil society organizations, electoral bodies, and research institutions to share good practices and strengthen collective approaches to democratic governance challenges.

- 🕒 Enhance implementation of regional

governance instruments

Greater efforts should be made to promote the effective implementation of the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance and other regional governance frameworks. Strengthening compliance mechanisms would contribute to greater consistency between formal commitments and political practice.

Recommendations for Development Partners

- 🕒 Support long-term institutional strengthening

Development partners should move beyond short-term project-based funding and increase support for long-term institutional development, organizational sustainability, leadership development, and knowledge production capacities among civil society organizations and think tanks.

- 🕒 Provide more flexible and adaptive funding mechanisms

Given the increasingly restrictive and volatile operating environment facing democratic governance actors,

flexible funding mechanisms are required to help organizations respond to emerging challenges while maintaining institutional stability.

- 🕒 Strengthen locally driven research and evidence generation

Support should be directed toward locally generated research, policy analysis, and evidence production that reflects the realities and priorities of Central African societies. Strengthening local knowledge ecosystems contributes to more relevant and sustainable policy solutions.

- 🕒 Support regional collaboration and collective action

Development partners should continue supporting regional networks, joint research initiatives, policy dialogues, and platforms that foster collaboration among think tanks and civil society organizations. Such initiatives contribute to stronger regional learning, greater resilience, and more effective democratic governance interventions.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Organizations consulted

- Nkafu Policy Institute
- CESBC
- EGTC
- CRG
- CEREG
- IGAC
- REDHAC
- CHRDA
- LTDH

- OCDH (CAR)

- OCDH (Congo)

Appendix 2 – Summary elements

- ECCAS Scores
- AU/ECCAS/CEMAC legal instruments
- Mapping of CSOs

Appendix 3 – Methodological Note

- Documentary sources
- Qualitative triangulation
- Data limitations

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