

# SUB REGIONAL UPDATE ON THE STATUS OF DEMOCRACY, RULE OF LAW, AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE EAST AND HORN OF AFRICA

In recent months, the East and Horn of Africa region has continued to grapple with crises in human rights and democracy, characterized by widespread suppression of civic space, persistent political instability, and targeted violence against human rights defenders (HRDs). The region has faced challenges stemming from conflict and governance issues, contributing to a deteriorating human rights landscape. According to the Economist, sub-Saharan Africa suffered a significant democratic reversal in 2023, with its regional average score falling from 4.14 in 2022 to 4.04 in 2023. More than 40% of the 44 countries in the region covered by the Democracy Index experienced declining scores. Further, the Civic Space Monitor reports that currently, 44 out of 49 African countries are rated as obstructed, repressed, or closed, reflecting a significantly restrictive environment for civic freedoms. The majority of countries in this sub-region are classified as repressed, including Burundi, Ethiopia, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda, one as obstructed (Kenya), and two as closed (Djibouti and Eritrea). These classifications reflect the decline of democracy, the rule of law and the realisation of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Several countries in the sub-region are gearing up for elections including Burundi, Tanzania, Uganda and South Sudan. Past experiences reveal that electoral periods present challenging times for human rights defenders (HRDs). The situation in Tanzania for instance is worrying with the increased attacks on critical voices challenging the status quo. Although the elections in South Sudan have been postponed for two years, the current context is hostile especially as HRDs call for reforms ahead of the now 2026 elections. The restrictive legal environment with the recent adoption of the National Security Service law further worsens an already volatile situation.

HRDs and journalists in the region face increased harassment and violence. In Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania, authorities have employed excessive force during protests, resulting in deaths and mass arrests, with over 300 protesters arrested during recent demonstrations against a proposed Tax Bill in Kenya. Internet restrictions further undermine the right to freedom of expression. Reports from Burundi indicate a rise in kidnappings, enforced disappearances, and assaults on journalists, while Rwanda's civic space remains tightly controlled. The country's restrictive environment during the presidential and parliamentary elections in July 2024, where President Kagame was re-elected with over 99% of the votes, highlights ongoing political repression. Djibouti and Eritrea continue to impose severe limitations on fundamental freedoms, consistently ranking among the most closed countries globally regarding civic space.

Ethiopia's human rights situation remains critical, with ongoing armed conflicts exacerbating the humanitarian crises in the Oromia and Amhara regions. Despite officially ending the state of emergency, the Ethiopian government has made minimal progress in ensuring accountability for widespread violations. In South Sudan, HRDs and journalists face persistent threats, and the recent decision to postpone the December election by two years raises serious concerns about the government's commitment to democratic governance and accountability. In Sudan, the conflict and instability have led to alarming human rights abuses, with HRDs, journalists, and civilians facing extreme violence and repression. Furthermore, Somalia grapples with conflicts against Al-Shabaab, resulting in significant human rights violations that endanger journalists from both state and non-state actors. The overall environment for civil society remains troubling, with HRDs advocating for marginalized groups such as environmental activists in Tanzania and Uganda, and those addressing sexual orientation and gender identity issues in Burundi, Kenya, and Uganda facing increasing risks.

In light of these challenges, we urge governments in the East and Horn of Africa to uphold international human rights standards by protecting HRDs, journalists, and civil society organizations from violence and repression. We further call on governments to foster an enabling environment for freedoms of expression, assembly, and association.

## Recommendations

- Urge all states parties to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights to protect HRDs, by strictly adhering to the provisions of the Charter and other international and regional instruments to which they are parties, as well as the United Nations Declaration on HRDs.
- Call on governments to end the excessive use of force, including tear gas, bullets, and arrests, during peaceful protests and ensure law enforcement officers adhere to international standards on the use of force and firearms, to ensure the safety and rights of demonstrators.
- Urge all countries to strengthen monitoring and accountability mechanisms to address human rights violations, and foster a culture where perpetrators are held accountable for their actions, especially in election processes.
- Urge all governments to cease the intimidation and harassment of opposition figures, and allow them to freely express their views and participate in political processes without fear of reprisal.
- Call on the Ethiopian government to end all restrictions on civil society organisations, including surveillance, and harassment and to ensure these organisations can operate freely.
- Call on the Ethiopian government to implement targeted measures against technology-facilitated gender-based violence affecting women HRDs through establishing support networks, providing legal aid, and enforcing strict penalties for online abuse.
- Urge the governments of Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Kenya, and the authorities in Sudan to immediately restore unrestricted internet and social media access, end censorship and harassment of journalists and media personnel, and uphold freedom of expression.
- Call on all countries to protect freedom of expression, end the arrests and intimidation of journalists and HRDs, enact laws that guarantee their rights to report and advocate freely to ensure transparency and accountability.
- Call on the government of Tanzania to respect the rights of indigenous populations in Ngorongoro, end the forced relocation of Maasai communities and restore their access to essential services and cultural sites.
- Call on all parties to the conflict in Sudan to grant immediate and unhindered access to humanitarian aid across the country, especially in conflict-affected areas, to address the urgent needs of millions facing hunger and impending famine.
- Call on the Joint Fact-Finding Mission into the human rights situation in Sudan established as per ACHPR Resolution 590 to ensure the complementarity of its efforts with those of other actors, in particular the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Fact-Finding Mission established by the UN Human Rights Council, and other appropriate regional and international entities.
- Call on the government of Eritrea and Djibouti to provide a safe and enabling environment for civil society to flourish and protect the rights of all individuals to freely express their opinions.