

The Democratic Legitimacy of President Paul Biya of Cameroon and Samia Suluhu Hassan of Tanzania within the Framework of African Union

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Abstract

Democratic legitimacy remains a central concern in African politics, particularly within the framework of the African Union (AU). The AU, through the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (2007), commits member states to uphold principles of free, fair, and transparent elections, respect for human rights, and constitutional governance. Yet, the practice of democracy across the continent often diverges from these ideals. This paper examines the democratic legitimacy of two contemporary African leaders: President Paul Biya of Cameroon and President Samia Suluhu Hassan of Tanzania. Biya, who has ruled Cameroon since 1982, represents one of the longest-serving leaders in Africa, with his continued tenure raising questions about electoral credibility and authoritarian consolidation. In contrast, Suluhu Hassan, who assumed office in 2021, initially gained praise for opening democratic space but her recent re-election in 2025 was criticized by AU observers for failing to meet democratic standards. By situating these cases within the AU's normative framework, this paper explores the tension between stability and democratic legitimacy in African governance.

Keywords: *democratic legitimacy, electoral fraud, election rigging, quasi democracy, electoral violence*

Introduction

Scholarly debates on democratic legitimacy in Africa often emphasize two dimensions: **input legitimacy** (the fairness of electoral processes) and **output legitimacy** (the effectiveness of governance and delivery of public goods). Lipset (1959) and Beetham (1991) argue that legitimacy derives from both procedural and performance-based factors, a framework that remains relevant in African contexts. Within the AU, legitimacy is further shaped by regional norms codified in the *African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance*, which obliges states to promote constitutional rule and sanction unconstitutional changes of government. However, scholars such as Murithi (2019) and Okeke (2021) highlight the AU's weak enforcement capacity, noting that political stability often takes precedence over democratic accountability.

Case studies of Cameroon and Tanzania illustrate these tensions. Analysts describe Biya's prolonged rule as a "crisis of democracy," pointing to electoral manipulation, repression of opposition, and AU's muted response. Conversely, Suluhu Hassan's leadership initially signalled democratic renewal, but AU election observers in 2025 reported ballot stuffing, internet blackouts, and politically motivated abductions, concluding that the election failed to comply with democratic standards. These contrasting trajectories underscore the AU's dilemma: whether to prioritize democratic norms or regional stability.

Theoretical Framework

Democratic Legitimacy Theory

- **Seymour Martin Lipset (1959)** argued that legitimacy derives from the belief that institutions are the most appropriate for society.
- **David Beetham (1991)** expanded this by emphasizing three dimensions: legality (rule of law), justification (shared values), and consent (popular approval).
- Applied to Africa, legitimacy is often contested when elections are manipulated or when leaders remain in power without genuine consent.
- **Paul Biya:** His prolonged tenure undermines consent and justification, as opposition parties and civil society frequently contest the fairness of elections.
- **Samia Suluhu Hassan:** Initially strengthened legitimacy by opening democratic space, but recent electoral irregularities weaken legality and consent.

Constructivism in International Relations

- Constructivism highlights the role of **norms and identity** in shaping state behaviour.
- The AU has constructed a normative framework through the *African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (2007)*, which sets expectations for democratic governance.
- However, enforcement is inconsistent, reflecting the tension between norms and political realities.
- **Paul Biya:** Despite violating democratic norms, his continued recognition by the AU reflects the prioritization of stability over strict adherence to norms.
- **Samia Suluhu Hassan:** Her reforms initially aligned with AU norms, but the AU's criticism of her 2025 election shows how normative expectations can challenge legitimacy.

Realism and Stability

- Realism emphasizes power and stability over normative ideals.
- The AU often tolerates authoritarian leaders to avoid instability, reflecting realist logic.
- **Paul Biya:** His regime is tolerated because Cameroon's stability is seen as strategically important in Central Africa.
- **Samia Suluhu Hassan:** Tanzania's relative stability makes her leadership acceptable, even when democratic standards are compromised.

Methodology:

This paper adopts a **qualitative, comparative case study approach** to examine the democratic legitimacy of President Paul Biya of Cameroon and President Samia Suluhu Hassan of Tanzania within the African Union (AU) framework. Comparative case studies are particularly useful for highlighting similarities and differences across political contexts, allowing for deeper insights into how legitimacy is constructed and contested in Africa.

Data Sources

- **Primary Sources:**

- AU official documents, including the *African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance* (2007).
- AU Commission statements on Cameroon's 2025 elections and Tanzania's 2025 elections.
- AU Election Observation Mission reports.
- **Secondary Sources:**
 - Scholarly works on democratic legitimacy (Lipset, Beetham).
 - Academic analyses of AU's role in promoting democracy (Murithi, Okeke).
 - Reports from international organizations (Freedom House, Afrobarometer).
 - Media coverage and policy briefs on Cameroon and Tanzania's political developments.

Analytical Framework

- **Democratic Legitimacy Theory:** Evaluates legality, justification, and consent in leadership.
- **Constructivism:** Assesses AU's normative expectations and their influence on member states.
- **Realism:** Considers AU's prioritization of stability over democratic enforcement.

These frameworks are applied to both cases to assess how legitimacy is constructed, challenged, and recognized within the AU.

Scope and Limitations

- **Scope:** Focuses on the period surrounding the 2025 elections in Cameroon and Tanzania, situating them within AU's broader democratic agenda.
- **Limitations:** Reliance on secondary data may constrain access to grassroots perspectives; AU's official reports may reflect diplomatic caution rather than full transparency.

Discourse on Objectives:

A. Democratic Legitimacy of Paul Biya (Cameroon)

President Paul Biya has ruled Cameroon since 1982, making him one of the longest-serving leaders in Africa. His continued tenure raises serious questions about democratic legitimacy.

- **Electoral Process:** Biya's re-elections have been marred by allegations of fraud, intimidation, and suppression of opposition parties. The 2025 election, which extended his rule into a potential eighth term at age 92, was criticized by observers as a "crisis of democracy." Reports highlighted violence, arrests of protesters, and restrictions on civil liberties.
- **AU Response:** The African Union congratulated Biya on his re-election but simultaneously expressed *grave concern* about the repression and violence surrounding the polls. This dual stance reflects AU's tendency to prioritize stability while acknowledging democratic deficits.
- **Legitimacy Assessment:** From the perspective of democratic legitimacy theory, Biya's rule fails the test of consent and justification. Citizens' ability to freely choose their leaders is compromised, undermining the legality and moral justification of his

presidency. Constructivist analysis shows AU norms are violated, yet realist logic explains AU's tolerance due to Cameroon's strategic importance in Central Africa.

B. Democratic Legitimacy of Samia Suluhu Hassan (Tanzania)

Samia Suluhu Hassan assumed office in 2021 following the death of President John Magufuli. Initially, her leadership was welcomed as a democratic opening, with reforms such as lifting bans on opposition rallies and engaging civil society. However, her legitimacy has become contested.

- **Electoral Process:** The 2025 election was marred by ballot stuffing, internet blackouts, and politically motivated abductions. AU election observers concluded the polls *failed to comply with democratic standards*.
- **AU Response:** The AU congratulated Suluhu Hassan on her victory but urged her government to protect fundamental rights and freedoms, acknowledging post-election violence.
- **Legitimacy Assessment:** Suluhu Hassan's legitimacy is mixed. While her early reforms aligned with AU democratic norms, the flawed 2025 election undermines legality and consent. Constructivist analysis shows AU norms were invoked to criticize the process, while realist considerations explain AU's continued recognition of her leadership for Tanzania's stability.

The Human Rights Watch (HRW) has accused Cameroonian security forces of using lethal force, committing killings, and arbitrarily detaining hundreds of people in a violent post-election crackdown following the disputed Oct. 12 vote. In a report released on Wednesday in Nairobi, the rights group said police and gendarmes fired live ammunition and tear gas to disperse opposition-led protests contesting the re-election of President Paul Biya, 92, who was declared the winner on Oct. 27 with 53.66% of the vote. Many protesters are said to have been shot dead by security forces and dozens left nursing gunshot wounds. The rights group said it interviewed 20 witnesses, including relatives of victims, lawyers and opposition figures, documenting killings, injuries and arbitrary arrests in several cities.

UN sources reported that security forces killed 48 people, while opposition groups said the toll was 55. Ilaria Allegrozzi, HRW's senior Africa researcher in a statement said that "the authorities should immediately rein in, investigate, and prosecute responsible security forces, and all political leaders should call on their supporters to reject violence." Biya's main challenger, Issa Tchiroma Bakary, had declared himself the victor and alleged widespread fraud. The HRW said hundreds of people, including minors, have been detained since the unrest with lawyers providing legal aid saying that as many as 2,000 people are being held across the country, many detainees have not been presented before a judge. Allegrozzi urged authorities to free all those detained for peaceful protest and to uphold due process. "The Cameroonian authorities should immediately release all those held in connection with peaceful protests or for peaceful expression of opposition to the government," she said. "Anyone committing violence should be appropriately charged with their due process rights fully respected, including their rights to bail and to a prompt and fair trial with an effective defense."

Rene Emmanuel Sadi, Cameroon's communication minister and government spokesman, defended the security operations in an address to reporters, saying authorities were confronting "illegal gatherings, roadblocks and violent mobs," and warned that "those fomenting unrest will face the full force of the law."

President Biya, the world's longest-serving head of state, has ruled Cameroon since 1982, having removed presidential term limits in 2008.

Tanzania

The diplomatic fallout of the election violence has been significant. Poll observers from the African Union and SADC failed to endorse the ballot, and an official tally that gave President Samia Suluhu Hassan close to 98% of the vote. Regional leaders will be under pressure to act on the findings of their observer missions. So far, their preferred option seems to be some form of transitional political arrangement. Tanzania's Vice President Emmanuel Nchimbi said on 9 November the government favored dialogue, but gave no further details. A day later, senior Chadema figures were released from detention.

Amid fears the government may be trying to divide the opposition – who had effectively been banned from the election – two Chadema party leaders told The New Humanitarian there can be no reconciliation before accountability in a country still traumatised by the violence. “Those that planned, financed, and carried out the massacres must first be brought to justice,” said John Kitoka, Chadema's director of foreign affairs. “Samia must also unconditionally step down – we do not recognise her as democratically elected.” Chadema is also planning to take to the streets on 9 December – independence day for Tanganyika – in what they hope will be an emphatic repudiation of Hassan and her ruling Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) party.

On the morning of election day, the streets of Dar es Salaam, the economic capital, were mostly empty. As the afternoon wore on, groups of protesters began to gather around the neighbourhoods of Ubungu – the location of the country's largest bus terminal – and the usually busy marketplace of Kariakoo. Word spread quickly online and, within hours, crowds were pouring into the streets across the country. “At first, it seemed almost like a joke,” said a reporter who witnessed the protests forming in Ubungu. “It was clear the movement was spontaneous, and lacked coordination.” The reporter, like other unnamed sources in this report, asked not to be named for fear of reprisals.

Things quickly degenerated. Polling stations, police stations, and businesses associated with wealthy CCM backers were set ablaze during the night. In the next few days, there was widespread upheaval as protesters – a broad demographic spectrum of Tanzanians – rallied against the government. A curfew was quickly enforced, roadblocks set up across city centres, and the internet was shut off. In multiple videos circulating online, in addition to uniformed security personnel shooting at protesters, men in civilian clothes could be seen patrolling the streets with assault rifles firing indiscriminately. “I saw several people shot – some collapsed instantly, others were carried away bleeding,” said one witness.

“Security forces have been storming homes, dragging citizens out, and shooting them on their doorsteps for daring to protest,” *Jumuiya ni Yetu* said in a statement. Mwang'ombe of Chadema said he had spoken to doctors who said they were told by police at gunpoint not to reveal the numbers of the dead and wounded arriving at their hospitals. “The government is working extra hard to conceal the dead bodies,” he added. *Jumuiya ni Yetu* is assembling a list of alleged perpetrators for submission to the ICC. Among those named are Hassan and her son, Abdul Hafidh Ameir, who is believed to have led a pre-election undercover abduction and assassination squad.

A flawed election

In the months leading up to the election, abductions had been rising sharply as the government cracked down on Chadema and its leader, Tundu Lissu. He was arrested in April on treason charges for calling for a boycott of the elections after Hassan failed to follow through on promises to reform the electoral system.

The electoral commission disqualified Lissu, followed by Luhaga Mpina, the candidate of the second largest opposition party, ACT-Wazalendo. That left Hassan facing only minor opponents at the polls, as rights groups condemned the climate of fear.

On election day, a preliminary SADC statement noted a “very low voter turnout”, with some polling centres receiving “no voters at all”. Members of its observer mission witnessed ballot stuffing, but the team was unable to verify the vote counts due to the internet outage at the end of the day.

Although Mahmoud Ali Youssouf, the chair of the African Union, congratulated Hassan on her win, a statement from its electoral observer mission said the poll did not meet democratic principles or standards.

C. The Role of the African Union

The AU plays a critical role in shaping perceptions of legitimacy across the continent.

- **Normative Framework:** The *African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (2007)* commits member states to uphold democratic principles, sanction unconstitutional changes of government, and protect human rights.
- **Implementation Gap:** Scholars argue that AU enforcement is weak. While the AU issues statements and sends observation missions, it rarely imposes sanctions on leaders who undermine democracy. Stability often takes precedence over strict democratic accountability.
- **Comparative Analysis:**
 - In Cameroon, AU’s muted response to Biya’s authoritarian consolidation reflects realist priorities.
 - In Tanzania, AU’s criticism of Suluhu Hassan’s election shows normative expectations at work, but the lack of strong enforcement highlights institutional weakness.
- **Implications:** The AU’s dual role — norm promoter and stability guarantor — creates tension. Leaders can claim legitimacy through AU recognition even when democratic standards are compromised.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The democratic legitimacy of African leaders remains a contested issue within the framework of the African Union. President Paul Biya of Cameroon exemplifies entrenched authoritarianism, where prolonged tenure and manipulated elections undermine the principles of legality, justification, and consent. Despite widespread criticism, the AU continues to recognize his leadership, reflecting a realist prioritization of stability over democratic accountability. In contrast, President Samia Suluhu Hassan of Tanzania initially embodied democratic renewal, but her 2025 re-election revealed significant irregularities that compromised legitimacy. The AU’s criticism of the Tanzanian polls demonstrates its

normative commitment to democracy, yet its continued recognition of Suluhu Hassan underscores the tension between ideals and political realities.

Ultimately, both cases highlight the AU's dilemma: balancing the enforcement of democratic norms with the need to maintain regional stability. While the AU has established a robust normative framework through the *African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance* (2007), its enforcement mechanisms remain weak, allowing leaders to claim legitimacy despite failing democratic standards.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen Enforcement of AU Norms

- The AU should move beyond symbolic statements and adopt stronger sanctions against member states that fail to uphold democratic standards.
- Mechanisms such as suspension from AU activities or targeted sanctions could deter authoritarian practices.

2. Support Democratic Reforms

- In Cameroon, the AU should encourage political transition and reforms that allow genuine competition.
- In Tanzania, the AU should support Suluhu Hassan's government in implementing electoral reforms to restore credibility.

3. Enhance Election Observation Missions

- AU observer missions should be empowered to provide independent, transparent assessments and follow-up mechanisms to ensure compliance with recommendations.

4. Promote Civil Society Engagement

- The AU should strengthen partnerships with civil society organizations, media, and grassroots movements to enhance democratic participation and accountability.

5. Balance Stability and Democracy

- While stability is important, the AU must recognize that long-term stability is best achieved through legitimate governance.
- A shift toward prioritizing democratic legitimacy will enhance the AU's credibility both within Africa and globally.

References

□ **African Union Charter (2007):** *According to the African Union's Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (African Union, 2007), member states are obliged to uphold democratic principles.*

□ **AU Commission Statement on Cameroon (2025):** *The AU Commission expressed "grave concern" over violence during Cameroon's 2025 elections but still congratulated Biya (African Union Commission, 2025).*

□ **AU Election Observation Mission Report on Tanzania (2025):** *The AU Election Observation Mission concluded that Tanzania's 2025 elections failed to meet democratic standards (African Union Election Observation Mission, 2025).*

- **Lipset (1959):** *Lipset (1959) argues that legitimacy derives from a government's ability to maintain order and satisfy citizens' needs.*
- **Beetham (1991):** *Beetham (1991) emphasizes legality, justification, and consent as the pillars of democratic legitimacy.*
- **Murithi (2019):** *Murithi (2019) critiques the AU's limited enforcement capacity, noting its tendency to prioritize stability over accountability.*
- **Okeke (2021):** *Okeke (2021) highlights the AU's selective application of democratic norms, often influenced by strategic interests.*