

Local Perceptions of Election Observation in Africa

Preliminary Findings

Robert Macdonald and Thomas Molony



About the research project

This working paper by Robert Macdonald and Thomas Molony provides preliminary summary findings from the ‘Local Perceptions and Media Representations of Election Observation in Africa’ research project. It is based at the University of Edinburgh and funded by the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

Through three country case studies – Zambia, The Gambia, and Kenya – the project investigates:

1) Local perceptions of election observation missions

Despite being of great interest to observer groups, the views of citizens in the countries that host election observation missions are generally overlooked in the academic literature on election observation. In addressing this gap, the project develops understandings of how people in host countries evaluate the goals, methods, and performance of election observation initiatives.

2) Media representations of election observation missions

The project develops understandings of how information produced by, and relating to, election observation missions circulates via traditional and social media, as well as the ways in which it can be distorted through this process.

The authors conducted research alongside co-investigators from partner organisations based in the case study countries: Marja Hinfelaar and O’Brien Kaaba at the Southern African Institute for Policy and Research (SAIPAR), Zambia; Sait Matty Jaw at the Center for Research & Policy Development (CRPD), The Gambia; and Racheal Makokha at the Technical University of Kenya.

For details visit our website at: <https://www.sps.ed.ac.uk/lmeo>.

Methodology



Image 1: Citizen observers at a polling station in Darsilameh (Kombo Central, West Coast region), south of Brikama on the border with Casamance (Senegal), The Gambia, 4 December 2021
(Photo credit: Tom Molony)

The summary findings presented here mainly draw on a series of 520 in-depth structured qualitative interviews led by the authors with non-elite informants over two phases of data collection. During the first phase, which took place during each country’s pre-election period, the questions mostly focused on historical experiences of observation as well as general preferences about who should observe and what tasks they should undertake. It was timed to cover the weeks leading up to election day: July-August 2021 in Zambia, November-December 2021 in The Gambia, and July-August 2022 in Kenya. In the second phase, three months after each country’s elections, the interviews focused more on evaluations of the observation that had occurred at the recent elections, and the ways in which information about observers had circulated. In Zambia and The Gambia this phase was conducted in November-December 2021 and February-March 2022 respectively.

The second phase in Kenya is due to take place in November and December 2022 (when a further 80 interviews will be conducted). In Zambia and The Gambia, four geographical areas were identified to cover one urban and one rural location perceived to be pro-government, and one urban and one rural location perceived to be pro-opposition. To allow for shifting incumbent-opposition dynamics, research was conducted in six areas during the

first phase in Kenya. In all three countries, we targeted 20 pre-election and 20 post-election interviews in each of these areas, with interviewees selected to achieve a gender balance and an even spread between age groups (approximately one-third for each of the 18-35, 36-55, 56+ age categories). With assistance from researchers recruited by the partner organisations, the interviews were conducted in the languages favoured by the informants, posing open-ended questions. Separately, more targeted discussions were also undertaken with 135 individuals who either work for or engage with election observation missions. Media and social media coverage of election observation missions was monitored across each country's electoral period, and public events held by the missions were attended or followed.

Study sites and *perceived* pre-election political affiliation, in chronological order of data collection:

Zambia

Mazabuka	urban	UPND, at time in opposition
Siavonga	rural	UPND, at time in opposition
Petauke	rural	PF, at time in government
Kitwe	urban	PF, at time in government

The Gambia

Bakau	urban	UDP, opposition
Banjul	urban	NPP, government
Kiang West	rural	UDP, opposition
Niamina West	urban	NPP, government

Kenya

Wajir	rural	Azimio la Umoja
Nyeri	urban, rural	Kenya Kwanza
Samburu	rural	Azimio la Umoja
Kisumu	urban	Azimio la Umoja
Uasin Gishu	rural	Kenya Kwanza
Nakuru	urban	Kenya Kwanza

Preliminary findings

Election observation is seen as important

Support for election observation is exceptionally strong. **There is no doubt that citizens believe it is important that elections in their country are observed by dedicated election observers** (see Table 1).

Table 1: Do you think it is important that [country]'s elections are observed by dedicated election observers? (Pre-election question)

	Yes	No	Don't know
Zambia (n=80)	78	1	1
The Gambia (n=80)	78	0	2
Kenya (n=120)	116	1	3

Citizens tend to express suspicions about the electoral process in their countries and speak favourably about the potential of election observers to improve overall election quality and transparency. It is also common for respondents, particularly those who have concerns about the potentially destabilising effects of elections, to express a belief that observers can make positive contributions to maintaining peace.

When asked who benefits from the presence of election observers, **there is an overwhelming feeling in all three countries that election observation helps the citizens of the countries holding the elections** (see Table 2). There are almost no respondents who suggest that election observation missions have hidden agendas, despite this being a

common criticism in the academic literature. Rather, respondents express a strong belief that election observers are motivated by a desire for good quality elections and greater transparency (see Table 3).

Table 2: Who benefits from election observation? (Pre-election question, interviewees could provide more than one response)

	Citizens	Politicians	Observers/donors	Don't know
Zambia (n=80)	57	2	5	23
The Gambia (n=80)	66	15	1	7
Kenya (n=120)	88	39	2	13

Table 3: Why do you think observers observe the elections? (Pre-election question, interviewees could provide more than one response)

	Quality elections	Promote peace	Own interests	Don't know
Zambia (n=80)	72	7	3	8
The Gambia (n=80)	78	4	2	5
Kenya (n=120)	90	16	2	15

Knowledge about election observation is poor

Citizens in all three countries tend to have little knowledge of election observation. This is evident both when we ask respondents to share their views on what observers do, and from their responses to various other questions in our interviews. Over half of our respondents either say that they do not know anything about election observation or provide answers that are totally incorrect. Even those who have some knowledge about election observers often make smaller errors in describing their role and tend not to provide much detail. For example, a businesswoman in Bakau, The Gambia, states, “In my opinion, the work of observers is to make sure there is free and fair elections”. Similarly, Muyunda, an unemployed young man in rural Siavonga, Zambia, explains that election observers “are there to watch the election; you find them in the polling station”.

Another issue is that citizens often **conflate election observers with other actors in the electoral environment.** This occurs most commonly with electoral management body (EMB) staff and party agents. For example, a middle-aged shop worker in Nyeri, Kenya, describes observers as being those who “see that there are security guards, the line is neat, they help old people to vote. They help those when others are trying to create confusion for some voters who don’t know what to do”. Similarly, a retiree in Gambia – where marbles are used as voting tokens instead of ballot papers – is adamant that he had seen observers in his polling station: “Yes, I even argued with some of them. They gave me a token that could not fit into the ballot box. They were trying to debate with me like I don’t know how to vote”. Although rarer, election observers can also be confused with journalists, particularly those from international media houses such as Al Jazeera or the BBC, and, especially in Kenya, with pollsters.

We also find that **few citizens know the names of any specific observer groups.** When we asked respondents immediately before their national elections to name any of the main observation groups, less than one-quarter of respondents could mention a single observer mission – be it citizen, regional or international. When we asked a similar question after the elections, a large majority still could not name a single specific group. Among those that are able to provide correct answers, Zambians and Kenyans name a wide variety of citizen, regional and international groups, while Gambians tend only to name the African Union and the European Union. At no stage do respondents show an awareness that different missions can have different methodologies and priorities. Across the case studies, around one respondent in eight believes their country’s EMB conducts election observation.

Our research also suggests that **citizens tend to have difficulty identifying observers.** When asked if they had seen any during their recent elections, 44 out of 160 respondents from Zambia and The Gambia report that they saw observers, almost exclusively at the polling station. These relatively low numbers can partly be explained by respondents not actively looking out for observers when in the polling station, and also because many personnel working in polling stations lack clear identification that indicates their role. This is the case for a middle-aged housewife in Banjul, The Gambia, who states

that “There were lots of people with t-shirts, and others sitting on tables. They all looked the same to me. I just voted and left”. In particular, party agents can be hard to identify, which can account for why citizens confuse them with observers and other personnel working in the polling station. Of the 44 respondents who report seeing observers, only 15 think they know which organisation they were with.

Very little information about election observation missions’ activities and statements reaches citizens

In all three of our case study countries, we find that **respondents are generally not exposed to much news about the activities of observation missions or information relating to their statements**. For example, over half of the respondents in our post-election interviews in Zambia and The Gambia report that they had heard nothing at all about observers on either traditional or social media. When asked, many of those who said they had received information about election observers could not recall what they had heard. Others spoke about election-related news that was not directly about election observers. Our data suggests that, in both Zambia and The Gambia, **less than one-quarter of respondents actually hear news about observers**.



Image 2: Citizen and regional observers, party agents and EMB staff during the sealing of ballot boxes at close of polling, Moi Avenue Primary, Nairobi, 9 August 2022 (Photo credit: Tom Molony)

For those who appear to have genuinely encountered information about election observers, **TV and radio are the most common mediums**, followed by social media. Print media, which is not always easily available outside these countries’ capital cities, is rarely cited as a source of news on election observers. Even those respondents who report encountering information about election observers were not able to provide particularly detailed information about its content. Indeed, several of those who had heard about the deployment of observers did not hear anything subsequently. It is only a very small minority of respondents who are able to provide any accurate information about the activities of election observation missions or the content of their statements. When explaining the information that they had encountered, these respondents generally do not link it to specific observation groups but rather tend to talk about election observers in general.

During both pre- and post-election interviews, we also asked respondents if people talk about election observation in their areas. **A majority of both men and women say that election observers are not commonly discussed**, although male respondents are more likely to report talking about election observers than their female counterparts. Rather, many respondents explain that the election was discussed, but observers specifically were not. For example, one farm worker from Kenya states, “I stay here in Naivasha. Much is concentrated on who is contesting – not election observation. Maybe it will feature when that time comes. At the moment, it is like a silent topic.”

In our post-election interviews, we discussed the final reports that election observation missions tend to produce.

Respondents are generally unaware of where observer reports can be found. As one teacher in The Gambia explains, “We are aware of [the observers] being present but I have never seen any reports of their verdicts”. We also asked respondents if they would be likely to read these reports if they could access them. Although few of the respondents have a clear idea of what these documents contain, the fact that many of the respondents express a desire to read them (see Table 4 below) shows that **citizens do wish to hear more from election observation missions**. That is also apparent in replies to our post-election questions “Is there anything else you would like election observers to do in future elections?” and “Is there information that you would like to have about election observers that you do not currently know or have access to?”. In both cases, requests for more information about what election observers do, and a wish to be informed about observation missions’ key findings, are the most common responses.

Table 4: Are you likely to read observers’ more detailed reports? (Post-election question)

	Yes	No
Zambia (n=80)	60	20
The Gambia (n=80)	38	42

The fact that citizens tend to receive very little specific information about election observation missions makes it hard for them to evaluate observers’ performance

The poor circulation of information about election observers, detailed above, means that **it is difficult for citizens to hold informed views on how well election observers have performed at both recent and historical elections**. During the post-election interviews, we asked respondents to evaluate the performance of citizen, regional, and international observers during the recently completed elections (see Tables 5, 6 and 7). Across all countries, a significant number of respondents are unable to give any comment on the overall performance of observers. This is especially the case for The Gambia, where the previous regime hosted few external election observation missions. This led one teacher in urban Banjul to explain that she could not assess observers’ performance in previous polls because “I have never heard of election observers”. Our data shows that **those respondents who feel comfortable evaluating observers mostly express satisfaction with them, regardless of their origins**. However, when we asked why they had evaluated the observers in this way, very few of the respondents provide specific details about what observers had actually done during the elections.

Table 5: Do you think domestic election observers did a good job at the last election? (Post-election question)

	Did well	Mixed performance	Did poorly	Don’t know
Zambia (n=80)	46	8	3	23
The Gambia (n=80)	47	10	3	20

Table 6: Do you think regional election observers did a good job at the last election? (Post-election question)

	Did well	Mixed performance	Did poorly	Don’t know
Zambia (n=80)	45	2	9	24
The Gambia (n=80)	39	2	6	33

Table 7: Do you think international election observers did a good job at the last election? (Post-election question)

	Did well	Mixed performance	Did poorly	Don’t know
Zambia (n=80)	48	0	3	29
The Gambia (n=80)	44	0	5	31

When, in our pre-election interviews, we asked respondents to list the things that election observers had done well and poorly during previous elections, a lack of detailed knowledge was also apparent. A clear example of this relates to the controversy surrounding observation of the 2017 Kenyan elections. International observers were criticised in the media and

online due to a perception that they had signed off on an election that was later annulled by Kenya's Supreme Court.¹ It is notable that, when evaluating the past performance of election observers in Kenyan elections, only one of our 120 Kenyan respondents referred to these events. This shows that the **narratives on election observation which circulate among politically-engaged and highly-educated urbanites can be significantly different from those to which broader populations are exposed.**

Rather than referring to specific observer activities or statements, **many respondents base their evaluations of election observers' performance on more general perceptions of electoral quality.** There tends to be an assumption that the observers must have done their jobs well if elections have been peaceful and appear to have been credible. Similarly, if there were problems during the election, citizens will often assume that observers have underperformed. Indeed, the most common complaints about the past performance of observers are that they have failed to prevent specific problems during previous elections. Notably, **those areas where the most popular local candidate had lost the previous elections are where respondents are most likely to be critical of election observers.** This is reflected clearly in Kenya. A retiree in Kisumu – a stronghold of supporters for Raila Odinga, who failed in his 2017 bid for the presidency – argues “Raila didn't win, so they [election observers] were no good!”. This position contrasts with that of Kenneth, from Uasin Gishu – the home county of William Ruto, winning vice-presidential candidate in 2017. When asked if election observers had performed well in previous elections, he replies: “Yes! The candidates we wanted were elected!”.

Citizens' expectations for observation activities often differ from common practices

During our interviews, we asked a number of questions designed to solicit respondents' preferences for the focus and activities of observation missions. One key finding is that **it is common for citizens to believe that it is within observers' mandate to intervene in the electoral process.** In part this can be explained by the tendency for citizens to confuse observers with other electoral actors. It also reflects a lack of awareness of observers' inability to interfere in the electoral process. As a result, respondents often express disappointment when they witness or hear about problems with an election but do not see an immediate response from observers.

Another finding is that **citizens believe that it is most important for observers to focus on voting and counting.** Throughout the interviews, citizens rarely refer to election observers' work that is conducted outside polling stations and tallying centres, and they seldom mention observation of the campaign environment and other pre-election matters. It is also rare for respondents to argue that election observers are overfocused on election day, despite this being a common criticism in the academic literature.

Citizens also want election observers to inform them in clear terms both about who won the election, and whether it was fair or not. This comes across clearly in several parts of our interviews, both when discussing statements and the roles of observers more generally. Examples of this include a middle-aged hotel worker in Nakuru, Kenya, who states “they must say who has won and who hasn't”, and a teacher-cum-taxi driver in Mazabuka, Zambia, who offers that getting clear verdicts is “the whole purpose of having observers”. This desire is often expressed as the wish for observers to declare, in binary terms, whether the elections were ‘free and fair’ or ‘not free and fair’. The phrase ‘free and fair’ is offered by around one-in-six respondents during interviews, even though it did not appear in any of the interview questions. With most credible observation missions not now using ‘free and fair’ in their public statements, its popular use by citizens when referring to elections and election observation indicates the term's continuing salience in popular discourse. **When asked when they would most like to hear from observers, the most common response is immediately after the election results are announced,** which is after most missions have released their preliminary statements.

Many respondents soften their desire for a clear verdict when presented with a hypothetical scenario where observers' statements may heighten the risk of violence (see Table 8). In both Zambia and Kenya, majorities want observation missions to reveal all their findings irrespective of the consequences. However, in The Gambia, responses are

1. This perception was not entirely accurate. For more details see Molony, Thomas and Robert Macdonald, 'Re-Evaluating International Observation of Kenya's 2017 Elections', *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 13 (4), (2019), pp. 601-620.

more evenly balanced. There is also little gendered difference in Gambian responses, while in Zambia and Kenya, women were more likely than men to want observers to avoid public statements that might heighten the risk of violence. Although not prompted to offer solutions for how observers might share their sensitive information without causing violence, some women suggest that this might be dealt with behind closed doors. For example, a hairstylist in Nakuru, Kenya – an area that experienced considerable post-election violence in 2007-08 – states: “I don’t think they should be too clear if there’s a risk of violence. It’s better they don’t say it publicly – maybe involve the authorities or a group concerned – than risk violence by saying it out publicly”.

Table 8: Do you think it is best for observers to give clear verdicts on the quality of elections that they have observed if they are concerned about the risk of violence? (Pre-election question; F=female, M=male)

	Yes	No	Don't know
Zambia (n=80)	F16 M35	F12 M10	F5 M4
The Gambia (n=80)	F20 M17	F19 M22	F1 M0
Kenya (n=120)	F25 M42	F25 M12	F8 M6

Despite knowledge gaps, respondents often have strong views about who should be conducting election observation

During the pre-election interviews, we asked respondents who they thought should be observing their elections (see Table 9). Overall, international election observers tend to be preferred over their domestic counterparts, but that pattern is not evident in The Gambia.

Table 9: Who do you think should be observing [country]’s elections? (Pre-election question, unclear responses not shown)

	Citizen	International	Regional	A combination
Zambia (n=80)	13	37	2	25
The Gambia (n=80)	40	12	1	24
Kenya (n=120)	16	74	18	19

The explanations from those who choose international observers generally highlight a perception that they are more impartial than citizen observers, who are often viewed as being biased or corruptible. The factors that appear to make these perceptions more common in Zambia and Kenya than in The Gambia include political polarisation, a generally high perception of political corruption, and the prominence of ethnicity in politics, all of which appear to reduce confidence in citizen observers. For those who prefer citizen observers, patriotic explanations relating to a need for countries to take responsibility for their own affairs are most common. Among those respondents choosing a mixture of different observer types, a desire for maximum transparency is often stressed, as is the perception that international observers are likely to improve the contribution of citizen observers if they were to work together.

We also asked respondents if they would be more likely to trust citizen observers if they were selected from religious organisations (see Table 10). For this question responses are mixed. Female respondents and those living in rural areas are more likely to trust citizen observers if they come from religious organisations than men and urban respondents.

Table 10: If domestic observers in [country] came from religious organisations, would this affect how you view them or if you trust them? (Pre-election question)

	Would not trust them	No difference	Would trust them more	Religion should not be mixed with politics
Zambia (n=80)	36	10	31	0
The Gambia (n=80)	18	4	37	16
Kenya (n=120)	33	6	67	3

Further Information

The authors can provide a presentation and individual discussion on any of the issues covered in this working paper.

Contact Thomas.Molony@ed.ac.uk.

Readers may also be interested in our second working paper, 'Media Representations of Election Observation in Africa – preliminary findings' by the same authors, available at <https://www.sps.ed.ac.uk/lmeo>.



Cover image: Regional election observers in Hargeisa, Somaliland, 29 May 2021. Observers on the mission were aware that in this instance the term 'monitor' on their bibs should instead have been printed as 'observer'. (Photo credit: Richard Harper, adapted by Adam Cavill.)

