



EAST AFRICAN LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY &
AFRICAN EUROPEAN PARLIAMENTARIANS' INITIATIVE

**INTERPARLIAMENTARY SEMINAR ON DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE AND
ELECTORAL INTEGRITY IN THE EAST AFRICAN COMMUNITY**

**Safeguarding Democracy and Electoral Integrity in the East African
Community: Parliamentary Responses to Emerging Challenges**

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PARLIAMENT OF UGANDA, KAMPALA, UGANDA

REPORT OF THE SEMINAR

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1.0 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1.1 Introduction

The East African Legislative Assembly (EALA), in collaboration with the African European Parliamentarians' Initiative (AEPI), organised a Seminar marking the revival of the Nanyuki Seminar series. The seminar focused on the theme: **“Safeguarding Democracy and Electoral Integrity in the**

East African Community: Parliamentary Responses to Emerging Challenges.” This initiative seeks to strengthen democratic governance and electoral integrity across the East African Community (EAC) through inter-parliamentary dialogue and collaboration.

The seminar was attended by members and staff of EALA, representatives of AEPI, and staff from the Partner States’ Ministries responsible for EAC Affairs. The list of attendance is hereto attached as **Annexe 1.**

This report provides the background and rationale of the Nanyuki Seminar, the justification for the selected theme of the seminar, its objectives and expected outcomes. It also highlights the main issues covered by the presentations and interactive discussions by the participants and the proposed recommendations to enhance democratic governance across the EAC Partner States.

1.2 Background and Rationale

EALA is one of the seven Organs of the EAC. As the legislative arm of the Community, it discharges the legislative, oversight and representation functions. The Assembly membership is drawn from each of the eight Partner States. Currently, EALA comprises 63 members from the Republic of Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Republics of Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, the United Republic of Tanzania, and the Republic of Uganda.

Building on a legacy of African–European parliamentary collaboration first advanced through AWEPA, EALA and AEPI signed a Memorandum of Understanding in March 2025 to resume capacity-building seminars (the Nanyuki series), which previously ran from 2006–2016. Historically, the Nanyuki Seminar series served as a strategic platform for dialogue on integration, governance, and security. Following AWEPA’s closure in 2017, these seminars ceased, creating a gap in regional parliamentary engagement.

The revived EALA and AEPI partnership aims to reinforce functional relationships and advance communication frameworks among regional and national legislatures, with a strategic focus on current governance priorities.

1.3 Justification

The EAC has made notable progress in integration and peacebuilding, but emerging political challenges, such as electoral credibility, civic participation, and institutional accountability, threaten democratic resilience. Parliaments, as the cornerstone of representative governance, are uniquely positioned to respond through legislation, oversight, and public engagement. Strengthening inter-parliamentary cooperation is critical for harmonising democratic standards and reinforcing good governance across the region.

1.4 Objectives

The seminar aimed to:

1. Identify common threats to democratic governance and emerging political trends.
2. Strengthen parliamentary oversight and legislative frameworks for free and fair elections.
3. Promote dialogue on safeguarding civic space and electoral integrity.
4. Generate actionable policy recommendations for democratic resilience.

1.5 Expected outcomes

The seminar sought to achieve:

- Enhanced awareness of regional governance challenges.
- Improved legislative tools for electoral Integrity.
- Policy recommendations for enhancing electoral transparency and civic participation.

2.0 PROCEEDINGS

2.1 Opening Session

The Clerk of EALA, Mr. Obatre Lumumba, welcomed Members and the AEPI team, situating the seminar within the long-standing Nanyuki tradition initially institutionalised by AWEPA. He highlighted the Nanyuki seminars' legacy, which includes the inter-parliamentary games, inter-parliamentary joint committees, and the establishment of the Bureau of EAC Speakers.

The Seminar was opened by the Speaker of EALA, Rt. Hon. Joseph Ntakirutimana. He welcomed delegates and reaffirmed parliament's central role in legislating, oversight, and accountability. He emphasised that democracy is a continuous process requiring vigilance and cooperation, and expressed appreciation to AEPI for restoring this collaborative platform. The Speaker called for candid engagement between the participants to generate actionable resolutions that reinforce democratic governance and the overall EAC integration agenda.

In his statement, the AEPI President, Mr. Brendon Howlin, expressed gratitude for the renewed partnership with EALA. He underscored the importance of safeguarding democracy and ensuring electoral integrity amid emerging challenges, and invited the participants to openly discuss and share their experiences across contexts.

2.2 Presentations

2.2.1 Presentation 1: A European Perspective on Safeguarding Democracy

The presentation was made by Amb. Mags Gaynor, Irish Ambassador to the Republic of Uganda.

The presentation underscored the preciousness of democracy through Ireland's historical experience, where democracy was hard-worn. It was outlined that the core pillars of democracy include a vibrant civic space, media freedom, active civil society, electoral integrity, and a human rights-based approach.

Amb. Mags Gaynor indicated that Ireland's support to democratic governance in East Africa focuses on empowering Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), credible election management, promoting women's political participation, and youth engagement through civic education.

On the issues raised by the participants about the impact of low youth electoral turnout in some European democracies, women political participation in Ireland, foreign funding to CSOs in Africa with possible foreign specific agenda, the European tendency to prescribe its model of democracy to Africa, the increasing costs of elections in East Africa caused by voter bribery practices, and the abuse of social media to influence elections outcome, Amb. Mags Gaynor clarified that :

- There are mechanisms to broaden political participation, such as the Single Transferable Vote system applied in Ireland and the conduct of referenda on contentious issues.
- Ireland has undertaken decades-long incremental reforms to promote women's political participation.
- Irish support to CSOs aims to uphold democratic values, not to advance a foreign agenda.

- There is a need for wider debates around foreign-funded CSOs in Africa.
- Ireland recognises contextual differences and appreciates the value of respectful dialogue rather than external dictation of democratic practice.
- EAC could explore the possibility of enacting a legal framework to put reasonable limits on election financing, disclosure obligations and audit of election expenses, as is the case in Ireland.
- Counter-disinformation should be undertaken while protecting free expression.

2.2.2 Presentation 2: Safeguarding Democracy: Electoral Integrity, Civic Space & Parliamentary Oversight

The presentation was delivered by Hon. Dora Byamukama. It revolved around three critical pillars of democracy, namely electoral integrity, civic space, and parliamentary oversight, and their interconnected role in sustaining democracy.

Understanding Democracy and Its Relevance

The presentation defined democracy as a system rooted in the principle of rule by the people, emphasising that it is not a one-time event but a continuous process. Democracy thrives on free and fair elections, active citizen participation, the rule of law, human rights protection, and accountable and transparent institutions such as electoral bodies and the judiciary.

It was highlighted that weaknesses in any of these areas threaten the entire democratic ecosystem. Parliament was identified as a key guardian of democracy, entrusted with upholding the rule of law, protecting human rights, and preventing the concentration of power.

Democracy in the EAC Framework

The EAC Treaty was cited as a foundational instrument requiring adherence to democratic principles enshrined in Articles 3(b), 5, 6(d), 7(2), 8(4) of the Treaty. Membership and operations within the Community are anchored on good governance, rule of law, and democratic values, with organs like the East African Legislative Assembly (EALA) playing a central role in implementation.

Current Democratic Landscape and Challenges in EAC

It was observed that the EAC region has made notable progress, including constitutional reforms, adoption of multiparty systems, regular elections, improved electoral technologies such as biometric voter registration, and growing civic engagement.

However, the presentation diagnosed persistent challenges, such as discrepancies in electoral laws, limited trust in election results, election-related violence, executive dominance, weak institutional checks and balances, restrictions on media freedoms and civil liberties, politicised electoral institutions, weak party democracy/financing, and governance gaps that erode public confidence.

Electoral Integrity

Electoral integrity was defined as the degree to which elections meet international standards of being free, fair, and transparent. It encompasses the entire electoral process, from legal frameworks and voter registration to dispute resolution. Threats to integrity include disinformation, voter suppression, cybersecurity vulnerabilities, political violence, and abuse of state resources. Strengthening integrity requires impartial electoral management, transparency in results, robust digital security, and continuous civic education.

Civic Space

Civic space refers to the environment enabling citizens and organisations to participate freely in public life. It is therefore essential for meaningful democracy. The core elements of civic space include freedoms of expression, association, assembly, and access to information.

The presentation underscored that shrinking civic space, often marked by restrictive laws, harassment of journalists, and internet shutdowns, signals democratic backsliding. Protecting civic space calls for legal safeguards, support for independent media, and constructive dialogue between governments and civil society.

Parliamentary Oversight

Parliamentary oversight emerged as a cornerstone of democratic governance. EALA's functions include legislation, budget approval, inquiries, and ensuring accountability. Oversight tools such as committee hearings, audit reviews, and whistleblower protection were highlighted.

However, oversight faces challenges like executive dominance, resource constraints, corruption, and political polarisation. Enhancing oversight capacity requires stronger committees, better access to information, training, and investment in research support.

Interconnection of Pillars of Democracy

The presentation stressed that electoral integrity, civic space, and parliamentary oversight are mutually reinforcing. Failure in one undermines the others, weakening the democratic system. Democratic resilience depends on the interaction of these pillars rather than any single component.

Good Practices and Emerging Challenges

Examples of good practices included electoral reforms, digitised civic education, civil society coalitions, parliamentary inquiries, and public engagement initiatives.

Emerging challenges were categorised into digital threats (disinformation, cybersecurity risks), institutional gaps (underfunded electoral bodies), and socio-economic issues (such as youth unemployment, corruption, and insecurity).

Key Recommendations

Hon. Byamukama made the following actionable recommendations for consideration by EALA :

- Strengthening independent electoral management bodies.
- Ensuring protection of civil liberties and media freedom.
- Harmonising electoral laws and the regulation of campaign financing.
- Enhancing parliamentary transparency and capacity.
- Promoting digital safety and countering disinformation.
- Safeguarding civic space and ensuring inclusive participation.
- Fostering regional parliamentary cooperation and peer learning.

2.2.3 Presentation 3: Strengthening Parliamentary Oversight for Transparent and Accountable Governance

The presentation was delivered by Hon. Dora Byamukama. It was focused on the critical role of parliamentary oversight in promoting good governance and public trust, emphasising that parliamentary oversight is essential for ensuring responsible use of public resources and maintaining citizen confidence.

Why Parliamentary Oversight Matters

Oversight was described as a mechanism that prevents corruption, ensures policies and budgets achieve intended results, and strengthens institutional accountability. It enhances transparency and builds public trust in governance systems. Quoting Louis D. Brandeis, Hon. Byamukama noted that “sunlight is the best disinfectant,” symbolising the importance of openness and public scrutiny in preventing corruption and abuse of power.

Key Oversight Actors and Roles

The role of parliament was highlighted as central to reviewing government policies, budgets, and expenditures. Through its standing committees, parliament scrutinises public accounts and governance processes and summons officials for explanations. Partnerships with CSOs and media were noted as vital for exposing abuse, promoting transparency, and facilitating citizen feedback. The judiciary complements these efforts by enforcing the rule of law, adjudicating corruption cases, and providing legal remedies against abuse of power.

Challenges to Effective Oversight

Several obstacles were identified, including political interference in oversight institutions, weak parliamentary capacity, inadequate technical skills, and poor follow-up on audit reports. Other challenges include restricted civic space, limited citizen engagement, and entrenched corruption networks that undermine accountability.

Strengthening Parliamentary Oversight

Strategies for improvement include strengthening and adequately funding oversight committees, providing members of parliament with research and legal expertise, institutionalising follow-up on audit findings, and enhancing cooperation between parliament and other oversight bodies.

Tools for Stronger Oversight

The presentation recommended tools such as performance audits, budget tracking systems, public hearings, stakeholder consultations, and ICT solutions for digital transparency and monitoring.

Enhancing Other Oversight Mechanisms

Independent institutions must be guaranteed legal, operational, and financial autonomy. Protecting whistleblowers and anti-corruption investigators, adopting technology for real-time audits, and improving coordination with parliament, media, and civil society were emphasised.

Boosting Social Accountability

Citizen engagement was identified as crucial for accountability. This includes involving citizens in budget planning, supporting civil society watchdog initiatives, promoting media freedom, and ensuring broad access to public information.

Leveraging Digital Tools

Digital solutions such as open data portals, e-governance systems, whistleblower platforms, and cybersecurity measures were proposed to enhance transparency and protect sensitive information.

Proposed Policy Recommendations

The presentation proposed key recommendations, including reforming laws to strengthen transparency, ensuring independence and funding for oversight bodies, building capacity for MPs and staff, promoting citizen engagement, and developing digital infrastructure for governance.

2.2.4 Presentation 4: New Wine in Old Wineskins: Is There Appetite for New Governance Ideas in the EAC?

This presentation was delivered by Mr. Mwambutsya Ndebesa. He explored governance challenges and democratic trends in the East African Community (EAC). Using the metaphor of “new wine in old wineskins,” the speaker examined whether existing governance structures can adapt to emerging socio-political realities.

The metaphor of “new wine in old bottles,” drawn from biblical teachings, was used to illustrate the rigidity of governance structures in EAC. Just as Jesus confronted inflexible societal systems, the presenter is of the view that Africa today faces similar challenges with post-colonial and post-liberation state structures that have failed to evolve in line with modern governance needs.

Elements of Democracy

The presentation emphasised that democracy is more than periodic elections. It includes separation of powers among government arms, political accountability, justice, equality, rule of law, respect for human rights, tolerance, and service delivery. Substantive democracy goes beyond electoral rituals to encompass fairness and citizen engagement.

Paradox of Democracy

Democracy was described as inherently contradictory. While it promotes freedom and representation, it can also lead to violent conflicts, governance paralysis, or even state disintegration if not balanced. Excessive competition may trigger wars, while too much consensus can stall decision-making. The need for equilibrium between these paradoxes was stressed.

Benefits of Democracy

Despite its imperfections, democracy remains the best alternative to other governance systems. It strengthens state institutions, legitimises authority, fosters trust, preserves peace, upholds rights, and promotes equality and justice. It decentralises decision-making, mediates conflicts, and ensures fairness and accountability.

Elections Without Democracy

The speaker highlighted that elections do not automatically equate to democracy. In many EAC states, electoral processes are compromised by partisan election management bodies, biased policing, restricted media freedom, abuse of state resources, and monetisation of politics. Election Observers often face movement restrictions, and legal reforms are deliberately delayed.

Securitisation of Elections

A rarely discussed but critical issue is the securitisation of elections, framing them as threats to national security. This creates a climate of fear, justifying extraordinary measures such as military involvement in election policing. Regimes prioritise order over justice, using security as a strategic tool to manipulate outcomes.

Democracy in East Africa: A History of Disappointment?

The speaker explained that elections in East Africa have often been marred by violence, irregularities, and exclusion. Some regions fail to participate, candidates are barred under flimsy excuses, and opposition figures face arrests. Media access is unequal, voter education is minimal, and freedom of assembly is curtailed under security pretexts.

Political Corruption in EAC

Beyond monetary corruption, political corruption undermines democracy through patronage, nepotism, tribalism, cronyism, and elite capture. These practices distort governance and perpetuate inequality, weakening electoral integrity and public trust.

New Social-Political Trends (New Wine)

In his assessment, the rise of technology and the Gen Z movement is reshaping civic culture. Young, educated, and networked populations are resisting manipulation, corruption, and authoritarian tendencies. They demand transparency, freedom of information, and accountability, challenging traditional governance norms.

EALA and Political Transformation

The East African Legislative Assembly (EALA) was urged to spearhead regional integration beyond intergovernmental cooperation, including gradual, principled ceding or pooling of sovereignty.

Proposed Recommendations

Key recommendations included adopting the EAC Protocol on Good Governance, creating a transnational parliamentary caucus, mediating regional conflicts, exercising robust oversight, including establishing a regional Question Time to the Council of Ministers, fostering common political values, norms, systems, and embracing a transnational mindset to drive transformation.

2. 3 Issues raised and input from Plenary Discussions

EALA members extensively discussed the issues highlighted by all the speakers and provided input based on their practical experience and assessment of democratic governance across the EAC. Members stressed the following main issues and input:

- Democracy is a continuous practice, anchored in human and civic rights, accountability, social justice and service delivery, rather than a periodic electoral event.
- Every model of democracy must be reflective of the peculiar context of the country, including literacy levels, clan structures, diverse political culture, history and security realities, aligning global standards to local values/realities, with the caution that “contextual” must not excuse human and civic rights erosion or indefinite securitisation.
- Promotion of democratic governance must include the balance of rights with obligations, taking into account the paradoxes of democracy.
- There is a need to enhance intra-party democracy as a foundation for democratic governance of the country.
- Studies should be conducted to explore the potential of traditional/ ancestral governance models to contribute to improving modern governance systems in East Africa.
- Monetisation of elections, including voter bribery, is ever-increasing in some of the EAC Partner States, causing an endless corruption cycle, with its adverse effects on electoral integrity and democratic governance. There is an urgent need to curb this phenomenon to safeguard democracy.

- There is a general consensus on the main challenges to electoral integrity in many of the EAC Partner States that span from partisan election management bodies, limited relevance of election observation by local or international observers, fraudulent processes, unequal access to media, abuse of state resources during election campaigns, criminalisation of dissent, and political patronage, amongst others.
- Responsible use of social media and new technology could contribute to enhanced election management, political participation and accountability. This could be achieved through leveraging open data, e-governance, whistleblower platforms, and measured internet governance approaches that resist disinformation without silencing dissent.
- There is a need to study the Gen Z dynamics in East Africa (motivation, manipulation, internet governance, etc) to understand and address the growing disconnect between the youth and the leaders, through enhanced youth engagement, mentorship, civic education and responses to their concerns.
- There is a need for the Assembly to explore practical ways to broaden youth participation, strengthen women's leadership and embed civic education in routine parliamentary work, not just for election purposes.
- EALA has not fully leveraged its oversight mandate to contribute to improved governance across the Community, notwithstanding its capacity gaps.
- The EAC's current intergovernmental model is not well aligned with the desired trajectory toward deeper integration. The EAC Partner States need to explore the possibility of gradual pooling of sovereignty to achieve greater benefits of integration, including peace and security, harmonised democratic governance standards and implementation of the responsibility-to-protect principle.
- EALA has a pivotal role in advocating for the restructuring of the EAC governance to adapt to new realities, promoting integration, good governance, and democratic resilience.
- Coupling political will with institutional design, the EAC can move beyond intergovernmental cooperation to a values-anchored integration that earns citizen trust and delivers tangible improvements in public life.

3.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the discussions, participants made the following recommendations:

1. EALA and AEPI to develop a capacity building programme structured into thematic Nanyuki Series addressing critical regional issues that are within the mandate of the Assembly. Members of National Assemblies, EAC Secretariat, relevant departments and other relevant stakeholders should participate in the seminars.
2. EALA to engage with the various stakeholders to advocate for fast-tracking the conclusion and ratification of the EAC Protocol on good governance and ensure that it addresses the challenges to electoral integrity and sets good governance standards for the EAC.
3. Through the Committee on Regional Affairs and Conflict Resolution, the Assembly is to undertake engagement with the Elections Management Bodies, the Anti-Corruption Agencies and other stakeholders on voter bribery, election financing, mandatory disclosure and audits, and other matters that affect electoral integrity to make appropriate recommendations for implementation by the Council of Ministers and the Partner States.
4. The Assembly to engage with the Council of Ministers for enhancing the EAC Election Observation mechanism and ensuring the report is tabled before the Assembly, and follow-up is organised to address the critical issues observed.

5. The Assembly to undertake oversight activity of the status of implementation of human and civic rights by the Partner States for purposes of recommending harmonisation and sharing of best practices across the region.
6. The Assembly to conduct structured engagement with youth organisations, women’s advocacy groups and other marginalised groups on their political participation, representation and other means of addressing the specific issues that they are faced with.
7. EALA to establish a dedicated “ Question time” for the Council of Ministers to respond to critical challenges affecting the region, including governance issues, and make commitments to address them.
8. EALA to engage with the Council of Ministers on a regional policy and legal framework for responsible use of social media and counter-desinformation.
9. EALA to spearhead the process of EAC governance structure transformation toward deeper integration through gradual pooling of sovereignty.

4.0 CONCLUSION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

4.1 Conclusion

The Nanyuki Seminar successfully revived a critical platform for Inter-Parliamentary Dialogue on democratic governance and electoral integrity within the East African Community. Through insightful presentations and candid discussions, participants reaffirmed that democracy is a continuous process anchored in accountability, civic rights, and inclusive participation. The seminar highlighted persistent challenges such as electoral credibility, shrinking civic space, and weak oversight mechanisms, while also identifying opportunities for reform through harmonised laws, strengthened institutions, and enhanced parliamentary capacity.

Key recommendations emphasised the need for robust oversight, responsible use of technology, and structured engagement with youth and marginalised groups. The seminar underscored EALA’s pivotal role in advocating for governance reforms, promoting transparency, and steering the EAC toward deeper integration grounded in shared democratic values.

4.2 Acknowledgement

The East African Legislative Assembly (EALA) expresses its profound gratitude to the African European Parliamentarians’ Initiative (AEPI) for their invaluable partnership in organising this seminar. Special appreciation goes to the Parliament of Uganda for hosting the event and providing an enabling environment for constructive dialogue. We acknowledge the contributions of all presenters, including Amb. Mags Gaynor, Hon. Dora Byamukama, and Mr. Mwambutsya Ndebesa, whose expertise enriched the discussions.

Our sincere thanks extend to the Members of EALA, representatives from Partner States, and all stakeholders who actively participated and shared their perspectives. Their commitment and insights were instrumental in shaping the seminar’s outcomes.