

ELECTORAL SUPPORT NETWORK OF SOUTHERN AFRICA

# 3<sup>RD</sup> ELECTION ACADEMY REPORT

13-14 APRIL, 2026

JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA



**AHEAD**  
Africa



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## List of Abbreviations

Action for Holistic Electoral Assistance and Democracy	AHEAD
African Election Observers Network	AfEONet
Artificial Intelligence	AI
Artificial Intelligence – Research Innovation and Societal Education	AI-RISE
Catholic Commission of Justice and Peace	CCJP
Christian Churches Monitoring Group	CCMG
Coordinating Assembly of Non-Governmental Organisations	CANGO
East and Horn of Africa Election Observation Network	E-HORN
Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa	EISA
Electoral Management Bodies	EMBs
Independent Electoral Commission	IEC
Electoral Support Network of Southern Africa	ESN-SA
European Union	EU
Instituto Angolano de Sistemas Eleitoral e Democracia	IASED
Optical Character Recognition	OCR
Open Society Foundations	OSF
Parallel Vote Tabulation	PVT
South African Council of Churches	SACC
United States of America	USA
United States Agency for International Development	USAID
West Africa Election Observation Network	WAEON
Women’s Academy for Political Leadership Excellence	WALPE
Zambia National Women’s Lobby Group	ZNWLG
Zimbabwe Election Support Network	ZESN

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We further acknowledge the invaluable collaboration and support of the AHEAD consortium members, namely the West Africa Election Observation Network (WAEON) and East and Horn of Africa Election Observers Network (EHORN). Their technical input, peer learning, and continued partnership were instrumental to the successful delivery of the Academy.

Special recognition is extended to ESN-SA member organisations for their commitment, active participation, and contributions throughout the Election Academy. Their collective experience and regional perspectives greatly enriched the discussions and outcomes of the Academy.

ESN-SA also extends appreciation to resource persons and experts whose engagement, and thoughtful contributions ensured robust learning and meaningful exchange throughout the Academy.

## Introduction and Background



Figure 1: Participants of the 3rd Election Academy

The Electoral Support Network of Southern Africa (ESN-SA) convened the 3rd Election Academy under the theme, *The Future of Election Observation in Africa: Adapting to Political, Technological, and Financial Shifts*, in Johannesburg, South Africa, from 13 to 14 April 2026. The Academy brought together election citizen observer groups from the ESN-SA members, civil society actors, electoral experts, regional election observer networks, and practitioners from across Africa. The Academy aimed to strengthen shared understanding, peer learning, and strategic thinking around three interlinked issues: Inclusive participation in elections, particularly for women, youth, and persons with disabilities; Election observation in constrained political environments; and the sustainability and future of election observation, including the growing role of technology and Artificial Intelligence (AI).

The ESN-SA Host Director, Mrs Rindai Chipfunde Vava, welcomed participants and partners to the 2026 Election Academy, highlighting the critical role election observation has played in strengthening democracy in Africa. Her remarks underscored emerging political, technological, and financial challenges such as shrinking civic space, digital risks, and funding constraints making adaptation and collaboration essential. She stated that the Academy was positioned as a timely

platform for shared learning, innovation, and strategic engagement to shape the future of election observation on the continent.

Mr Soren Larsen from the European Union Delegation to South Africa congratulated ESN-SA on convening its 3rd Election Academy. He noted that the Academy was particularly timely, emphasising the importance of creating space for reflection and dialogue on the future of election observation in light of evolving political, financial, and global dynamics. He commended ESN-SA for sustaining the Academy as a platform for critical engagement among practitioners and stakeholders and underscored the value of continued collaboration to strengthen credible and sustainable election observation efforts in the region.

## Sessions

### Session 1: The changing Landscape of Elections in Africa- A reflection on the evolving political and institutional context of elections in Africa

At the opening of the Election Academy, Ms Ichumile Gqada of the Open Society Foundations (OSF) challenged participants to move beyond technical discussions of electoral processes and confront the deeper political and institutional crises shaping elections in Africa today. She situated elections within a fractured global and continental context marked by democratic regression, authoritarian consolidation, conflict, and the erosion of multilateral norms, arguing that elections have increasingly become ritualistic exercises disconnected from meaningful democratic change.

Drawing on recent trends across the continent, she highlighted the weakening independence of Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs), declining public trust, flawed and uncompetitive elections, and the instrumentalisation of state institutions to entrench executive power. She further cautioned that election observation and EMBs now operate under mounting political pressure, resource constraints, technological disruption, and disinformation, limiting their ability to serve as effective counterweights to democratic backsliding. Her provocation called on election practitioners not only to defend procedural credibility, but to reflect critically on whether elections, as currently practised, are still delivering accountability, inclusion, and transformation for citizens and what it will take to restore their democratic purpose.

Complementing Ms Gqada, Professor Annie Barbara Chikwanha, an academic in politics and international relations, also delivered a thought-provoking analysis on the rapidly changing electoral environment in Africa. She began by highlighting exogenous global influences shaping elections in 2026, including ongoing wars and frozen conflicts, economic slowdown and inflation, migration pressures, democratic backsliding, and the resilience of authoritarianism. These global dynamics, she argued, increasingly intersect with African electoral processes, tightening political space and complicating election administration and observation.

Professor Chikwanha outlined how changes in the United States of America (USA) election governance, such as the weakening of federal oversight, increased partisan monitoring, and threats against election officials, have undermined global democratic norms. These developments, she noted, have affected Africa indirectly by weakening the United States' credibility as a democratic model and emboldening illiberal practices elsewhere. Turning to the African context, she highlighted those current strains on election observation, including political targeting of observers, physical violence, legal harassment, smear campaigns, donor retreat, technological gaps, and the rise of misinformation, artificial intelligence-driven disinformation, and

foreign interference. These pressures have created a financial and operational crisis for observation missions, particularly domestic citizen observer groups.



Figure 2: Ichumile Gqada presenting in the first session

### **Plenary discussion**

During discussions, a participant questioned: "When will Africa set a good example of democracy? Historically, we have looked up to the United States of America as a pinnacle of democracy, and current events are proving otherwise." Another pointed out the knowledge gap between policy makers, civil society actors and the citizens. Citing an example of the popular slogan "*Amandla Awethu*", which loosely translates to "power is ours", she pointed out that many Africans, though they chant the slogan, are not aware that it refers to democracy and that the government should be accountable to the people. Emphasis was placed on the need to cascade civic and voter information to the citizens.

### **Session 2: Technology and the Future of Elections - Examining how technological developments, including AI, are re-shaping electoral processes and monitoring and observation methodologies.**

The session on Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Elections was delivered by Dr Bridget Chipungu Chimnga of Artificial Intelligence - Research Innovation and Societal Education (AI-RISE) and Mr Sy Mamabolo, Chief Elections Officer of the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) of South Africa. The session examined how emerging technologies are reshaping both electoral integrity and election

administration. Dr Chimbga provided a critical overview of the rapidly evolving digital landscape, warning that AI has fundamentally altered the scale, speed, and sophistication of electoral manipulation through tools such as deepfakes, micro-targeted disinformation, and coordinated inauthentic behaviour, with disproportionate impacts on women, youth, and election observers. She challenged participants to recognise that electoral harm now unfolds well before polling day, necessitating significant adaptation of legal frameworks, observation methodologies, and institutional preparedness. Dr Chimbga emphasised that election observation groups must invest in digital tools; she stated that they are not a 'nice-to-have' but a must-have.



*Figure 3: Sy Malambo presenting*

Complementing this perspective, Mr Mamabolo presented the IEC's practical experience in deploying AI to strengthen electoral administration. He mentioned that as the IEC, they use AI in voter registration, whereby AI is able to do identity document and residential address verification. He also highlighted that the IEC has been using AI to validate and extract relevant information from the uploaded images. Their Azure AI Vision checks the images and text using Image Analysis for visual features and Optical Character Recognition (OCR) to extract text from images. Mr

Mamabolo also highlighted that the IEC developed a chatbot which it feeds information to AI models in the form of Acts, Regulations, documents, FAQs, etc., and restricts the model to only look at this information. He further highlighted the Commission's commitment to strict ethical guardrails, data protection, regulatory compliance, and human oversight when using AI.

Mr Mamabolo reiterated that AI cannot be ignored in elections, and EMBs have to choose which elements of AI they want to adopt. He also highlighted that the IEC has been working with social media companies such as Meta to establish systems that debunk deepfakes, misinformation and disinformation.

### ***Plenary Discussions***

During discussions, one participant asked how the IEC protects itself from hacking, interception and interference since these IT systems are developed outside of Africa. In response, he highlighted that the IEC develops its own systems. He further noted that integrity in elections is the highest priority in Africa, even with the developed IT systems, which have to be audited to prove their integrity. He noted that the IEC extends an invitation to political parties to audit the system as a way of building trust and confidence in the IT systems being used.

### **Session 3: Election Observation in Political Environments- Examining the conditions and operating environments for citizen election observers**

The session on Election Observation in Political Environments examined the complex political, legal, institutional, and social conditions under which citizen election observers currently operate across Africa. The panel comprised Mr Naina Harijaona from *Sadify* Madagascar, Mr Peter Mwanangombe from the Christian Churches Monitoring Group (CCMG), Zambia, and Mr Bheki Dlamini from the Coordinating Assembly of Non-Governmental Organisations (CANGO), Eswatini. The panellists highlighted that contemporary election observation is increasingly conducted in constrained civic spaces characterised by political interference, weak legal protections, and heightened risks to observer safety.

Mr Harijaona highlighted that in many contexts, state institutions expected to uphold electoral integrity are themselves politicised, creating hostile operating environments in which observers face intimidation, physical violence, judicial harassment, arbitrary detention, and threats to their families. These risks are compounded by administrative obstacles such as restricted access to key stages of the electoral process, delayed or contested accreditation, and limited impact of reported violations due to weak judicial follow-up, reinforcing a culture of electoral impunity.

Mr Mwanangombe cited that election observation brings integrity to the election, and EMBs should thus embrace citizen observer groups. He further highlighted that it is

important for Citizen observer groups to understand their mandate and not to overstep into the mandate of the EMBs, which results in the EMB not trusting observer groups and souring relationships.

Mr Dlamini further explored structural challenges affecting the sustainability and effectiveness of citizen election observation, including limited public funding, over-reliance on external donors, conceptual ambiguity around observer independence and impartiality, and constrained legal standing for citizens within electoral justice systems.

### ***Plenary Discussions***

In response to discussions, panellists emphasised the need for adaptive and strategic approaches, including strengthened technical capacity, multidisciplinary methodologies, the use of data-driven tools such as parallel vote tabulation, and context-sensitive engagement with electoral management bodies and other stakeholders. The session concluded that while citizen election observation remains indispensable, particularly in political environments with limited party pluralism, it can only be effective if observers are able to operate with legitimacy, protection, and impact.

### **Session 4: Adapting to Inclusive Elections – Exploring how strategies for meaningful inclusion and participation of women, youth, marginalised groups and persons with disabilities**

The session examined strategies to achieve meaningful participation of women, youth, marginalised groups, and persons with disabilities across the electoral cycle. The panel comprised Ms Stabile Dewa of Women's Academy For Political Leadership Excellency (WALPE), Mr Golden Nachibinga of Zambia Women's Lobby Group (ZNWLG) and Mrs Nzira Deus of Forum Mulher. Panellists highlighted that inclusion requires more than formal voting rights; it demands electoral systems deliberately designed to address entrenched structural, legal, economic, and social barriers.

Ms Stabile Dewa of Women's Academy on Political Leadership Excellency (WALPE) Africa commented that persistent patriarchy, exclusionary political party structures, unequal access to political financing, and political violence, particularly gender-based violence, are key factors limiting participation. She stated that economic inequality and the high cost of Politics of the Stomach further restrict who can realistically compete for office. Furthermore, Ms Dewa pointed out that online and offline electoral violence continues to deter participation of women and Persons with Disabilities (PwDs).

Mr Golden Nachibinga of Zambia Women's Lobby Group (ZNWLG) underscored that legal and policy reforms, including quotas and mixed-member electoral systems,

yield mixed results due to weak implementation, low representation thresholds, and unregulated party practices. Internal party dynamics, such as male-dominated candidate adoption processes, financial gatekeeping, and informal norms, often undermine the transformative intent of inclusion measures.

Mrs Nzira Deus of Forum Mulher added to these perspectives by highlighting that meaningful inclusion requires sustained investment across the entire electoral cycle, not only during election periods. Drawing on civil society experience, she emphasised the importance of grassroots civic and voter education, community-level engagement, and collaboration with women's movements to address both formal and informal barriers to participation. Mrs Deus emphasised that inclusive electoral processes must intentionally respond to the lived realities of marginalised women, including those in rural and vulnerable communities, to ensure that participation translates into real influence and representation rather than symbolic inclusion.

### ***Plenary Discussions***

During the plenary discussions, panellists shared adaptive strategies for advancing inclusion, including intersectional advocacy approaches, institutional strengthening, economic and leadership empowerment initiatives, and the use of accessible electoral technologies. Community-based voter education, engagement of traditional and religious leaders as gatekeepers, accessible polling arrangements, and the use of disaggregated data to expose exclusion were identified as effective practices when implemented in consultation with affected groups. The session concluded that credible and inclusive elections require coordinated action by electoral management bodies, political parties, and civil society to move beyond symbolic inclusion toward systemic reforms that enable substantive participation for all citizens.

### **Session 5: Sustainability of Election Observation Organisations - Examining financial and Institutional sustainability challenges affecting election observation networks - Role of Regional and International Actors.**

The last session of the Academy was on Sustainability of Election Observation Organisations - Examining financial and institutional sustainability challenges affecting election observation networks, and it was presented by Mr Marcus Ageng'a of East and Horn of Africa Election Observers Network (E-HORN) and Dr Kojo Asante of West Africa Election Observation Network (WAEON). The session examined the sustainability challenges facing election observation organisations, framing sustainability as a political economy issue rather than a technical one. Mr Ageng'a highlighted that most election observation organisations operate within fragile, project-based funding cycles, leaving them vulnerable between electoral periods and increasingly dependent on foreign donors. He emphasised that sustainability is interlinked in three dimensions: financial continuity, institutional

capacity, and political legitimacy or independence, with emphasis that survival, especially when it compromises independence, does not equate to sustainability.



*Figure 4: Marcus A. Agenga, Tuntufye Simwimba, & Dr Kojo Asante*

Dr Asante cited heavy donor dependency as a key challenge facing election observation groups. He highlighted that, due to shifting geopolitical priorities, funding attention has increasingly moved away from Africa. By way of example, he noted that for his organisation, election observation activities were largely funded by USAID support, which was halted in 2025. He further flagged the 2025 U.S. foreign assistance freeze as a major funding shock to the election observation ecosystem. Dr Asante noted that this was not the first time the sector had experienced a severe decline in funding, recalling that following the 9/11 attacks, funding levels also dropped significantly before recovering later.

The two presenters proposed pathways to sustainability, including pooled multi-donor funding mechanisms, domestication of financing, South–South knowledge exchange, endowment and reserve fund models, shared regional technology infrastructure, and treaty-based assessed contributions for election observation.

### ***Plenary Discussions***

During the discussions, participants proposed the possibility of legislation mandating government funding for citizen election observation groups. However, strong arguments were raised against this suggestion, with concerns that such funding could undermine the independence of observer groups and make them vulnerable to political manipulation. A participant from Seychelles noted that although observer organisations in their country are legally entitled to government funding, they deliberately decline it due to concerns around impartiality and independence.

Participants also discussed the potential for private sector funding, which many identified as an underutilised avenue for resource mobilisation. One participant cited an example of a school golf tournament that raised USD 15,000 in a single day, underscoring that there are diverse and innovative ways through which election observation organisations could strengthen their fundraising efforts.

### Closing Session: Key takeaways and formally close the Election Academy

In the closing session of the Election Academy, Mrs Ellen Dingani, Programmes Director for the ZESN, expressed appreciation to participants for their active engagement and the highly participatory nature of the Academy. She highlighted key takeaways from the discussions, including the need for election observation to adapt to increasingly constrained political environments, the importance of building digital and technological resilience in the face of AI-driven risks, and the urgency of strengthening inclusion for women, youth, persons with disabilities, and other marginalised groups. Mrs Dingani pointed out the sustainability challenges facing election observation organisations and the importance of regional solidarity, collaboration, and innovative funding approaches to safeguard independence and long-term effectiveness. She concluded by reaffirming ESN-SA's commitment to continued learning, collaboration, and collective action to strengthen credible, inclusive, and sustainable election observation efforts across Southern Africa.

## Conclusion

The 3<sup>rd</sup> ESN-SA Election Academy served as a timely platform for critical reflection on the future of election observation in Africa amid increasing political constraints, technological disruption, and financial uncertainty. Discussions highlighted that traditional observation approaches are no longer sufficient and must adapt to changing realities, including shrinking civic space, AI-driven and new technologies, and evolving electoral risks.

The Academy reaffirmed the central role of citizen election observation in promoting electoral integrity, while highlighting the importance of institutional independence, observer protection, and innovation. Participants emphasised the need to strengthen digital resilience, advance inclusive electoral reforms, and address structural barriers

affecting women, youth, persons with disabilities, and other marginalised groups. The conversations also made clear that sustainability challenges facing election observation organisations require diversified funding, regional solidarity, and long-term strategic collaboration.