



Influence for Hire in Africa: How Coordinated Online Behaviour Shapes Elections and Politics

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Abstract

Influence for hire has become a defining feature of African electoral politics. Coordinated networks of paid influencers are manufacturing political sentiment at scale, distorting public discourse and undermining democratic integrity. Driven by economic necessity, these markets are also being exploited by internal and external actors to shape elections, governments and perceptions. There is an urgent need for stronger regulation, digital literacy investment, and international coordination to minimise the effects of influence for hire.

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Analysis

African Democracies

African politics are often contentious, shaped by legacies of colonialism, continued destabilisation, and deeply entrenched corruption. Across the continent, political systems range from absolute monarchies and military regimes to authoritarian governments and electoral democracies. While these systems differ substantially, they are all vulnerable to the strategic manipulation of political participation and public opinion.

The majority of African countries are not classified as full democracies. According to the [Democracy Index](#), only one African state – Mauritius – is considered a full democracy, while a small number are classified as flawed democracies and the remainder fall into hybrid or authoritarian categories. Although this analysis focuses primarily on democratic and pseudo-democratic systems, influence-for-hire practices are not confined to them. Rather, they are particularly salient in political environments where elections exist, but institutional safeguards remain weak. This is not to say that authoritarian regimes do not benefit from influence-for-hire markets because they do. Such markets are used to shape perceptions and manage narratives around said regimes, but this analysis specifically focuses on the role of influence-for-hire in African democracies.

Declaring a commitment to democracy is comparatively easy; sustaining it is not. Elections alone do not constitute democratic governance, despite the insistence of some leaders to the contrary. Nevertheless, for now, the international system continues to treat electoral democracy as the normative standard. States that can plausibly present themselves as liberal democracies benefit from greater diplomatic legitimacy and reduced external pressure. Elections, therefore, carry not only domestic significance but also considerable weight in international relations.

Data from the [Global State of Democracy Initiative](#) reveals a paradox: while trust in democracy has declined globally, levels of democratic participation in Africa have remained relatively stable since the 1990s. This suggests that public interest in governance and accountability continues; however, it manifests through informal means like protest rather than participation in formal electoral processes. Public demand for accountability and democratic reform continues to grow. Across Africa, this dynamic has been especially visible in the wave of decentralised, youth-led demonstrations, often described as “Gen Z protests”, that have emerged in recent years.

Over the past several years, protests have occurred in many countries, including Kenya, Morocco, Mozambique, Madagascar, Tanzania, Ghana, and Nigeria. While their immediate triggers vary, these movements share a core dissatisfaction with government performance and responsiveness.

In many African democracies and pseudo-democracies, political power has become increasingly concentrated. Corruption remains entrenched, and political elites are unwilling to relinquish authority. While it is neither accurate nor helpful to generalise across a continent of 54 countries and nearly a billion people, several recurring patterns are evident. Political power is frequently intertwined with ethnic or cultural dominance, with ruling parties and elites disproportionately drawn from majority groups. Governmental structures and institutions compete with eroding transparency and accountability, increasing the stakes of elections, which retain both real and symbolic power. Despite these challenges, it is important to acknowledge that some recent elections have produced meaningful and positive political change.



Influencing the Electorate

Faced with these pressures, governments and political parties have adopted a wide array of strategies to maintain control. These range from election manipulation and opposition suppression to constitutional amendments like removing term limits, as well as crackdowns on protest and dissenting speech. Digital tools have become central to these efforts. The internet and social media serve both as instruments of control, through censorship or shutdowns, and as mechanisms of influence, enabling the dissemination of propaganda in the form of targeted narratives and coordinated political messaging.

The role of social media in shaping electoral outcomes is now well established. Less widely examined, however, is the rise of influence-for-hire and the emergence of “digital mercenaries.” Influence-for-hire functions primarily as a commercial service. It relies less on automated bot networks and more on coordinated activity by real individuals, organised by high-reach creators through private communication channels. Paid messaging is embedded within culturally significant content, creating engagement that appears organic and affords clients a degree of arms-length, plausible deniability.

The actors involved in these networks vary but display notable consistency across national contexts. Many of the most skilled practitioners developed their capabilities while supporting youth-oriented or reformist movements. In South Africa, Nigeria, and Kenya, for example, political parties and movements such as the Economic Freedom Fighters, #EndSARS, the “Obedient” movement, and protests against Kenya’s Finance Bill provided both motivation and informal training grounds. As participants gained tactical fluency in digital mobilisation, some transitioned into professionalised influence operators. While many continue to volunteer for causes they believe in, they also offer their services to paying clients.

The Structure of Influence-for-Hire

At the centre of these operations are mega-influencers who attract large audiences through content focused on everyday culture, sport, or entertainment, later integrating paid political messaging. Surrounding them are networks of nano- and micro-influencers, ordinary users coordinated through private groups, who carry out low-effort, high-volume tasks. Intermediaries broker relationships, budgets, and briefs, while external actors seeking local legitimacy can contract domestic networks without operating directly in-country.

In the African context, paid micro-influencers play a particularly prominent role. High levels of unemployment and poverty affect both educated and uneducated populations, creating strong incentives to participate. With mobile data relatively affordable in many countries, modest compensation, such as grocery vouchers, data top-ups, or the equivalent of a few US dollars, can be sufficient to motivate participation. For many individuals, this represents an easy and legal source of income. Awareness of the broader political implications of their actions varies, and in some cases may be limited or outweighed by immediate economic considerations.

The operational workflow of influence-for-hire campaigns is relatively standardised. A client issues a brief outlining objectives, target audiences, timelines, and deliverables. Brokers circulate the brief to mega-influencers, who opt in or out. Execution then shifts to private messaging platforms, most commonly WhatsApp or Telegram, where influencers coordinate groups of followers. Participants are assigned micro-tasks such as liking, reposting, commenting, or amplifying hashtags within synchronised timeframes. Proof-of-work is typically provided via screenshots, and compensation is delivered through mobile money services or data credits. Because the activity



is carried out by real users with established online identities, it often appears indistinguishable from genuine community sentiment.

The cumulative impact of these practices is significant. While the absence of long-term ideological allegiance among participants may suggest neutrality, the result is an increasingly saturated information environment. Political discourse becomes noisier and more polarised, making it harder for citizens to distinguish authentic debate from paid amplification. In an already fragmented media landscape, this contributes to distorted perceptions of public opinion and political legitimacy.

The term “digital mercenaries” captures the transactional nature of this work but oversimplifies the motivations of those involved. Many participants operate in a hybrid space, combining political belief with economic necessity. Broadly demonising these actors could drive the practice further underground while disproportionately harming individuals for whom digital labour represents a critical income stream. A more constructive response lies in professionalisation: establishing clear disclosure norms, raising standards of practice, and enforcing them consistently. Such measures can enhance accountability without undermining legitimate forms of political advocacy and digital entrepreneurship.

Empirical evidence underscores the scale of the challenge. During Kenya’s 2022 elections, research by the [Institute for Security Studies](#) found that online political discourse was significantly distorted by paid influencer activity. In [South Africa](#), the period leading up to the 2024 National Elections saw similar practices used to manufacture the appearance of organic political support for parties and controversial figures. Short-form digital content now dominates political communication. It allows limited space for substantive policy engagement, yet its repetitive nature has a powerful psychological effect. Repetition bias, the tendency to internalise frequently encountered messages, means that coordinated influencer campaigns can shape perceptions, attitudes, and ultimately voting behaviour, often without explicit awareness on the part of audiences.

As internet penetration across Africa continues to expand, the importance of digital media literacy will only increase. In 2024, it was estimated that only [38 percent](#) of Africans are online. Public understanding of how online platforms are used to influence political behaviour remains limited, as does the ability to identify coordinated manipulation, mis- and disinformation.

External Actors and Influence-for-Hire

Beyond the concern for the stability, governance and electoral integrity of African countries, international stakeholders should be concerned about the use of domestic influence-for-hire ecosystems by external actors. From a Western perspective, the actions of Russia and Russian state-linked information operations are worth considering.

Russian engagement in Africa has combined security cooperation, economic interests, and political influence. Alongside military deployments and diplomatic outreach, [information operations](#) have played a central role in shaping public narratives. Rather than relying solely on overt state propaganda, Russian-linked actors have demonstrated a preference for [leveraging local voices and networks](#) to amplify favourable messaging, discredit opponents, and frame geopolitical competition in anti-Western terms.

Influence-for-hire markets provide an efficient mechanism for this strategy. By contracting domestic influencers, who can coordinate micro-influencer networks, the external actors can insert messaging that appears locally grounded and culturally fluent. Content frequently blends legitimate grievances, such as frustration with



corruption, inequality, or perceived Western hypocrisy, with narratives that promote alternative security partnerships or governance models. The use of local intermediaries and paid influencers offers plausible deniability and complicates attribution, particularly for overstretched regulatory and electoral bodies.

Russian presence is particularly noticeable in Western African states, former French territories. Russian actors can leverage anti-French, anti-Western, and Pan-Africanist sentiments along with [propaganda](#) to [present an alternative](#) scenario to the citizenry. Russian paramilitary groups in several African states have pushed online campaigns praising their role as a security provider while attacking domestic critics, opposition figures, journalists, and international organisations. In these contexts, influence-for-hire not only distorts electoral competition but also shapes broader public attitudes toward foreign military involvement, peacekeeping missions, and diplomatic partnerships.

The significance of this dynamic lies not only in electoral interference but in its cumulative impact on governance, conflict dynamics, and foreign policy alignment. Influence-for-hire enables external actors to operate outside of traditional diplomatic or military confrontation, exploiting existing social and economic vulnerabilities to advance strategic interests.

Implications for International Partners and Policymakers

Influence-for-hire is no longer a peripheral concern but a structural feature of contemporary political competition in many African states. Its effects extend beyond domestic politics; it shapes electoral credibility, political stability, and international perceptions of democratic legitimacy. For diplomats, multilateral institutions, and international partners, this presents both a challenge and an opportunity.

Addressing influence-for-hire requires a calibrated response that recognises local socioeconomic realities while upholding democratic norms. Regulatory and legislative frameworks governing social media and political advertising must be strengthened, particularly during electoral periods, with provisions for transparency, monitoring, and post-election review. At the same time, investments in digital media literacy, which are targeted at citizens, civil society, and electoral management bodies, are essential to building long-term resilience.

No state operates in isolation within the digital information environment. The tools used to manipulate opinion are accessible to a wide range of domestic and external actors, often with greater resources and technical sophistication than national authorities. It is critical that regional bodies and international partners develop shared standards. Technology, digital information platforms and generative A.I. growth are outpacing legislation, and influence-for-hire is not confined to Africa. It is ever more important to develop frameworks and legislation to formalise and professionalise the growth.

The international community needs to engage constructively with governments, platforms, and civil society to promote transparency, accountability, and informed participation. Influence-for-hire will persist, but its capacity to undermine democratic processes can be mitigated. Doing so is not only in the interest of African electorates but also of a global system that depends on credible, legitimate, and stable democratic governance.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the authors.



About the Authors of this Issue

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