Political freedoms and interest have yet to translate into Mandela's vision of participatory democracy in Africa

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 39 | Anyway Chingwete and Claire-Anne Lester

Summary

Nelson Mandela International Day (18 July) honours the ideals that underpinned Madiba's actions – freedom, universal enfranchisement, and participatory democracy. As Mandela once said, "We can change the world and make it a better place. It is in your hands to make a difference." More than a quarter-century after grass-roots pro-democracy movements began replacing authoritarian regimes in many African countries, and despite marked progress toward democratic governance, many new democracies continue to suffer from a number of democratic deficits. One of these is low levels of civic participation.

Democratic political systems rely on citizen participation, building wider channels of integration and richer networks of association, for their consolidation. Citizen participation can range from the bare minimum of voting to more active modes of citizenship, such as campaigning or being a member of a community organisation or social movement. In Africa, participation may also focus on powerful informal and traditional networks.

In the formal political sphere, participation empowers citizens and is a vital part of democratic governance. In the context of a new democracy, a strong and engaged civil society is desirable for its ability to legitimate the state's authority, to hold the government accountable, and to allow citizens to engage in decision-making processes that ultimately affect their lives.

Data from Afrobarometer surveys show that large majorities of African citizens are interested in public affairs and feel free to express their views and associate as they wish. But tracing political participation across the continent suggests that awareness of political freedoms and interest in public affairs have not translated into an actualisation of these freedoms through widespread civic engagement and political participation in Africa's democracies.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues across more than 30 countries in Africa. Five rounds of surveys were conducted between 1999 and 2013, and Round 6 surveys are currently under way (2014-2015). Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples of between 1,200 and 2,400 respondents. Samples of this size yield country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3% (if n=1,200) or +/-2% (if n=2,400).

This analysis draws mostly on survey results from Afrobarometer Round 5 (2011-2013, or c. 2012), whose nationally representative samples totalling 51,605 respondents from 34

countries[1] represent 84% of the continent's population. In addition, results from 16 countries that were also tracked in earlier survey rounds (c. 2002, c. 2005, and c. 2008)[2] are analysed for over-time comparisons.

Key findings

- Interest in public affairs is high (80% of respondents) across the 34 surveyed countries. Both interest in public affairs and the tendency to discuss politics with friends and family are highest in North Africa, i.e. in a region considered less democratic than Southern, West, or East Africa.

- The proportion of respondents who belong to community groups or voluntary associations has increased, from 26% in c. 2002 to 36% in c. 2012.

- Despite strong interest in public affairs and increased membership in community groups, active participation in terms of contacting government officials to raise an issue is reported by less than 30% of the population in all regions.

- Active citizenship is particularly low among citizens living in North African states; only 14% of North Africans say they are members of a community group or voluntary organisation, and only 26% attended a community meeting (other than a religious meeting) in the year preceding the survey to raise an important issue. In contrast, 74% of East Africans say they attended community meetings, as did 61% of Southern Africans and 58% of West Africans.

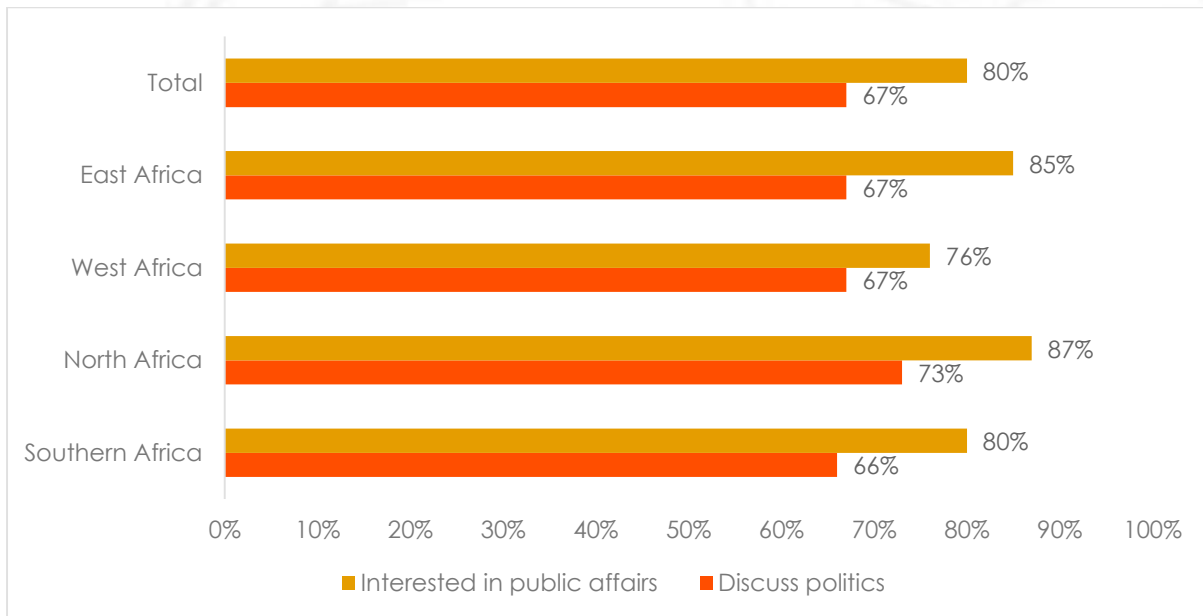## Interest in public affairs and perceptions of freedom

Across the continent, four out of five Africans (80%) assert that they are "very interested" or "somewhat interested" in public affairs. This proportion has remained consistently at 80% or above between c. 2002 and c. 2012. Similarly, two-thirds (67%) of respondents say they discuss political affairs "frequently" or "occasionally" with family and friends (Figure 1).

Looking at results by region, both interest and propensity to discuss politics are higher in North Africa than in East, West, or Southern Africa – an interesting finding considering the autocratic nature of many regimes in the North African region. (Among five North African countries surveyed, Freedom House rates only one (Tunisia) as "free" in terms of political rights and civil liberties (Freedom House, 2015).)

---

[1] Countries included in Round 5 are Algeria, Benin. Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Cote d'Ivoire, Egypt, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritius, Morocco, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Sudan, Swaziland, Tanzania, Togo, Tunisia, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

[2] Countries tracked since 2002 are Botswana, Cape Verde, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Uganda, Tanzania, and Zambia.

Figure 1: Percentage of respondents who are interested in politics and discuss political affairs | by region | 34 countries | c. 2012

Respondents were asked:
1. How interested are you in public affairs? (% who say "very interested" or "somewhat interested")
2. When you get together with your friends or family, would you say you discuss political matters? (% who say "frequently" or "occasionally")
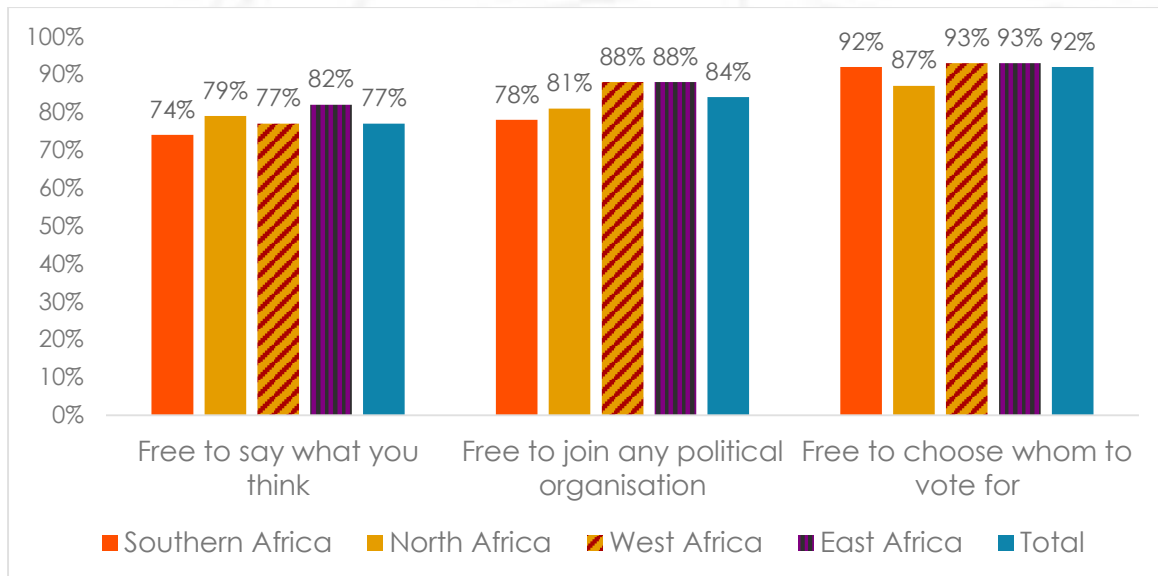
Large majorities also say they enjoy the freedom to say what they think (77%), to join any organisation they wish (84%), and to vote for any candidate they like (92%) (Figure 2).

Citizens in East African countries are most likely to feel free to say what they think (82%, compared to 74% in Southern Africa).

North Africans are about average in perceived freedoms of expression and association, though they are somewhat less likely to say they feel free to choose whom to vote for (87%, compared to 93% in West and East Africa and 92% in Southern Africa).

Despite these small regional differences, the data suggest that Africans generally have a strong sense of their political freedoms. The perceived freedom of electoral choice remained high (between 80% and 92%) both across the continent and between c. 2008 and c. 2012.

Figure 2: Perceived political freedoms | by region | 34 countries | c. 2012

Respondents were asked: *In this country, how free are you: (a) To say what you think? (b) To join any political organisation you want? (c) To choose who to vote for without feeling pressured?*
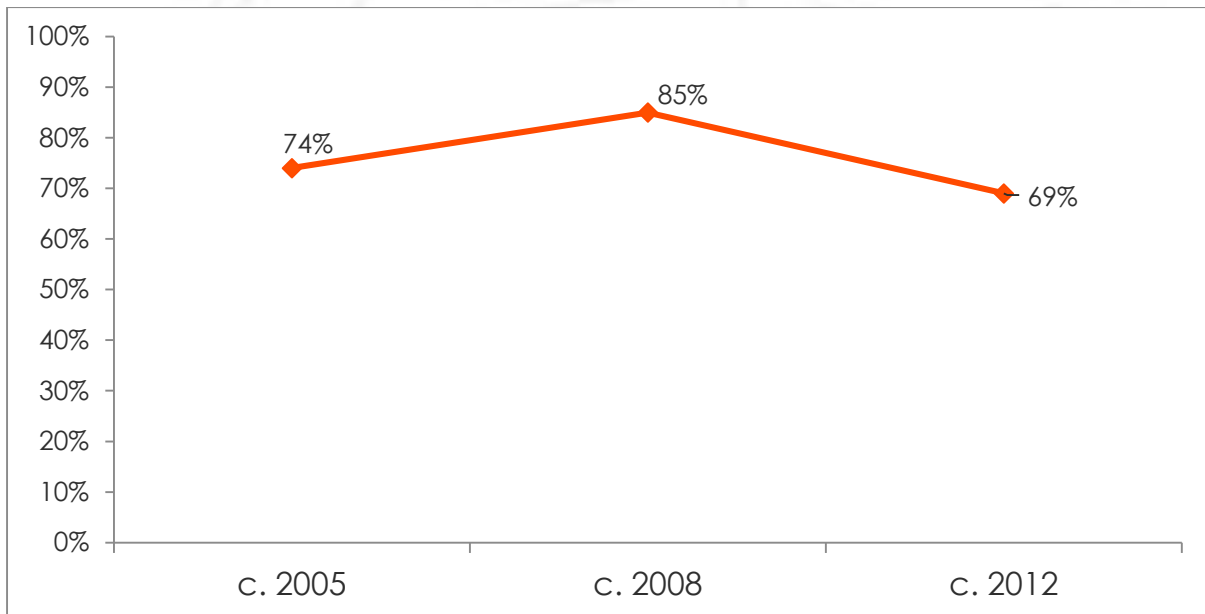*(% who say "completely free" or "somewhat free")*

Political participation

High interest in public affairs and high perceptions of political freedoms across the continent reflect promising potential for political engagement. However, levels of tangible political participation are more mixed.

Voting rates declined between c. 2005 and c. 2012 (Figure 3). Membership in a community group or voluntary organisation increased between c. 2002 and c. 2008, from 26% to 38%, before dipping to 36% in c. 2012. However, this increase has not led to an increase in active participation in community meetings (Figure 4).
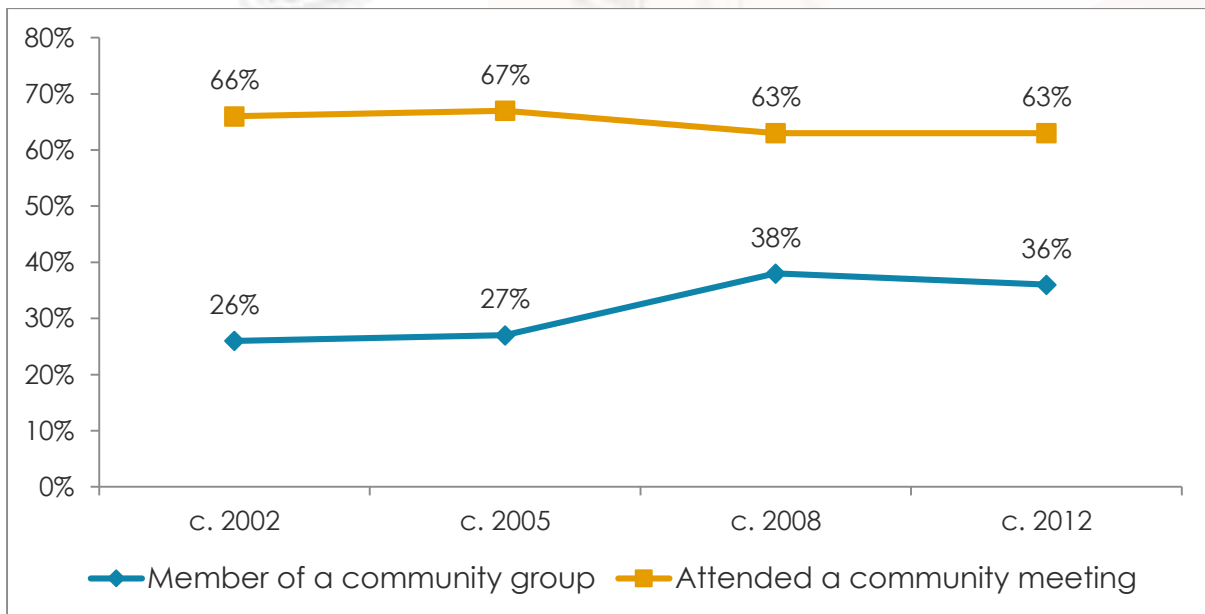
Likewise, the proportion of respondents who say they contacted a member of Parliament (MP), an official of a government agency, or a political party representative during the year preceding the survey remained fairly static between c. 2002 and c. 2012, ranging between 12% and 18% (Figure 5). About one in four respondents contacted a local councillor to raise an important issue, suggesting that people may feel more comfortable contacting local officials.

Figure 3: Trend in voter turnout | 16 countries | c. 2005-c. 2012

Respondents were asked: *With regard to the most recent national election in (year), which statement is true for you: You voted in the last election?*
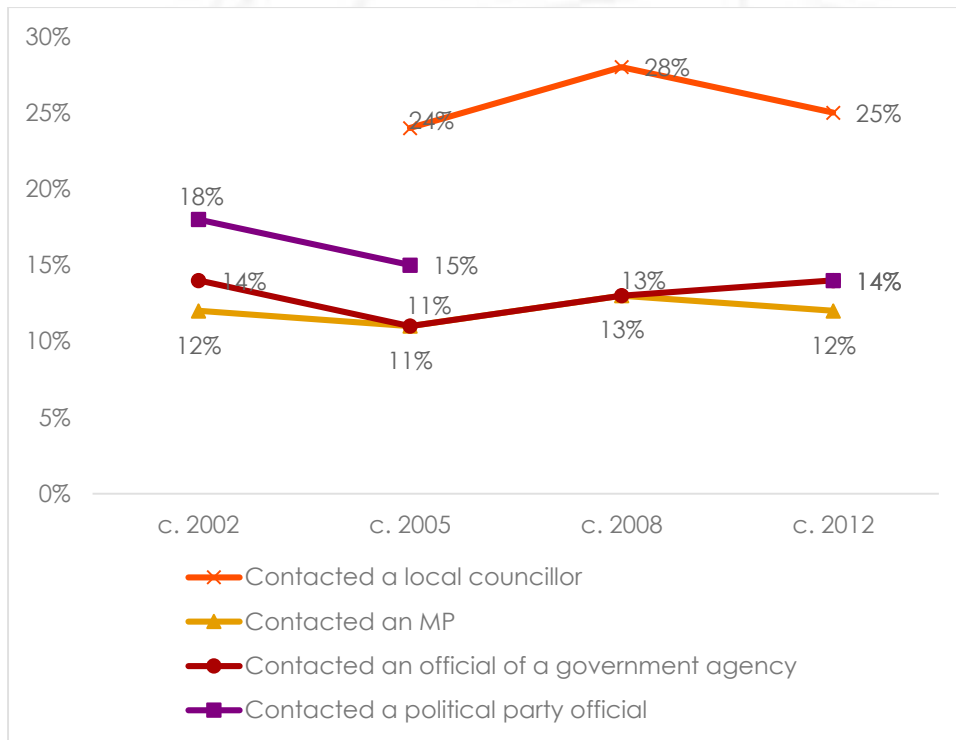
Figure 4: Community group membership and meeting attendance | 16 countries | c. 2002-c. 2012

Respondents were asked:
1. *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? (% who said "official leader," "active member," or "inactive member" of "some voluntary association or community group" (other than a religious group))*
2. *Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things in the past year: Attended a community meeting? (% who said "often," "several times," or "once or twice")*

Figure 5: Contact with political or government officials | 16 countries | c. 2002-c. 2012

Respondents were asked: *During the past year, how often have you contacted any of the following persons about some important problem or to give them your views?*
(% who said "only once," "a few times," or "often")

Civic engagement in post-colonial Africa

While Afrobarometer data allow us to examine political engagement through voting, participation in community groups, and contact with elected or appointed government representatives, they do not measure some forms of non-conventional or informal participation that may be relevant to African societies. The literature depicts post-colonial African countries as web-like, composed of many social and political organisations (Dia, 1996; Migdal, 1988) that hold variable degrees of social control. Fragmented authority can precipitate struggles for social control between official government entities and less formal spheres of influence, such as landowners, moneylenders, local chiefs, and kinsmen. Ekeh (1975) asserts that the experience of colonialism in Africa led to the emergence of two public spheres: the *civic public*, which includes the formal structures of government instituted by colonial administrations, and the *primordial public*, which includes more informal, traditional groupings or cultural ties. The extent to which citizens are interested and participate in each sphere will depend on the nature of the issue involved.

This suggests the possibility that in addition to their high or low levels of formal political engagement, citizens may be using less formal spaces to discuss pertinent issues, such as negotiating with a local strongman or traditional leader, instead of with an MP, to raise an important issue.

Conclusion

The Afrobarometer data suggest a weak link between citizens and the formal decision-making agencies of the state. Interest in public affairs and increased group membership have not translated into higher voter turnout or a stronger propensity to engage government

officials or political party representatives to raise a concern. Dia (1996, p. 1) describes this as a disconnect between indigenous and formal institutions – a consequence of formal institutions and hierarchies that did not develop out of "local culture."

If healthy democracies rely on citizen participation, then moving toward Mandela's democratic vision will require a better understanding of the nuanced relationships between the state apparatus and the citizens they govern. As it stands, interest in public affairs and the freedoms that citizens enjoy are not being channelled into active political participation as a platform for substantive change.

References

Freedom House. (2015). Freedom in the world 2015: Discarding democracy: Return to the iron fist. Available at https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2015#.VZENYfmqqkp.

Ekeh, P. P. (1975). Colonialism and the two publics in Africa: A theoretical statement. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, *17*(1), 91-112.

Dia, M. (1996). *Africa's management in the 1990s and beyond: Reconciling indigenous and transplanted institutions.* Washington, DC: The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/The World Bank.

Migdal, J. (1988). *Strong societies, weak states.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Anyway Chingwete is Afrobarometer project manager for Southern Africa for the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in Cape Town, South Africa. Email: achingwete@ijr.org.za

Claire-Anne Lester is an intern in the Policy and Analysis Unit at IJR. Email: clairelest@gmail.com