
Afrobarometer Round 6

New data from
36 African countries



Dispatch No. 128 | 16 December 2016

After 50 years, freedom of association is firmly established, though far from absolute, in Africa

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 128 | Brian Howard and Kangwook Han

Summary

Fifty years ago today, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly enshrined a freedom that we had probably treasured ever since our evolution into social animals – the right to assemble and associate freely. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which was adopted along with the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), formalizes the right to peaceful assembly (Article 21) and freedom of association (Article 22), among other fundamental human rights.

As the UN says in observing the half-century milestone, freedoms of assembly and association “are a vehicle for the exercise of many other civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights, allowing people to express their political opinions, engage in artistic pursuits, engage in religious observances, join trade unions, elect leaders, and hold them accountable.” As such, they play “a decisive role” in building and consolidating democracy (UN Special Rapporteur, 2016a).

All African countries except South Sudan are signatories or state parties to the ICCPR, committing them to “take positive measures to establish and maintain an enabling environment” for associations – which can be anything from a prayer group to an online discussion group, a demonstration, a labor union, a political party or – yes, as long as it’s peaceful – a birthday party. No participant in an association should have to fear harassment, a travel ban, or a smear campaign, much less violence or detention (UN Special Rapporteur, 2016b).

**For more on the United Nations’
50th-anniversary celebration of its
two human rights covenants, see:**

<http://freeassembly.net/foaa-at-50/>

<http://2covenants.ohchr.org/>

#FOAAat50

How well are African governments fulfilling their commitment? Given human-rights activists’ concerns about shrinking civic space (Freedom House, 2016) and continuing headlines about repression in the streets and on the Web (e.g. Human Rights Watch,

2016), how free do Africans feel to exercise their right of association – especially in political organisations, probably the most likely type of association to attract official concern and repression?

Afrobarometer surveys in 36 African countries offer some encouraging news: Most Africans feel at least “somewhat free” to join any political group they want. But only 21 of 36 countries have majorities who feel “completely free,” and some countries have seen sharp declines in perceived freedom.

Freedom of association clearly goes hand in hand with other freedoms and democracy: In places where citizens feel free to associate, they also tend to feel free to speak and vote their minds, and they perceive their countries as functioning democracies.

Even so, one in three Africans say that the government should have the right to ban any organisation that “goes against its policies” – a less-than-absolute endorsement of a freedom that most of them claim.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, the economy, and related issues across 36 countries in Africa. Five rounds of surveys were implemented between 1999 and 2013, and results from Round 6 surveys (2014/2015) are currently being released.

Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent’s choice with nationally representative samples, which yield country-level results with a margin of sampling error of +/-2% (for a sample of 2,400) or +/-3% (for a sample of 1,200) at a 95% confidence level.

Round 6 interviews with 53,935 citizens in 36 countries (see list in the Appendix) represent the views of more than three-fourths of the continent’s population.

Key findings

- On average across 36 countries, eight in 10 Africans feel at least “somewhat free” to join any political organisation they want, including a majority (58%) who feel “completely free” to do so. About one in six citizens (17%) say they feel “not very” or “not at all” free to associate as they wish.
- “Complete” freedom of association is a minority perception in 15 of 36 countries. While more than eight in 10 citizens feel “completely free” in Senegal (85%), Malawi (85%), Ghana (84%), and Botswana (83%), fewer than one-third say the same in Algeria (32%), Zimbabwe (30%), Sudan (27%), Egypt (27%), and Swaziland (7%).
- Across 20 countries tracked since 2008/2009,¹ the perception of “complete” freedom of association has been stable. In six of these countries, however, this perception declined significantly between 2008 and 2015, led by drops of 23 percentage points in Benin and 21 points in Burkina Faso. In four countries, the proportion of citizens who feel “completely free” increased significantly: Uganda (by 18 percentage points), South Africa (15 points), Namibia (14%), and Cape Verde (5 points).
- Women are somewhat less likely to feel “completely free” than men, 55% vs. 60%. The perception of being free increases modestly with age.
- In general, perceived freedom of association is correlated with higher levels of actual engagement in civic and political activities.
- Freedom of association also goes hand in hand with democracy: Citizens who feel free to associate also tend to feel free to speak and vote their minds, and to see their countries as well-functioning democracies.
- Despite high perceptions of freedom of association and its linkages with democracy, one-third (32%) of Africans “agree” or “agree very strongly” that governments “should be able to ban any organisation that goes against its policies.”

¹ Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe.

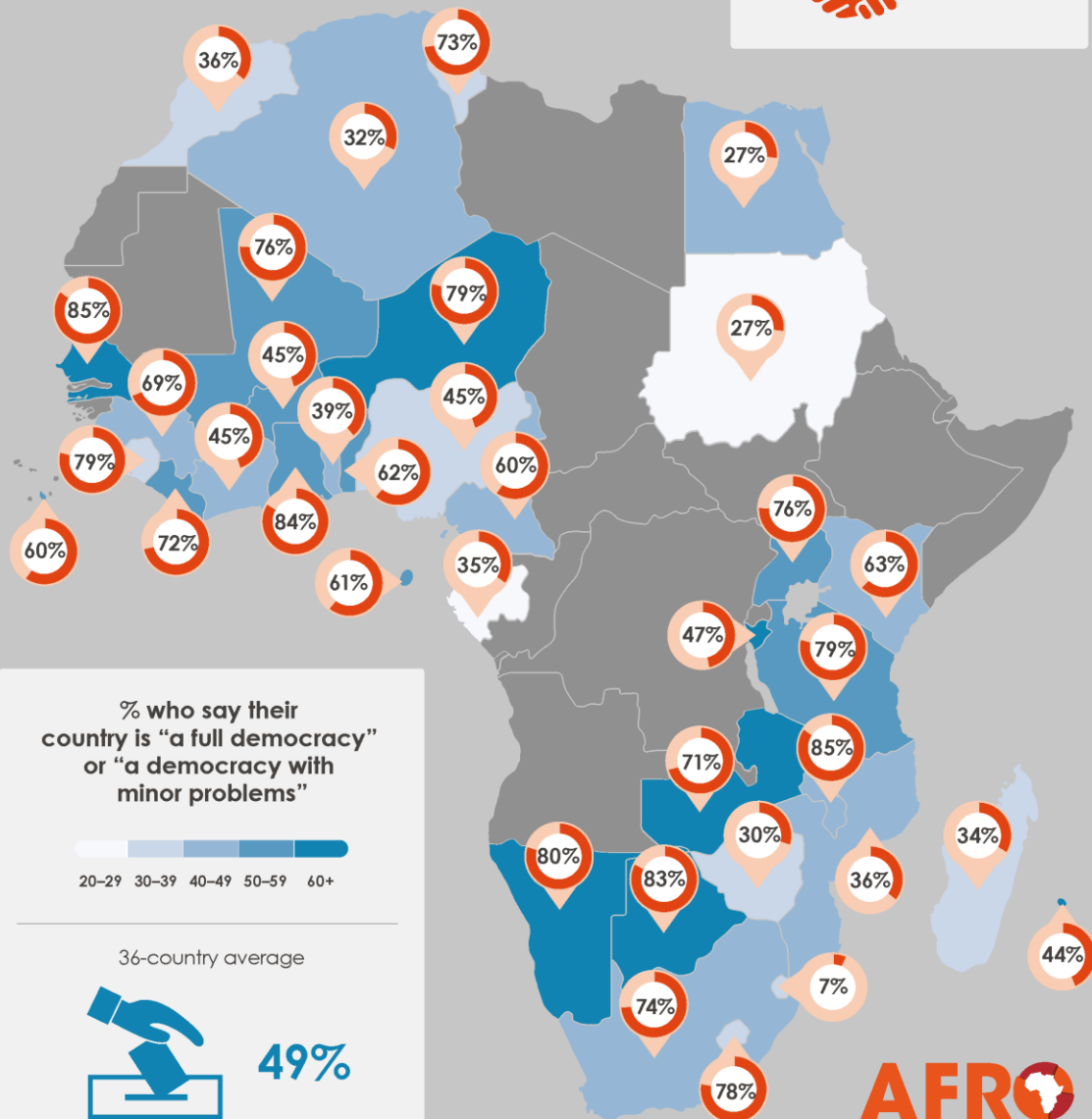
Perceptions of freedom of association and democracy

36 African countries | 2014/2015

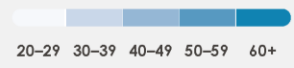
% "completely free" to join any organisation they want



36-country average



% who say their country is "a full democracy" or "a democracy with minor problems"



36-country average



Freedom of association

Freedom of association appears to be a widely enjoyed right in Africa. Afrobarometer asked respondents, “*In this country, how free are you to join any political organisation you want?*” On average across 36 countries, a majority (58%) of citizens say they feel “completely free,” and an additional 22% feel “somewhat free.” About one in six citizens (17%) say they feel “not very” or “not at all” free to associate as they wish.

Despite this encouraging overall picture, enjoyment of the freedom to associate is much more constrained in a number of countries. In 15 of the 36 countries, fewer than half of all citizens feel “completely free” to join political organisations (Figure 1).

Differences between countries are substantial: While more than eight in 10 citizens feel “completely free” in Senegal (85%), Malawi (85%), Ghana (84%), and Botswana (83%), fewer than one-third say the same in Algeria (32%), Zimbabwe (30%), Sudan (27%), Egypt (27%), and Swaziland (7%). The sense of being “not very free” or “not at all free” is particularly pronounced in Swaziland (73%), Zimbabwe (41%), Gabon (36%), and Mozambique (36%).

It should also be noted that events may overtake survey findings. In Burundi, for example, responses collected in late 2014 (when only 16% felt not very/not at all free) may no longer reflect public perceptions in the wake of government repression surrounding the re-election of President Pierre Nkurunziza. Recent government efforts to control the Internet, the news media, or other civic space may call for similar caution in interpreting results from Gabon, Uganda, and several other countries. (For dates of survey data collection, see Appendix Table A.1).

On average, the perception of freedom of association has been stable in recent years. Across 20 countries tracked since 2008/2009, the proportion of citizens who say they feel “completely free” to join any political organisation they want has remained at two-thirds (66% in 2014/2015). In six of these countries, however, this perception declined significantly between 2008 and 2015, led by Benin (a drop of 23 percentage points), Burkina Faso (-21 points), and Mozambique (-14 points) (Figure 2). Decreases were registered even in high-performing Senegal (85%, down from 90%) and Botswana (83%, down from 92%).

In four countries, the proportion of citizens who feel “completely free” has increased significantly: Uganda (by 18 percentage points), South Africa (15 points), Namibia (14%), and Cape Verde (5 points) (Figure 3).

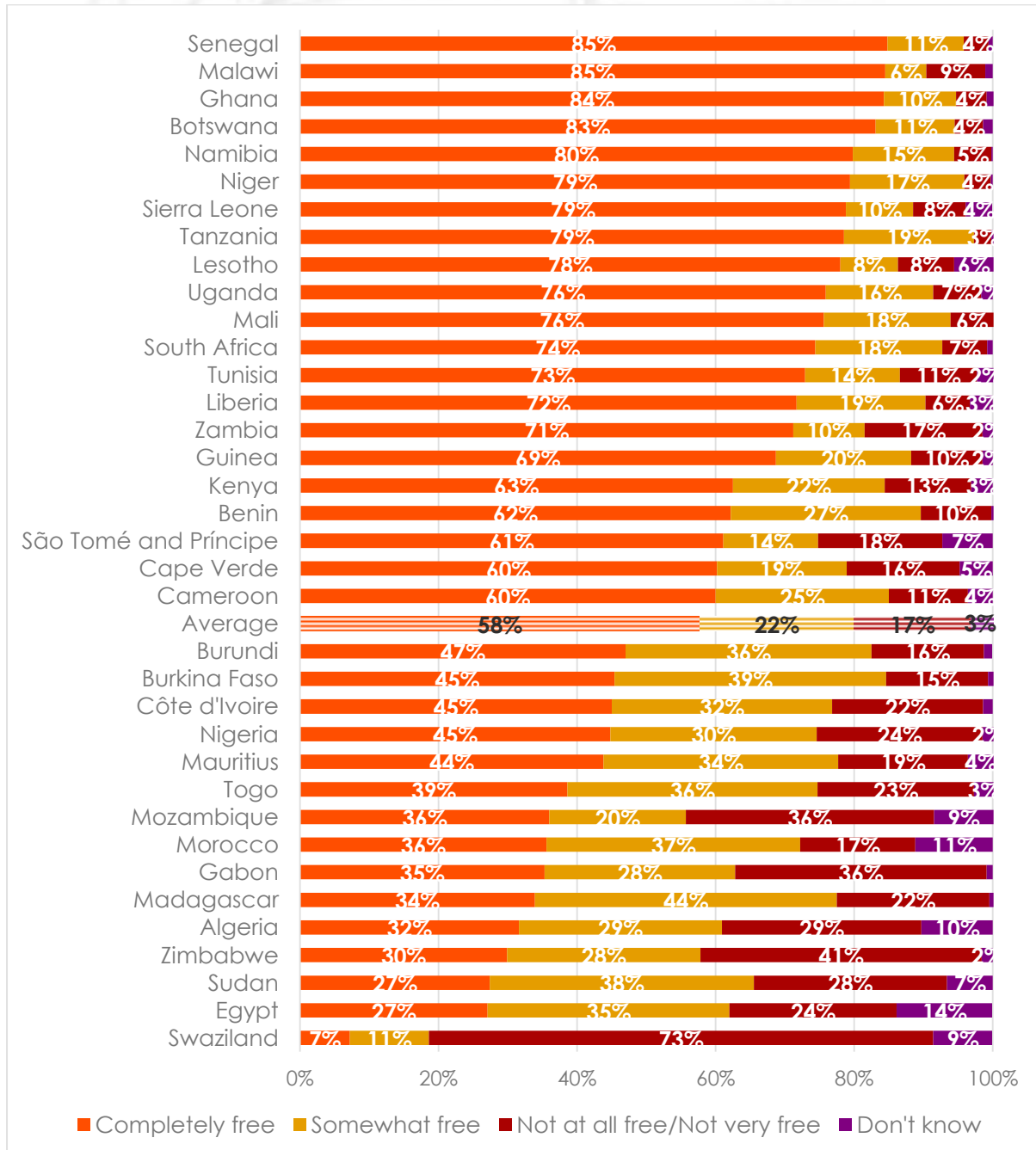
Grouped by region,² citizens in North African countries are on average far less likely to feel “completely free” (39%) than those in East Africa (66%) or West Africa (65%) (Figure 4). In the Southern Africa region, several countries register high levels of perceived freedom of association (Malawi (85%), Botswana (83%), Namibia (80%), South Africa (74%), and Zambia (71%)), but the regional average is pulled down by low scores for Swaziland (7%), Zimbabwe (30%), Madagascar (34%), and Mozambique (36%).

Women are somewhat less likely than men to feel “completely free” to join any organisation, 55% vs. 60% (Figure 5). Other differences between demographic sub-groups are modest. Perceived freedom of association increases with age, ranging from 53% of 18- to 25-year-olds

² Afrobarometer regional groupings are: Central Africa (Cameroon, Gabon, São Tomé and Príncipe), East Africa (Burundi, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda); North Africa (Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, Sudan, Tunisia), Southern Africa (Botswana, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Zambia, Zimbabwe), West Africa (Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo).

to 64% of those aged 66 or more. Education and lived poverty³ appear to show inconsistent trends, as perceived freedom is slightly lower among better-educated respondents as well as among poorer respondents. Christians and Muslims feel equally free to join any political organisation they want.

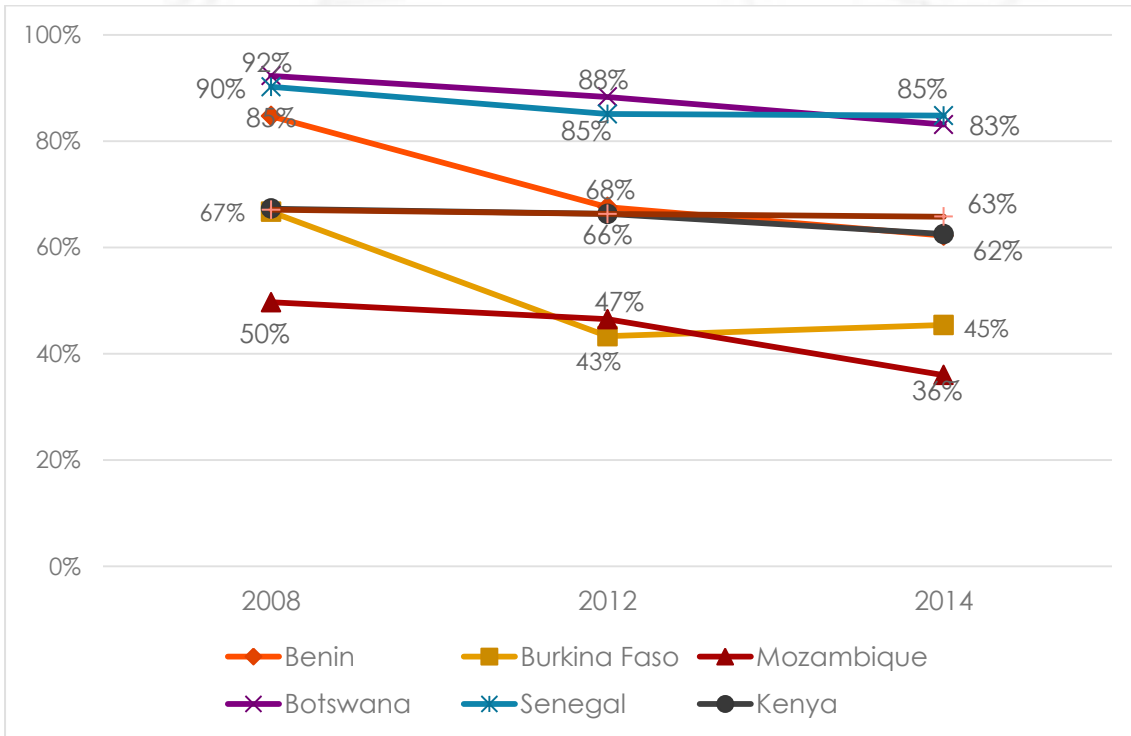
Figure 1: Freedom of association | 36 countries | 2014/2015



Respondents were asked: *In this country, how free are you to join any political organisation you want?*

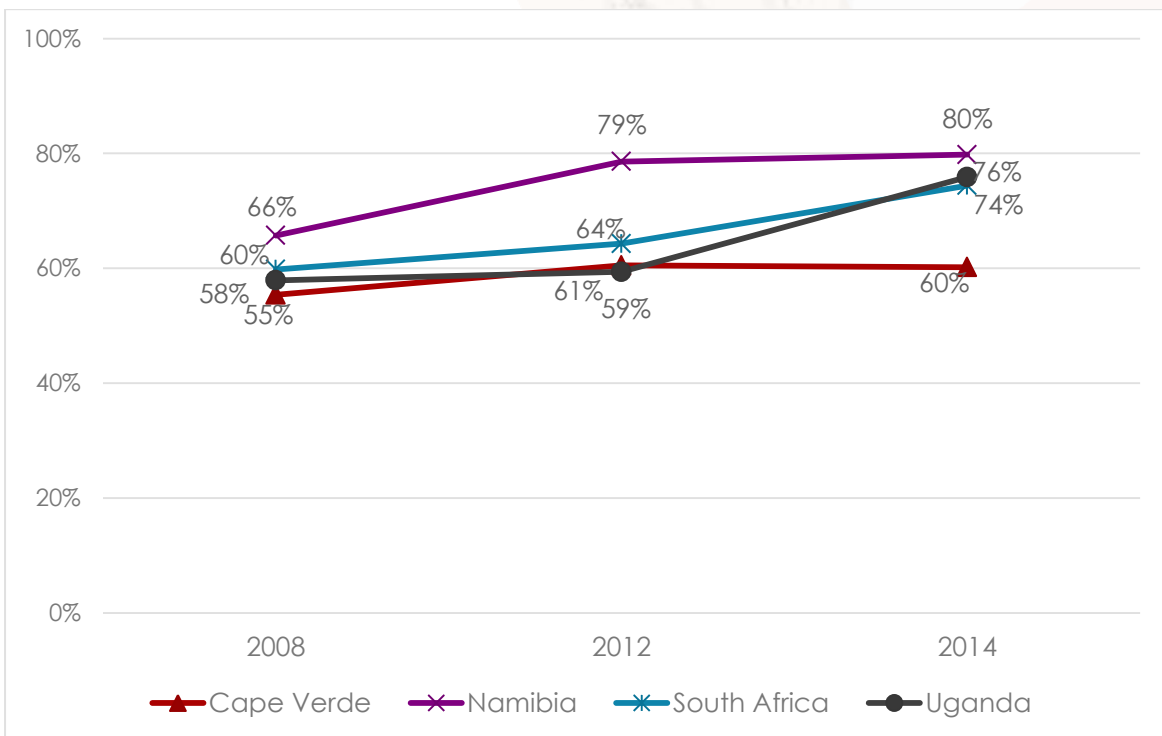
³ Afrobarometer assesses poverty through its Lived Poverty Index (LPI), an experiential measure based on how frequently respondents or their families went without five basic necessities (enough food, enough clean water, medicines or medical treatment, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the previous year.

Figure 2: Decreased perceptions of freedom of association | 6 of 20 countries | 2008-2015



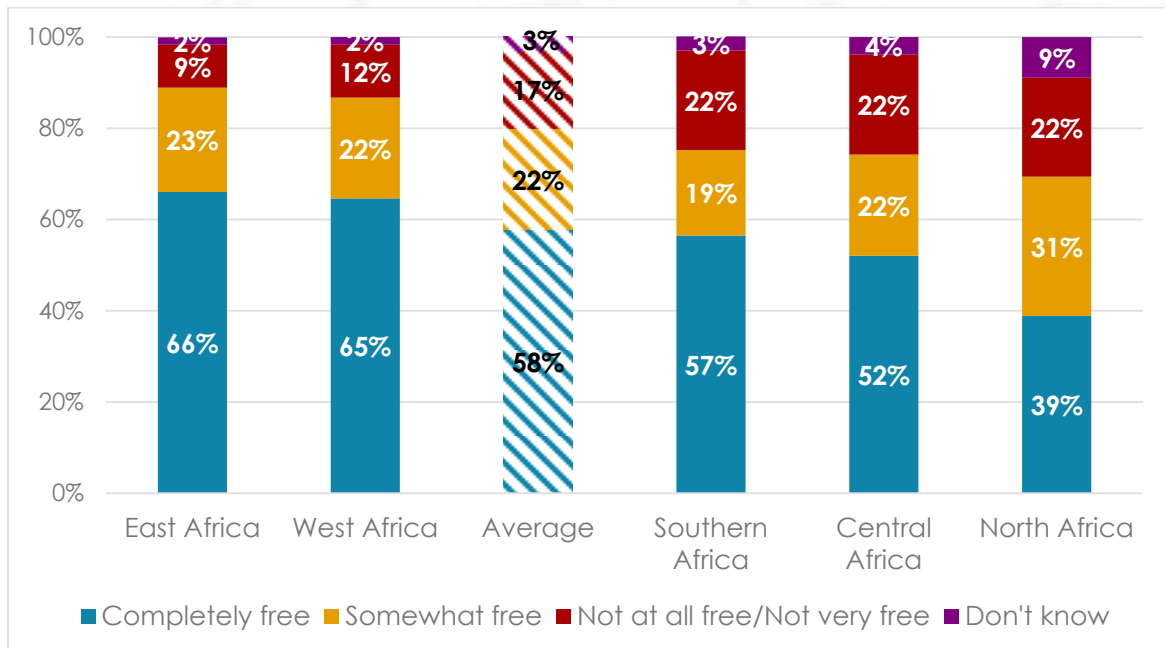
Respondents were asked: *In this country, how free are you to join any political organisation you want?*

Figure 3: Increased perceptions of freedom of association | 4 of 20 countries | 2008-2015



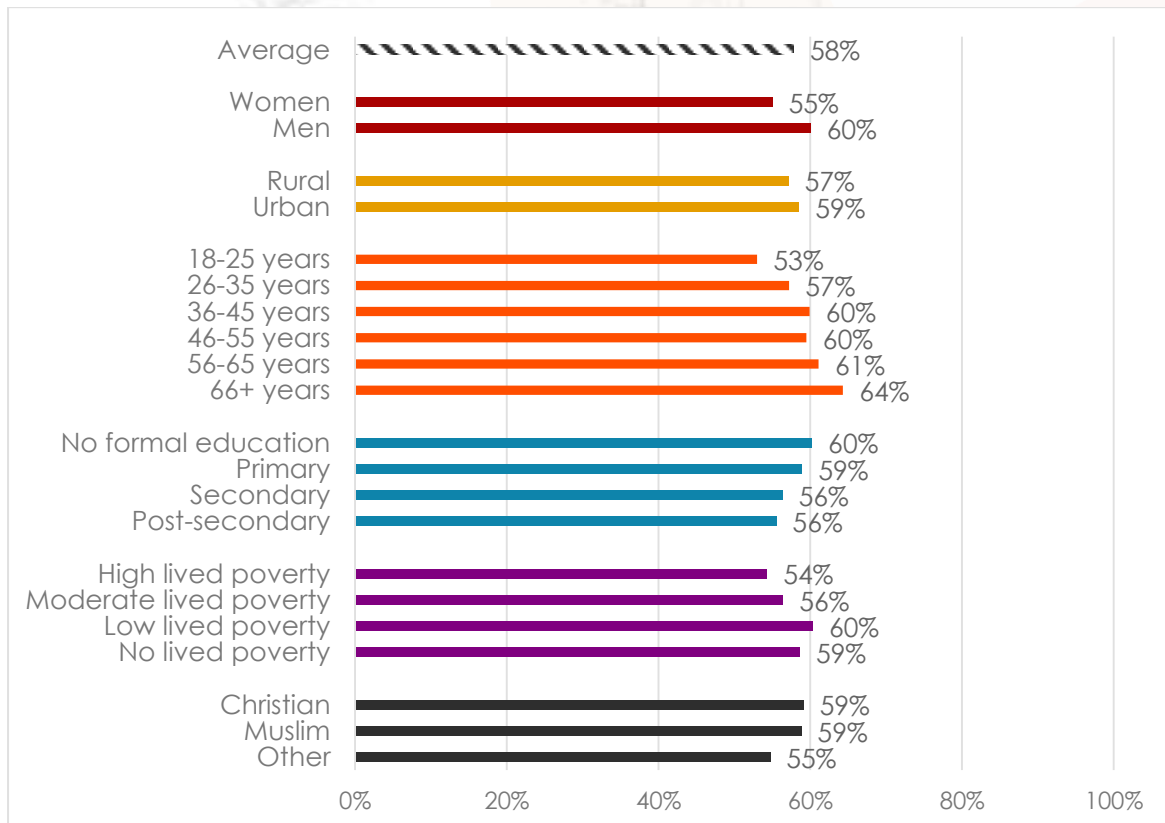
Respondents were asked: *In this country, how free are you to join any political organisation you want?*

Figure 4: Freedom of association | by region | 36 countries | 2014/2015



Respondents were asked: *In this country, how free are you to join any political organisation you want?*

Figure 5: Freedom of association | by demographic characteristics | 36 countries | 2014/2015



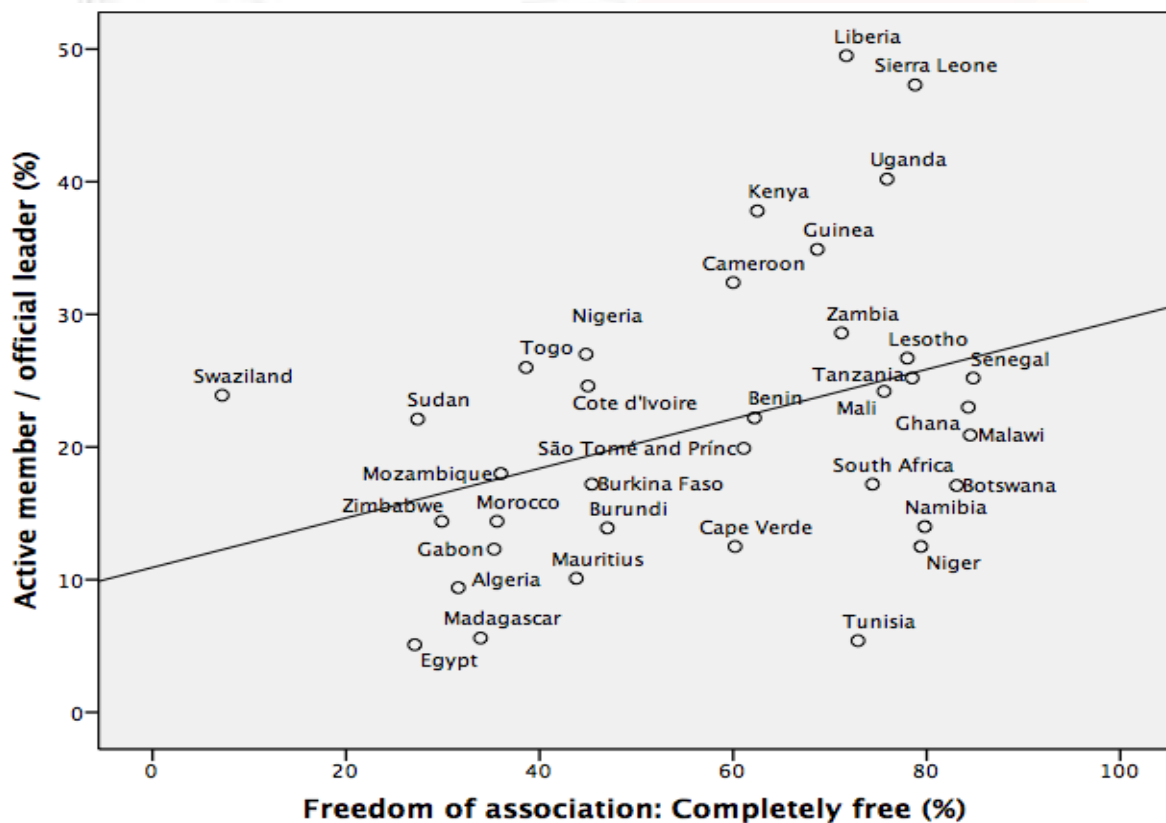
Respondents were asked: *In this country, how free are you to join any political organisation you want?*
 (% who say "completely free")

Freedom of association and civic/political participation

The perception of freedom of association is positively correlated with civic and political engagement. Citizens who feel free to join organisations of their choice are more likely to be active in voluntary associations or community groups than their counterparts who perceive themselves to be less free (Figure 6). Respondents who feel “completely free” to associate are also more likely to attend campaign rallies or meetings, to persuade others to vote for a certain candidate or party, to work for a political candidate or party, and to join others to request government action (Figure 7).

This basic correlation analysis cannot determine causation, that is, how perception and action influence each other – whether the perception of freedom encourages people to become active, or whether engaging in politics leads to a perception of freedom, or both.

Figure 6: Freedom of association and membership in associations | 36 countries | 2014/2015

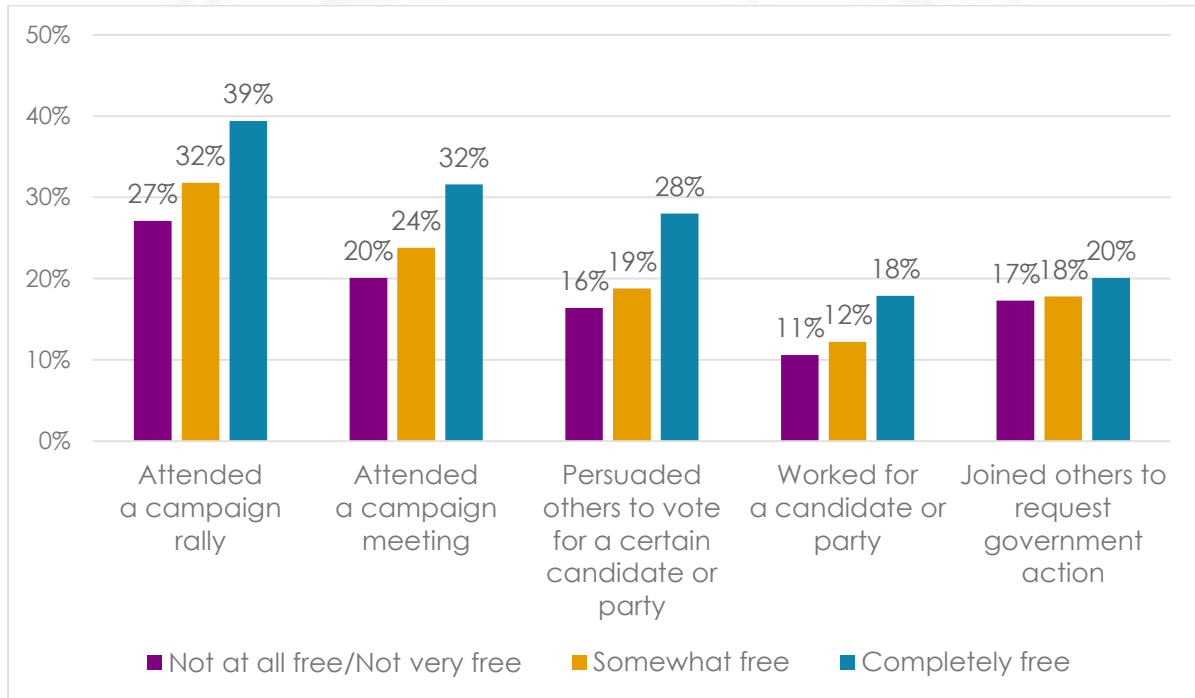


(Note: Pearson's $r = 0.370$ ($p < 0.05$))

Respondents were asked:

- In this country, how free are you to join any political organisation you want?
- Now I am going to read out a list of groups that people join or attend. For each one, could you tell me whether you are an official leader, an active member, an inactive member, or not a member: Some other [not religious] voluntary association or community group?

Figure 7: Freedom of association and political participation | 36 countries
 | 2014/2015



Respondents were asked:

- In this country, how free are you to join any political organisation you want?
- Thinking about the last national election in [month, year], did you: Attend a campaign rally? Attend a meeting with a candidate or campaign staff? Try to persuade others to vote for a certain presidential or legislative candidate or political party? Work for a candidate or party?
- Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens when they are dissatisfied with government performance. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things during the past year: Joined others in your community to request action from government?

Freedom and democracy

For Africans, freedom of association is tightly intertwined with freedom of speech and of the vote, as well as with democracy in general.

Perceptions of these three freedoms generally go hand in hand: With few exceptions, countries where large proportions of citizens feel “completely free” to associate also have high levels of perceived freedom of speech and are confident of their right to vote as they choose (Table 1).⁴

The perception of freedom to vote one’s choice is highest both in aggregate (69% “completely free” on average across the 36 countries) and in every individual country, while perceived freedom of association (58% on average) and freedom of speech (48%) follow, in many cases relatively closely, but in some cases by wide margins. Swaziland is a striking example of this hierarchy: 56% of Swazis say they feel “completely free” to vote for the candidate of their choice, while only 18% feel free to speak their minds and just 7% feel free to associate as they wish. But even in one of the continent’s most open polities, Mauritius, the

⁴ Pearson correlation tests confirm the tight intertwining, in people’s perceptions, of these three rights. For freedoms of association and speech, Pearson’s $r=0.926$, $p<0.01$; for freedoms of association and vote, Pearson’s $r=0.900$, $p<0.01$.

gap is wide: Three-fourths (74%) of Mauritians feel free to vote their choice, while only four in 10 feel free to speak (41%) or associate (44%).

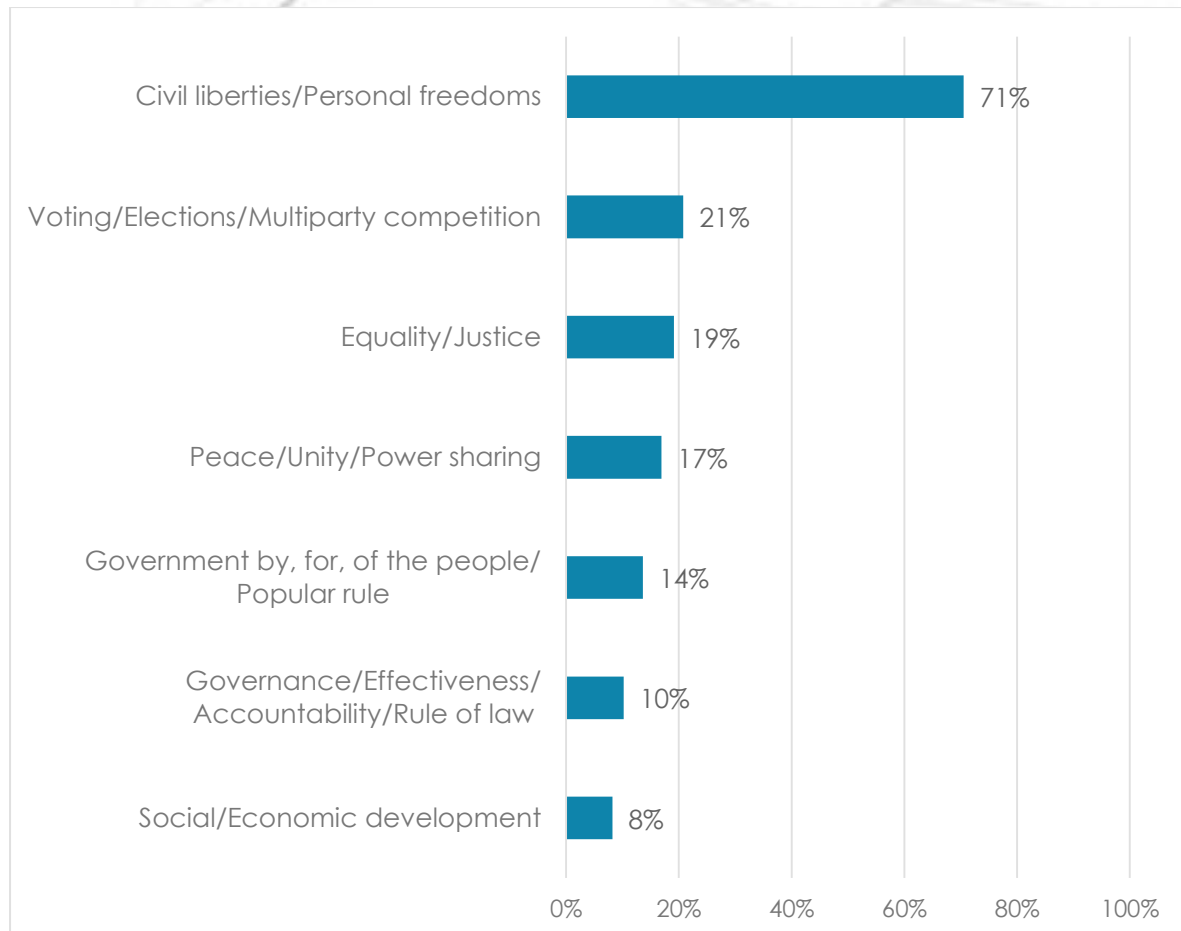
Table 1: Freedoms of association, speech, and vote | 36 countries | 2014/2015

	Complete freedom of association	Complete freedom of speech	Complete freedom of vote
Senegal	85%	72%	89%
Malawi	85%	77%	94%
Ghana	84%	73%	86%
Botswana	83%	65%	85%
Namibia	80%	70%	85%
Niger	79%	53%	80%
Sierra Leone	79%	53%	86%
Tanzania	79%	70%	80%
Lesotho	78%	68%	83%
Uganda	76%	65%	85%
Mali	76%	53%	79%
South Africa	74%	61%	78%
Tunisia	73%	67%	89%
Liberia	72%	53%	78%
Zambia	71%	63%	82%
Guinea	69%	59%	77%
Kenya	63%	54%	77%
Benin	62%	53%	72%
São Tomé and Príncipe	61%	60%	80%
Cape Verde	60%	56%	72%
Cameroon	60%	42%	68%
Burundi	47%	35%	55%
Burkina Faso	45%	31%	57%
Côte d'Ivoire	45%	31%	54%
Nigeria	45%	28%	49%
Mauritius	44%	41%	74%
Togo	39%	26%	58%
Mozambique	36%	31%	57%
Morocco	36%	29%	51%
Gabon	35%	20%	56%
Madagascar	34%	36%	61%
Algeria	32%	37%	51%
Zimbabwe	30%	27%	35%
Sudan	27%	16%	36%
Egypt	27%	33%	37%
Swaziland	7%	18%	56%
Average	58%	48%	69%

Respondents were asked: *In this country, how free are you to: Join any political organisation you want? Say what you think? Choose who to vote for without feeling pressured?*

These freedoms are also part of the backbone of democracy, in the eyes of many Africans. When survey respondents are asked, “What, if anything, does ‘democracy’ mean to you?” the most frequent response is civil liberties and personal freedoms, cited by 71% of respondents (Figure 8). Far fewer respondents cite voting/elections/multiparty competition (21%), equality/justice (19%), and other aspects of democracy.

Figure 8: What does ‘democracy’ mean to you? | 36 countries | 2014/2015



Respondents were asked: What, if anything, does “democracy” mean to you? (Respondents were allowed up to three responses. The figure shows % of respondents who cite each option as one of their three responses.)

Further confirming the link between freedom of association and democracy, respondents who see themselves as free to join any organisation they wish are also more likely to consider their country a democracy (Table 2). A majority (54%) of those who feel “completely free” to associate see their country as “a full democracy” or a democracy “with minor problems,” compared to only one-third (33%) of those who feel “not at all free” to associate. Across 36 countries, the relationship between perceived freedom of association and the perceived extent of democracy is statistically strong (Figure 9).

Similarly, perceived freedom of association is strongly related to citizens’ satisfaction with the way democracy is working in their country.⁵

⁵ Pearson’s $r = 0.4827$, $p < 0.01$

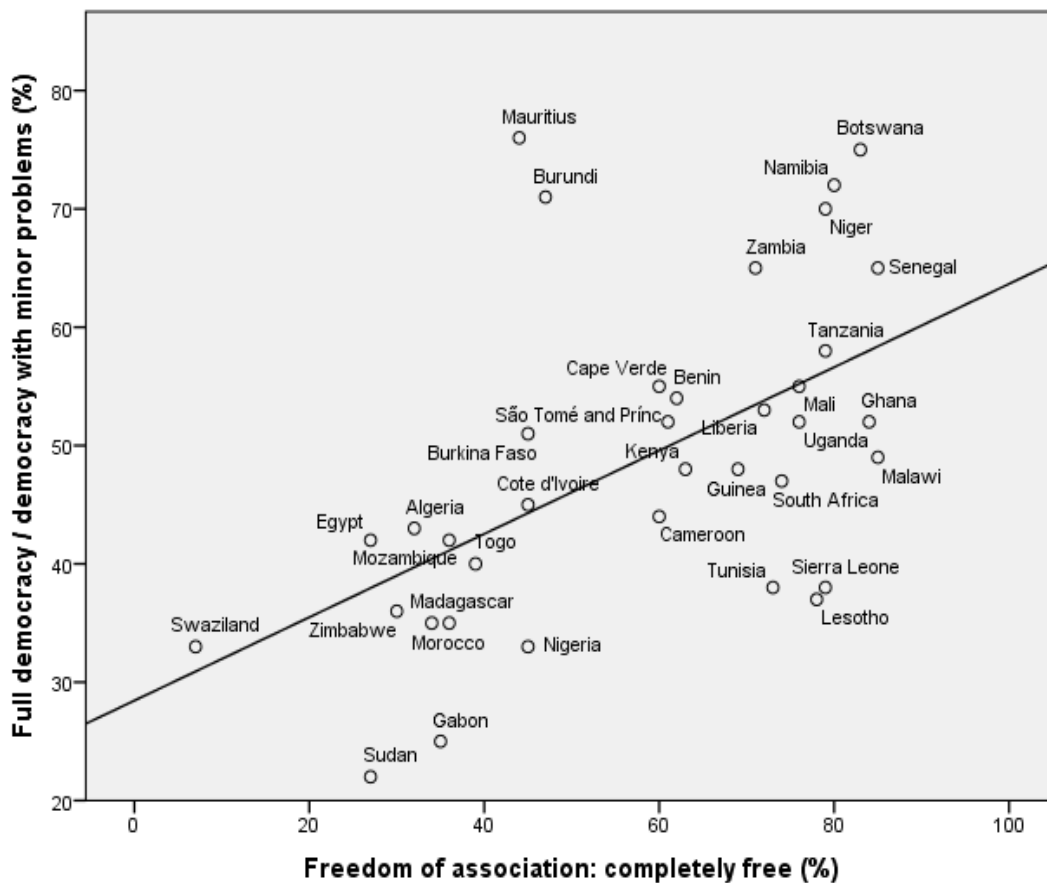
Table 2: Freedom of association and extent of democracy | 36 countries | 2014/2015

Perceived freedom of association	% who see their country as ...	
	A full democracy or a democracy with minor problems	A democracy with major problems or not a democracy
Completely free to associate	54%	36%
Somewhat free to associate	47%	43%
Not very free to associate	38%	51%
Not at all free to associate	33%	56%

Respondents were asked:

- In this country, how free are you to join any political organisation you want?
- In your opinion, how much of a democracy is [your country] today?

Figure 9: Freedom of association and extent of democracy | 36 countries | 2014/2015



(Note: Pearson's R = 0.545, p<0.01)

Respondents were asked:

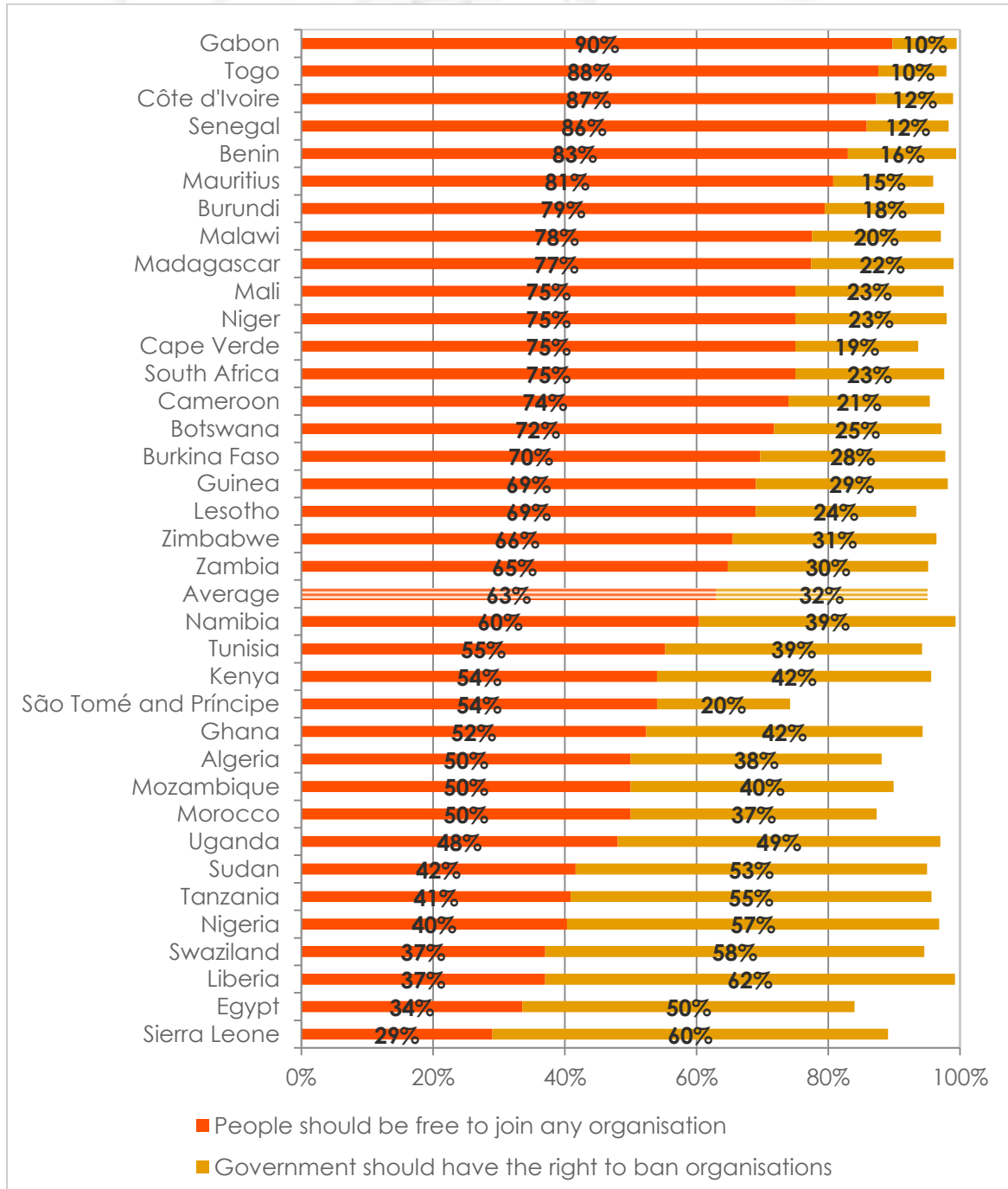
- In this country, how free are you: To join any political organization you want?
- In your opinion how much of a democracy is [your country] today?

Popular support for freedom of association

Given the strong linkages between perceptions of freedoms of association, speech, and vote and democracy, it may be surprising that support for unconditional freedom of association is far from unanimous. While six in 10 Africans (63%) “agree” or “agree very

strongly" that they "should be able to join any organisation, whether or not the government approves of it," one-third (32%) of citizens say the government "should be able to ban any organisation that goes against its policies" (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Popular support for freedom of association | 36 countries | 2014/2015



Respondents were asked: Let's talk for a moment about the kind of society you would like to have in this country. Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: Government should be able to ban any organisation that goes against its policies.
 Statement 2: We should be able to join any organisation, whether or not the government approves of it.
 (% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with each statement)

Support for freedom of association varies widely by country, from highs in Gabon (90%), Togo (88%), and Côte d'Ivoire (87%) to lows in Sierra Leone (29%) and Egypt (34%). Support for a government's right to outlaw certain organisations is the majority view in seven of 36 countries, most strongly in Liberia (62%) and Sierra Leone (60%) – perhaps a legacy of violent civil war-era organisations that inflicted untold suffering on the population.

Interestingly, a Pearson correlation test shows no association at the country level between supporting freedom of association in principle and actually feeling free (Pearson's $r=0.121$, $p>0.1$). In other words, people who feel “completely free” to join any organisation are no more or less likely to support freedom of association than those who feel less free.

Conclusion

Encouraging news – that eight in 10 Africans feel at least “somewhat free” to join any political organisation they want – should indeed be celebrated. But it should not obscure remaining challenges, including the large numbers of Swazis, Zimbabweans, Gabonese, Mozambicans, and other Africans who do not perceive – and therefore do not enjoy – this fundamental human right. Recent declines in perceived freedom of association in Benin, Burkina Faso, Mozambique, Kenya, and even high-performing Botswana and Senegal offer challenges for analysts and monitors.

Citizens' perceptions are consistent with advocates' arguments that freedom of association is intimately intertwined with other benefits of democracy, challenging all democratic governments to ensure the protection of a full complement of core rights and freedoms. As UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein said at the General Assembly's 50th-anniversary commemorative event in October, “These are not empty words, but rights. Every state represented in this room has sworn to be accountable to its people in ensuring these rights are respected” (United Nations Human Rights Office, 2016).

One final challenge, or puzzle, may be the significant proportion of Africans – about one in three – who do not fully endorse freedom of association, saying instead that their government should have the right to ban any organisation that “goes against its policies.” Perhaps a substantial number of Africans perceive themselves to be free to join any organisation *they might actually desire to join*, without necessarily wanting to give *carte blanche* to any and all organisations they can imagine.

To further explore this data, please visit Afrobarometer's online data analysis facility at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

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Appendix

Table A.1: Afrobarometer Round 6 fieldwork dates and previous survey rounds

Country	Months when Round 6 fieldwork was conducted	Previous survey rounds
Algeria	May-June 2015	2013
Benin	May-June 2014	2005, 2008, 2011
Botswana	June-July 2014	1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012
Burkina Faso	April-May 2015	2008, 2012
Burundi	September-October 2014	2012
Cameroon	January-February 2015	2013
Cape Verde	November-December 2014	2002, 2005, 2008, 2011
Côte d'Ivoire	August-September 2014	2013
Egypt	June-July 2015	2013
Gabon	September 2015	N/A
Ghana	May-June 2014	1999, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012
Guinea	March-April 2015	2013
Kenya	November-December 2014	2003, 2005, 2008, 2011
Lesotho	May 2014	2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012
Liberia	May 2015	2008, 2012
Madagascar	December 2014-January 2015	2005, 2008, 2013
Malawi	March-April 2014	1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012
Mali	December 2014	2001, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2013
Mauritius	June-July 2014	2012
Morocco	November 2015	2013
Mozambique	June-August 2015	2002, 2005, 2008, 2012
Namibia	August-September 2014	1999, 2003, 2006, 2008, 2012
Niger	April 2015	2013
Nigeria	December 2014-January 2015	2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2013
São Tomé and Príncipe	July-August 2015	N/A
Senegal	November-December 2014	2002, 2005, 2008, 2013
Sierra Leone	May-June 2015	2012
South Africa	August-September 2015	2000, 2002, 2006, 2008, 2011
Sudan	June 2015	2013

Country	Months when Round 6 fieldwork was conducted	Previous survey rounds
Swaziland	April 2015	2013
Tanzania	August-November 2014	2001, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012
Togo	October 2014	2012
Tunisia	April-May 2015	2013
Uganda	May 2015	2000, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012
Zambia	October 2014	1999, 2003, 2005, 2009, 2013
Zimbabwe	November 2014	1999, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2012

Other Round 6 global releases

- **Where to start? Aligning sustainable development goals with citizen priorities.** (2015). Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 67. http://afrobarometer.org/sites/default/files/publications/Dispatches/ab_r6_dispatchno67_african_priorities_en.pdf.
- **Building on progress: Infrastructure development still a major challenge in Africa.** (2016). Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 69. www.afrobarometer.org/publications/ad69-building-progress-infrastructure-development-still-major-challenge-africa.
- **Africa's growth dividend? Lived poverty drops across much of the continent.** (2016). Afrobarometer Policy Paper No. 29. <http://www.afrobarometer.org/publications/pp29-africas-growth-dividend-lived-poverty-drops-across-the-continent>.
- **Good neighbours? Africans express high levels of tolerance for many, but not for all.** (2016). Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 74. <http://afrobarometer.org/publications/tolerance-in-africa>.
- **Off-grid or 'off-on': Lack of access, unreliable electricity supply still plague majority of Africans.** Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 75. <http://afrobarometer.org/publications/ad75-unreliable-electricity-supply-still-plague-majority-of-africans>.
- **Lack of safe water, sanitation spurs growing dissatisfaction with government performance.** Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 76. <http://afrobarometer.org/publications/ad76-lack-of-safe-water-and-sanitation-spurs-growing-dissatisfaction>.
- **Despite gains, barriers keep health care high on Africa's priority list.** Afrobarometer Policy Paper No. 31. <http://www.afrobarometer.org/publications/pp31-despite-gains-barriers-keep-health-care-high-on-africas-priority-list>.
- **Strong public support for 'watchdog' role backs African news media under attack.** Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 85. http://afrobarometer.org/publications/ad85-media_in_africa_world_press_freedom_day_2016.
- **Regional integration for Africa: Could stronger public support turn 'rhetoric into reality'?** Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 91. <http://afrobarometer.org/publications/ad91-regional-integration-africa-could-stronger-public-support-turn-rhetoric-reality>.
- **Does less engaged mean less empowered? Political participation lags among African youth, especially women.** Afrobarometer Policy Paper No. 34. <http://www.afrobarometer.org/publications/youth-day-2016>.
- **Do trustworthy institutions matter for development? Corruption, trust, and government performance in Africa.** Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 112. <http://www.afrobarometer.org/publications/ad112-do-trustworthy-institutions-matter-development-corruption-trust-and-government>.
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