

Political accountability in East African countries: Who should make MPs and councillors do their jobs?

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 4 | Rose Aiko

Introduction

One of the critical challenges facing African countries today is how to make governments work for the people – using resources at their disposal efficiently, delivering public goods and services, and guaranteeing an equitable distribution of opportunities and national income among citizens. In many places, systems of checks and balances have not lived up to expectations in making state institutions deliver such public goods. As a result, citizen participation in government oversight is now recognized as almost indispensable.

In representative democracies, citizens elect politicians at predefined intervals, who then take on the role of overseeing the executive. Members of Parliament (MPs) are one such group, along with local government councillors and, as chief of the executive, the president. Since these politicians obtain their mandate from voters through elections, they should be answerable primarily to the voters. In fact, with weaknesses in the functioning of horizontal checks and balances, the primacy of voters in holding their elected leaders to account cannot be overstated.

In an ideal world where democratic elections occur regularly, voters should be able to remove poorly performing politicians from office by rejecting them at the ballot box and electing strongly performing or promising ones to office instead. Even so, elections are rather infrequent, taking place every four to five years in most countries, and they do not always guarantee optimal results in terms of rejecting bad performers and electing good ones. Likewise, a lot can go wrong during the long period between elections. These challenges provoke several questions: Who should take responsibility for monitoring politicians and making sure that they do their jobs once in office? To what extent do citizens claim for themselves the right to hold politicians accountable?

In an inspiring paper examining citizens' attitudes concerning who should hold political representatives to account,¹ Bratton and Logan (2006) used Afrobarometer survey data collected in 2005 to show that the majority of citizens in most of the 18 African countries participating in the survey tended to assign this responsibility to other institutions rather than claim it for themselves. Only 34%, on average, claimed the right to hold MPs accountable.² A slightly higher proportion (40%) claimed the right to hold local government councillors to

¹ Bratton, M., & Logan, C. (2006). Voters but not yet citizens: The weak demand for political accountability in Africa's unclaimed democracies. Afrobarometer Working Paper No. 63. Available at www.afrobarometer.org.

² In Malawi, Madagascar, and Zimbabwe, a majority of respondents in the 2005 survey assigned voters the role of making MPs do their jobs. In Namibia, Mozambique, and Cape Verde, less than 10% of respondents assigned voters this responsibility.

account.³ Citizens in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania – the East African countries participating in the survey at the time – did a little better, with an above-average proportion demonstrating awareness that it's the voters' responsibility to hold MPs (Figure 1) and councillors (Figure 3) to account. Uganda was the only country where a majority demonstrated awareness of this right, and then only to hold councillors accountable.

Based on their analysis, Bratton and Logan's key conclusion was that

"... Citizens have yet to fully appreciate that democratization endows them with the right to monitor their leaders between elections. Rather than being predisposed to vigorously call their elected leaders to account on a regular basis, African publics are instead primed to defer to the authority of big men."

Eight years down the line, this policy brief uses data from Afrobarometer Rounds 3, 4, and 5 surveys, collected between 2005 and 2012, to discern whether East Africans have changed their opinions about the primacy of voters in holding politicians to account. Is there any indication that citizens in East Africa are more appreciative of their democratic right to make sure that politicians do their jobs once in office?

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is an African-led, 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 1,200 or, in more socially diverse countries, 2,400 respondents.

In East Africa, the surveys have been carried out regularly in Tanzania and Uganda since the first round in 1999–2001, and in Kenya since the second round in 2002–2003. Burundi entered the Afrobarometer survey for the first time during its fifth round, 2011–2013. Surveys have not been conducted thus far in Rwanda.

Between 2005 and 2008, the samples in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda each comprised 1,200 adult respondents. For the fifth round, the sample size in Tanzania was increased to 2,400, whereas in Kenya, Uganda, and Burundi the sample sizes were 1,200. Samples of this size yield results with a margin of error of +/-2% (for a sample size of 2,400) or +/-3% (for 1,200) at a 95% confidence level.

Key findings

- East African citizens are generally becoming more aware that it is the voters' right and responsibility to make MPs and local government councillors do their jobs. But there are significant differences between countries.
- During the past eight years, Kenyans have made a significant leap in awareness of the political right to hold MPs and councillors accountable.
- By contrast, Tanzanians and Ugandans have lagged behind. In both countries, only a minority of citizens see holding MPs accountable as the voters' job, and citizens show some signs of surrendering this right to other institutions.

³ A majority in six countries – Malawi, Madagascar, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe, and Benin – supported the notion that the voters should be the ones to make elected councillors do their job.

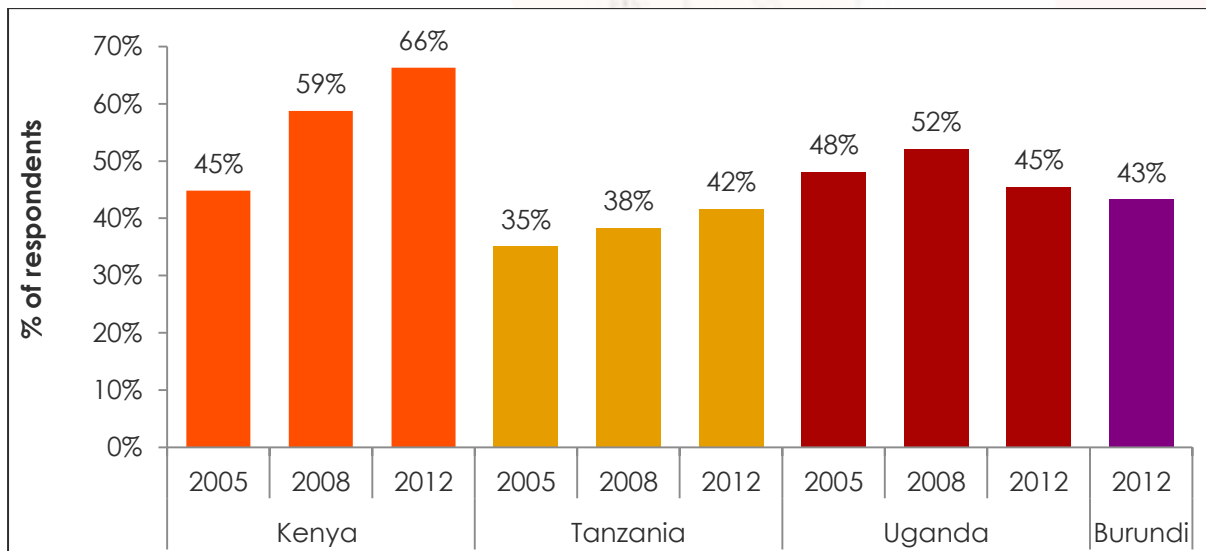
- Burundians are similar to Tanzanians and Ugandans in their views concerning who should hold MPs accountable, but a majority claim the right to hold local government councillors accountable.

Who should hold MPs to account?

Afrobarometer examines popular attitudes toward the political accountability of MPs by asking survey respondents to say who they think should be responsible for making sure that MPs do their job after they are elected. When this question was asked for the first time in 2005, only a minority of respondents (34%) in the 18 African countries⁴ covered by the survey at the time were aware that this was the voters' prerogative. In East Africa, an average of 43% assigned voters this responsibility.

In terms of how citizens' attitudes in the East Africa region have evolved since 2005 (Figure 1), the Afrobarometer data show that Kenyans' awareness of the political right to hold MPs to account is rapidly increasing: Two-thirds (66%) in 2012 said it was the voters' job, an increase of 21 percentage points since 2005. In Tanzania, the proportion also increased, albeit at a much slower pace than in Kenya, so that it remains a minority position that voters should make MPs do their job. Ugandans, on the other hand, seem to vacillate on this question. In Burundi, as in Uganda and Tanzania, only a minority say that voters should be the ones to hold MPs accountable. It is possible that the rapid change in Kenya has been invigorated by the path that politics has taken in this country during the past eight years. Notwithstanding immense challenges, including 2007 post-election violence, Kenya stands out as the first country in the East Africa region where multiparty elections have led to changes in the political party in power. Kenya was also the first country in the region to pass a new constitution in recent years, and other countries reviewing or contemplating a review of their constitutions are seeking lessons from Kenya.

Figure 1: Voters responsible for holding MPs accountable | 4 countries | 2005-2012

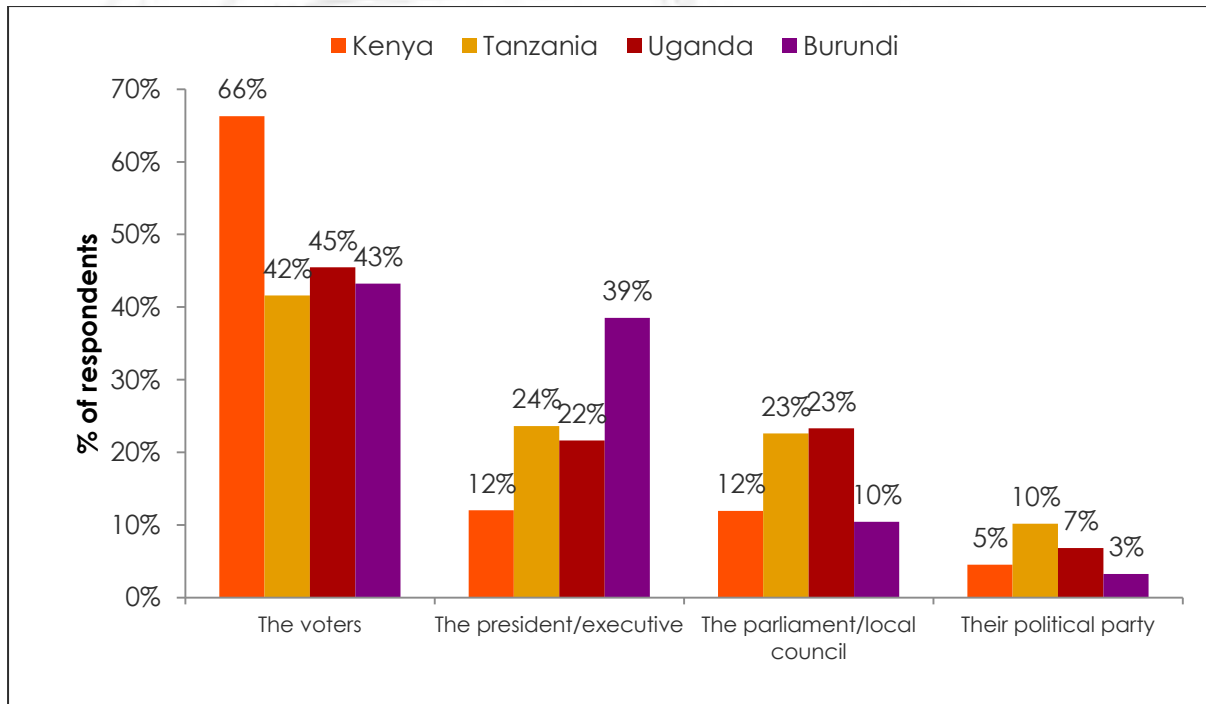


Respondents were asked: Who should be responsible for making sure that, once elected, members of Parliament do their jobs? (% who said "The voters")

⁴ Benin, Botswana, Cape Verde, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

A finer examination of the 2012 survey data shows that in Burundi, nearly as many citizens assign the president the role of holding MPs accountable as claim it for voters. In Tanzania and Uganda, at least one in five believe the president should hold MPs accountable, while similar proportions say the Parliament should do so.

Figure 2: Who should make MPs do their job? | 4 countries | 2012



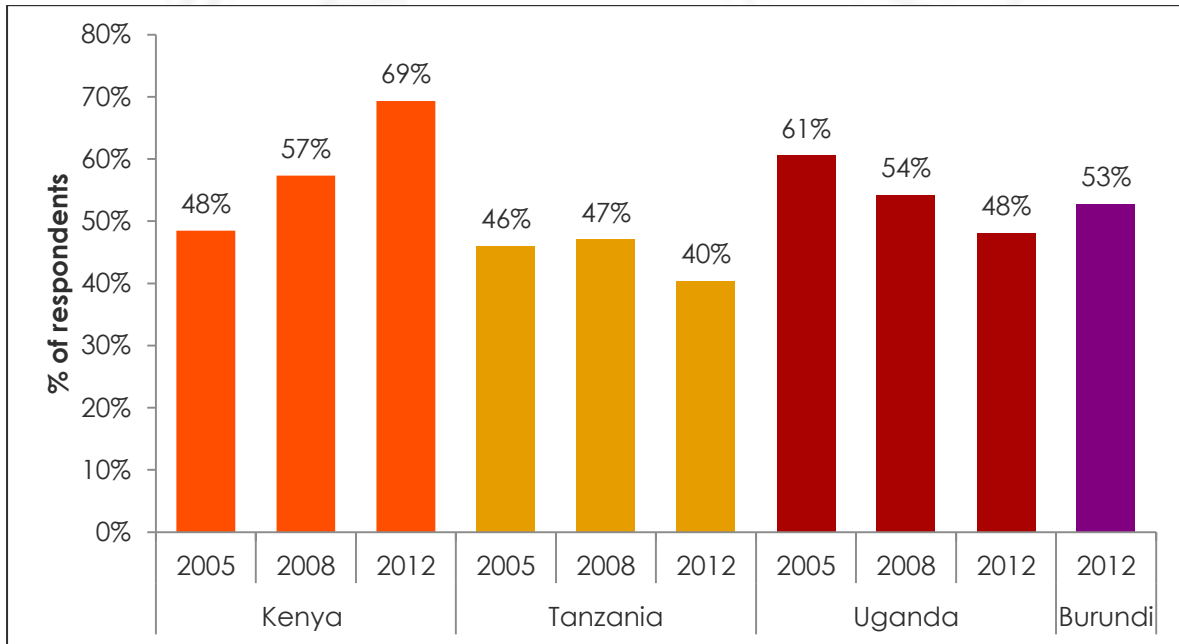
Who should hold local government councillors accountable?

Afrobarometer also asks respondents to say who they think should be responsible for making sure that elected local government councillors do their job once they are in office. Except for Tanzania in 2012, results suggest that a consistently higher proportion of citizens assign this responsibility to voters with regard to local government councillors than with regard to MPs. In 2012, 57% of respondents in the East Africa region said that voters should hold councillors accountable, a slight increase from 52% in 2005. This compares favourably with Africa in general (34 countries for which Round 5 data was available as of May 2014⁵), where only 35% of survey respondents believe it is the voters' responsibility to hold local government councillors to account.⁶

⁵ 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

⁶ If one only considers the 18 countries that were already participating in the Afrobarometer surveys in 2005, the proportion of citizens who say voters should hold local councillors accountable rises to 39% in 2012, not significantly different from the 40% who held this view in 2005. This suggests that not much change has taken place among these 18 countries during the last eight years, and that in countries that have newly entered the Afrobarometer network since 2005, a lower proportion of citizens subscribe to the democratic ideal that voters should hold the elected leaders accountable.

Figure 3: Voters responsible for holding local government councillors accountable
 | 4 countries | 2005–2012



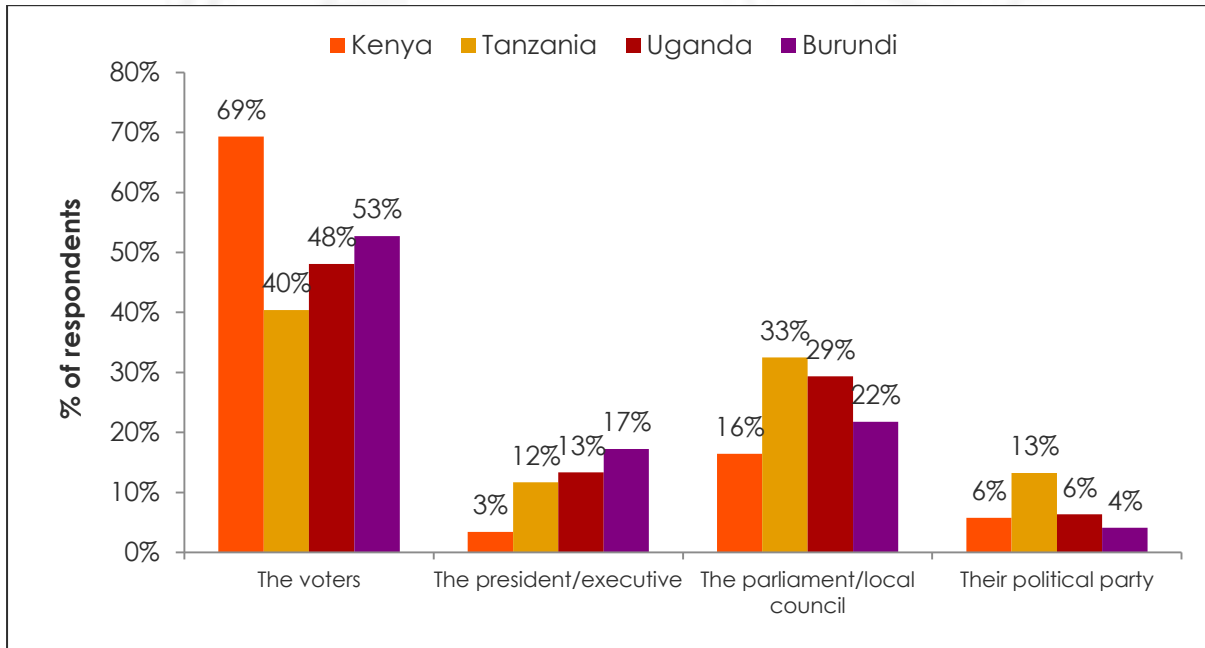
Respondents were asked: *Who should be responsible for making sure that, once elected, local government councillors do their jobs? (% who said "The voters")*

There are illuminating differences in how East Africans' opinions have changed with regard to political accountability of councillors. Whereas a consistently higher proportion of Kenyans have said since 2005 that it is the voters' right to hold councillors accountable, Ugandans are backing out, with a 13 percentage-point decline since 2005. Similarly, in Tanzania from 2005 to 2012, there was a 6 percentage-point decrease in the proportion of citizens saying voters should be the ones to hold councillors accountable. In Burundi, by contrast, a majority recognize that the voters should hold councillors accountable.

A closer look at the 2012 survey responses (Figure 4) reveals that about one-third of Tanzanians (33%) and Ugandans (29%) expect the Parliament/local council to hold local government councillors to account. Burundi has the highest proportion of respondents (17%) saying that the president/executive should hold councillors accountable, while Kenyans are the least likely to assign this role to the Parliament or the president/executive.

Figure 4: Who should make local government councillors do their job?

| 4 countries | 2012



Conclusion

The purpose of this analysis was to examine the evolution of East African citizens' awareness of their democratic right to hold politicians (MPs and local government councillors) accountable. Results demonstrate that progress is mixed, with remarkable differences between countries. In Kenya, a majority of citizens have consistently reported an awareness of this political right. By contrast, Tanzanians' attitudes are changing slowly, and the tendency to default to the president is still high, whereas Ugandans display indications of leaving this role to the executive. Burundians, assessed on the basis of 2012 data only, hold views similar to those of Ugandans and Tanzanians with regard to who should hold MPs accountable, although they display the strongest tendency in the region to delegate this obligation to their president/executive. Nevertheless, a majority in Burundi expect voters to hold elected councillors accountable.

Given that horizontal checks and balances between institutions cannot replace vertical oversight by citizens, citizens in other countries in East Africa would also do well to increase their awareness and exercise their political right to hold politicians accountable. Ugandan and Kenyan citizens have an advantage, compared to Tanzania and Burundi, in that their constitutions provide the electorate with the right to recall MPs before the end of their term in office if they fail to do their duty. The fact that a majority of Ugandans are not claiming this right might suggest however that many are unaware of the constitutional provision, or else they are wary of the ineffectiveness of this process. The latter notion is difficult to prove or disprove with current Afrobarometer data, and it could therefore be the subject of future research.

Results from Tanzania and Burundi demonstrate that a majority of citizens are yet to appreciate their democratic right and duty to monitor the actions of politicians and hold them accountable. Both countries lack a provision for the electorate to recall MPs, and should consider adopting this provision in their constitutions. This would be particularly easy for Tanzania to accomplish during its ongoing review of its constitution. A clearer understanding of the way the accountability chain is supposed to work, and particularly of

the links between voters and their MPs and between MPs and the president, is essential for citizens. Civil society organizations can help to bridge this knowledge and awareness gap through civic awareness/educational messages and debates that target voters individually and collectively. Of course, knowing one has a right is only a first step; voters also need to put this right to the test in practice and thereby help to drive the accountability loop, ultimately making governments deliver services to their people more efficiently.

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Afrobarometer is produced collaboratively by social scientists from more than 30 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD) in Ghana, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya, and the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy (IREEP) in Benin. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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For more information, please visit www.afrobarometer.org.

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