

## **Social Media and Youth Political Engagement: A New Era in African Elections**

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In the heart and heat of Kariakoo, Dar es Salaam, a group of young men congregates at their favorite "vijiwe vya vijana" in a lively salon, where haircuts are punctuated by animated discussions. Amid the hum of clippers and casual chatter, they exchange the latest political posts on their phones, with one asking, "Do you think she'll win again?"—a likely reference to Her Excellency Samia Hassan's prospects if she contests in the upcoming election. In this vibrant corner of Tanzania, young people are no longer passive observers of politics. They're actively shaping political discourse, engaging through platforms like TikTok, X (formerly Twitter), and Instagram. This simple moment is part of a continent-wide shift, where social media is transforming how Africa's youth engage with politics, breaking down the traditional barriers to participation.

Across the African continent, social media has evolved from a space for entertainment into a powerful tool for political mobilization. Historically, barriers such as limited access to information and time constraints kept youth distant from political processes. Social media, however, has dismantled these obstacles, allowing young people to engage in political discourse like never before.

Take, for example, Nigeria's 2023 elections, where youth participation reached unprecedented heights. Inspired by the digital activism of the 2020 #EndSARS protests against police brutality, Nigeria saw 39.65% of registered voters—over 37 million people—aged between 18 and 35<sup>i</sup>. Social media played a critical role in this surge, with campaigns tackling issues such as unemployment and education. These campaigns helped propel a third-party candidate to prominence, a rare achievement in Nigeria's political landscape.

Platforms like X have become breeding grounds for political expression, with viral videos calling young people to vote. In Tanzania, opposition leader Tundu Lissu, even in exile, leveraged X to rally youth support and bridge the political divide. Online discussions, Twitter spaces, and local meetups allowed young people to connect with candidates and engage in key issues, facilitating more meaningful political participation.

Beyond simply mobilizing voters, social media has fostered a new generation of youth-driven leaders who challenge entrenched power structures. In Uganda, pop star-turned-politician Bobi Wine became a symbol of hope and resistance, using Facebook and X to rally millions under the #PeoplePower movement during the 2021 elections. His grassroots campaigns resonated with young voters who were eager to see a shift in Uganda's political dynamics<sup>ii</sup>.

Similarly, in South Africa, Julius Malema of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) harnessed the power of X to energize youth, promoting bold, radical ideas. His digital outreach

contributed significantly to the EFF's increased youth vote share in the 2019 elections, illustrating the potential of social media to influence political outcomes.

Social media also empowers grassroots movements, amplifying voices that might otherwise be silenced. The #EndSARS protests in Nigeria are a prime example. Through live videos and viral tweets, young activists rallied millions to demand police reform, with activist Rinu Oduala's posts reaching over 30 million people<sup>iii</sup>. Social media platforms have proven to be powerful tools for mobilizing people, driving global awareness, and challenging political structures.

In Tanzania, the opposition party ACT Wazalendo utilized social media to expose election-related violence during the 2020 polls, despite government attempts to block information. This highlights the dual-edged nature of digital activism—while social media can empower citizens, it also becomes a battleground for control, with governments resorting to tactics like internet shutdowns and disinformation campaigns<sup>iv</sup>.

Each platform brings unique strengths to the table: TikTok and Instagram excel in visual storytelling, using viral videos to connect young people with political issues, as seen during Kenya's 2024 #RejectFinanceBill2024 protests. X, on the other hand, excels at real-time news sharing and debate, making it an essential tool for political discourse.

However, significant challenges remain. The digital divide between urban and rural communities limits political engagement for many Africans. While 57% of urban Africans have internet access, only 23% of rural populations are connected, according to a 2020 International Telecommunication Union (ITU) report. Bridging this gap is essential for ensuring equitable participation. Expanding internet infrastructure and promoting digital literacy are crucial steps toward empowering all African youth, not just those in urban centers.

Governments' responses to digital activism also raise concerns. In many countries, internet shutdowns, restrictive laws, and disinformation campaigns threaten the free flow of information and the ability to engage in digital activism. In Tanzania, for instance, the ACT Wazalendo party's efforts to document election-related violence during the 2020 elections were hampered by government censorship and Twitter blocks, illustrating the fragile nature of online freedoms.

Despite these challenges, social media's potential to reshape youth political engagement in Africa is undeniable. From increasing voter turnout to amplifying youth voices and challenging entrenched political systems, the power of digital platforms continues to grow. To unlock this potential fully, it is essential to address the digital divide and ensure that all youth, regardless

of their location, can access these tools. Social media must evolve beyond a fleeting trend—it should become a sustained force for political change.

By empowering Africa's youth, social media can foster a new era of political participation, leadership, and equity. The time to act is now—to amplify the voices of young Africans and pave the way for a politically engaged, empowered, and equitable continent.

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<sup>i</sup> Nigeria Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) [Report 2023](#).

<sup>ii</sup> Time Magazine, 2020. [Bobi Wine: Uganda's Presidential Candidate](#).

<sup>iii</sup> Udenze, S., Roig Telo, A., & Pires, F. (2020). "The EndSARS movement is an umbrella for other challenges': Assessing Nigeria's EndSARS protest through the theoretical lens of intersectionality." *International Journal of African Development*, 17(4). [Link to article](#).

<sup>iv</sup> Awinia, C. S. (2022). "Social Media Penetration, Party Politics, and Elections in Tanzania: Emerging Practices and Challenges." *Journal of African Political Studies*. [Link to article](#).