

Tuesday, 16 September 2025

Conference Highlights – 5th Annual Africa Parliamentary Engagement and Monitoring Organisations (PEMO)

The conference underscored the urgent need to strengthen trust, accountability, and dialogue between parliaments, civil society, and citizens across Africa.

Among the opening remarks of the conference, Mr Rashaad Alli, Executive Director at PMG, reiterated that democracy required dialogue. He further said that Parliament was at risk of being an echo chamber.

Keynote Address: Ms Yvonne Dausab, Former Namibian Minister of Justice

Ms Dausab opened with a reflection on the turbulence facing parliaments globally. She reminded delegates that legislatures existed to serve the people, and their privileges were only legitimate when exercised in the public interest. She described Africa's current crises, rising inequality, hunger, violence against women, and climate change, as demanding ethical leadership and citizen participation. Drawing on Namibia's Constitution, she stressed representation, public interest, and conscience as guiding principles, though often constrained by party politics. She urged leaders to resist complicity, strengthen open parliaments, and embrace culture and innovation as anchors of governance.

Remarks by Chief Fortune Charumbira, President of the Pan-African Parliament (PAP)

Chief Charumbira called for renewing dialogue between legislators and society. He warned that African democracy is weakened by leaders' lack of accountability and exclusion of citizens from decision-making. Using Burkina Faso's 2008 crisis as an example, he cautioned against legislatures ignoring public sentiment. He identified mistrust between governments, citizens, and civil society as a major barrier, and reminded delegates of PAP's role in promoting citizen-centred governance. His call to action was clear: advance the vision of *"One Africa, one voice."*

Engagement with Delegates

Participants pressed Chief Charumbira on corruption, openness, and dysfunctional parliaments. He acknowledged corruption in construction projects and highlighted PAP's new Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the African Parliamentarians Network Against Corruption. He pointed to PAP's efforts on gender equality, youth inclusion, and livestreaming sessions, while stressing the need for greater funding and constructive criticism from civil society.

Panel Discussion: Bridging the Democratic Gap

S'phamandla Mhlongo of the Pan-African CSO Forum stressed the Forum's role in amplifying marginalised voices and building CSO-PAP collaboration. Past initiatives included training on civic engagement, illicit financial flows, and the first Civil Society Dialogue on human rights. Lessons included that inclusion creates legitimacy, partnerships need trust, and technology can enable participation. Audience questions raised concerns about CSOs being reduced to rubberstamps, the need for Africa's own definition of democracy, and the barriers posed by the digital divide. Mhlongo urged continuous CSO initiatives, alignment with PAP processes, and vigilance against co-option.

Common Concerns and Themes

- **Trust Deficit:** Evidenced by continent-wide protests and citizen disengagement.
 - **Corruption:** Infrastructure projects as a central avenue for looting.
 - **Youth Apathy:** A generation disillusioned with parliaments.
 - **Military Interference:** Ongoing coups undermine democratic institutions.
 - **Civil Society's Role:** Acting as an “informal parliament” to fill representation gaps.
 - **Ethical Leadership:** Rooted in Africa's history, culture, and collective consciousness.
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Closing Note

The Pretoria convening solidified PEMO as **Africa's largest forum for dialogue between parliaments and civil society**. From Accra to Pretoria, it had evolved into a **continental and global platform**, uniting nearly 30 countries and international partners.

The message resounded clearly: **to renew trust, restore accountability, and reimagine parliaments as true people's houses—responsive, ethical, and inclusive.**

(Overview of the conference)

5th Annual Africa Parliamentary Engagement and Monitoring Organisations (PEMO) Conference

Theme: *“Getting Back on Track: Renewing the Dialogue Between Legislatures and Civil Society”*

Location: Pretoria, South Africa

Participation: Delegates from **29 African countries** (including South Africa, Zambia, Namibia, Mozambique, Malawi, Lesotho, Madagascar, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Ghana, Nigeria, Cote d’Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, Togo, Benin, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Gambia, Niger, Liberia, Kenya, Somalia, Uganda, Tanzania, South Sudan, Cameroon, Morocco, Ethiopia) as well as partners from **Argentina, Latin America**.

The PEMO conferences have evolved significantly:

- **2015 & 2021** – Accra, Ghana
- **2023** – Nairobi, Kenya
- **2024** – Kampala, Uganda
- **2025** – Pretoria, South Africa (largest convening to date, broadening scope beyond regional to continental scale)

Opening Remarks

Ms Bonolo Makgale (Centre for Human Rights)

- The conference is designed to **build networks** and **critically engage** with the role of domestic and regional parliaments.
- Parliaments must be **accountable and responsive**, as this is how democracy and human rights thrive.

- Warned against the “**democratisation of military in civil spaces.**”
- Recalled **former President Thabo Mbeki’s habit of prioritising listening** as a model for rebuilding Africa’s democratic promise: “hearing each other to build an Africa that contradicts our current reality.”

Prof. Ebenezer Durojaye (Acting Director, Centre for Human Rights)

- Officially welcomed attendees.
- Emphasised the need for **robust discussion** to confront democratic deficiencies in Africa.
- Looked forward to practical solutions for regional challenges.

Mr Kwame (Conference Secretariat)

- Thanked CHR and host organisations.
- Outlined the Secretariat’s role: **monitoring and engaging parliaments—calling them out where necessary but also guiding improvements.**
- Confirmed participation from **29 countries.**
- Noted the **expansion from Accra to Pretoria** as a sign of inclusivity and growth.
- Expressed gratitude to the **Parliamentary Monitoring Group (PMG)** and its Executive Director, **Mr Rashaad Alli**, for hosting.

Mr Rashaad Alli (Executive Director, PMG)

- Framed the theme in the context of **International Day of Democracy** (observed just a day earlier).
- Called for confronting **uncomfortable truths** about where democracy is falling short.
- Stressed that democracy “**does not run on autopilot; it requires maintenance, feedback, and sometimes messy dialogue.**”

- Warned that closed parliaments risk becoming **echo chambers**, while civil society disengagement risks losing opportunities to turn activism into action.

Ms Caroline Gaita (Chairperson, Africa Parliamentary Monitoring Organisations Network – APMON)

- Traced the conference’s journey from **West Africa to Southern Africa**, now spanning **33 countries**.
 - Cited a **trust deficit** between citizens and parliaments, evidenced by **24 anti-government protests** on the continent.
 - Pointed to **youth political apathy** and laws that are punitive rather than responsive.
 - Advocated for **enhanced accountability mechanisms** driven by citizens.
 - Thanked Latin American partners (especially **Maria**, for her leadership in championing *open parliaments*).
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Keynote Address: Justice Yvonne Dausab (Former Minister of Justice, Namibia)

- Warned that parliaments risk becoming “**rally grounds**” rather than forums for debate.
- Quoted **Vincent Harding** and **Walter Rodney**, urging a radically transformed African vision grounded in ethical leadership.
- Outlined **Namibia’s three principles of parliamentary decorum**:
 1. Represent all people.
 2. Be guided by public interest.
 3. Follow conscience—even when it conflicts with party lines.
- Called for **open parliaments**, while recognising the risks faced by dissenters.

- Highlighted the role of **citizens beyond elections**: democracy requires continuous vigilance.
 - Challenged **academics** to share knowledge and **harness the wisdom of the masses**.
 - Concluded that Africa's complexity demands **no one-size-fits-all solutions** but rather an ongoing dialogue anchored in culture, ethics, and accountability.
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Conversation with Chief Fortune Charumbira (President, Pan African Parliament – PAP)

- **Redefining Dialogue**: Criticised leaders who treat engagement with citizens as a favour rather than a duty.
- **Civil Society as “Informal Parliament”**: Recognised NGOs and grassroots actors as carrying the pulse of the people.
- **The Representation Gap**: Questioned why parliaments speak a different “language” than their citizens.
- **Case Study – Burkina Faso 2008**: Parliament's extension of presidential term limits against citizens' will led to mass protests and the burning of parliament.
- **Comparisons with EU**: The EU Parliament took 31 years to consolidate binding authority; African parliaments remain fragmented.
- **On Corruption**: Described it as a “**cancer**,” often embedded in inflated infrastructure budgets. PAP can only advise the AU due to sovereignty limits.
- **On Public Engagement**: PAP sessions are open, livestreamed, and invite civil society participation. Model laws (e.g., gender equality) are shared with member states.
- **On Coups (Mali, Guinea-Bissau)**: Called for restoring democracy through engagement, not exclusion. Warned against civil society legitimising unconstitutional regimes.

Call to Action by Chief Charumbira

- Citizens must know their **five PAP representatives** and hold them accountable.
 - Follow up on how Midrand resolutions are applied nationally.
 - Support PAP **fact-finding missions** to address human rights violations.
 - Strengthen **civil society–PAP collaboration**.
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Civil Society Reflections: Mr Sphamandla Mhlongo (Democracy Development Programme)

- Urged strengthening **local institutions** and **election observation**.
 - Reminded that PAP is not only a legislative body but also a **moral compass**.
 - Introduced the **PAP Civil Society Forum (PAPCSO)**:
 - Increase visibility of PAP.
 - Broaden civil society access and engagement.
 - Establish constructive citizen–PAP engagement forums.
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Interactive Session: *Pause Café* Exercise

Chairperson: Mr Richard Bloggers (Zambia)

Mashauriano: Council of Elders (Kenya)

Round 1 – Reflections on Engagement with Parliament

- **South Africa (Green Connection):** Engaged with the new **Minerals and Petroleum Committee** (2024), securing a weekly dialogue channel with the chairperson’s advisors and researchers.

- **Malawi:** Introduced an annual **Parliamentary Open Week** to bring citizens closer to legislative processes, despite budget constraints.
- **Zimbabwe:** Advocated for **public access to cabinet decisions**, challenging government opacity.

Common Thread: Direct and respectful engagement with parliamentarians is key to unlocking influence.

Session 2 – Looking to the Future (5–10 years ahead)

- **Uganda:**
 - Strengthen civic–parliamentary relationships.
 - Improve feedback loops.
 - Address oversight gaps.
 - Expand civic education for both MPs and citizens.

Session 3 – Inclusion of Marginalised Voices

- **Botswana:** Called for engaging marginalised groups through an **inquisitive rather than prescriptive approach**, ensuring context-driven understanding.

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