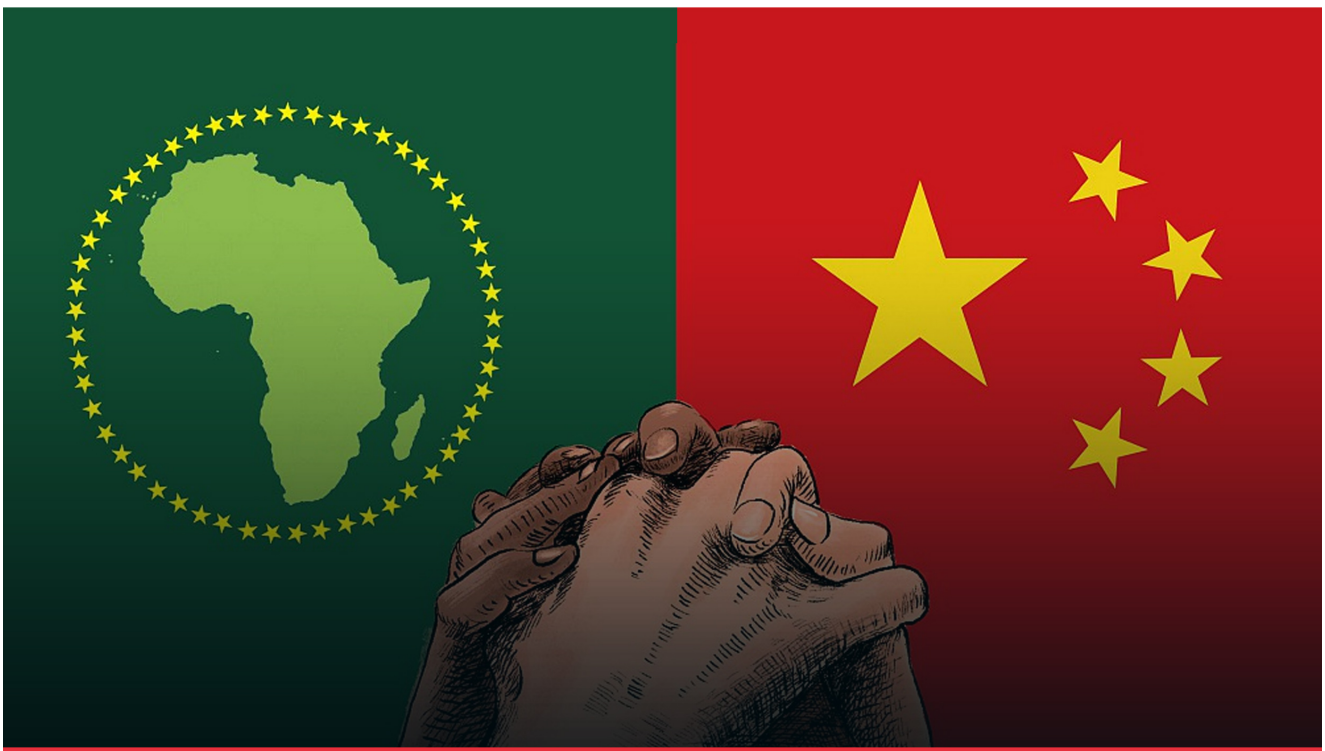


# The Year of African Elections & Why China Should Not Lose Sight



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In November of this year, the United States (US) will head to the polls for an all-but-certain rematch between Joe Biden and Donald Trump. Chinese leaders and policymakers will undoubtedly be closely watching the outcome of the US elections, as it may have [implications for the seemingly fragile US-China relations](#) going forward. China's concerns stem from the fact that the issue of China—whether to contain or confront it—has deeply become a central theme in the US election campaign, with both Biden and Trump consistently [raising the stakes against China](#).

However, the reality is that the US is not the sole nation with an election this year that could have some implications for China's global political economy. In Africa, where recent events indicate [a decreasing commitment from China](#) towards the continent, over two dozen African countries are heading to the polls this year to elect their next generational leaders, which could have implications for China's standing on the African continent.

So, while the potential outcome of the US election holds significant geopolitical implications that could greatly affect China's global interests, Chinese policymakers should not overlook the growing dynamics in African domestic politics and the potential ramifications of African election on African countries' future interactions with China.

## **Africa's 2024 Elections Calendar**

Africa faces a packed [election schedule in 2024](#), with 25 countries scheduled for presidential, general, or local elections throughout the year. The inference is that more than 46% of African countries will be participating in democratic processes to elect leaders at both national and local levels for the upcoming terms. Nineteen (19) of these elections are either presidential or general elections, with roughly two-thirds of them scheduled for the last quarter of the year.

Notable successes have already been witnessed in early elections conducted by Comoros and Senegal. However, Mali's presidential election, initially planned for February, has been [postponed by the Junta](#) citing 'technical reasons.' Despite the glitch in the African elections calendar caused by Mali's election postponement and the likelihood of some of these elections being uncompetitive and/or considered not credible, the over two dozen elections scheduled across the continent may, [as argued by some analysts](#), provide the best opportunity for Africa to strengthen its multiparty system and transition back to constitutional governance after a series of coups in recent years.

While many of these elections may receive less global attention, some will be keenly watched by the global community due to their competitiveness and the possibility of former Presidents returning to the helm of government. The first is in Ghana, where the exiting of the current president due to constitutional term limits is expected to result in a contest between the current Vice President, Mahamudu Bawumia of the governing New Patriotic Party, and John Mahama, the former president from 2012 to 2017 of the opposition National Democratic Congress. The second intriguing case is in South Africa, where Jacob Zuma, the former embattled President who [resigned in 2018 after intense pressure](#) from his own party (the ANC), has been [cleared by the court to contest the country's general elections](#) on the ticket of his newly formed uMkhonto weSizwe Party (MK).

**Table 1: Africa's 2024 Election Calendar (Source: EISA, updated April 2024)**

Country	Type of Election	Date
Algeria	President and Council of the Union	7 Sep
Botswana	National Assembly	October
Burkina Faso	Presidential	July
Cape Verde	Local	September or December
Chad	President	6 May
Comoros	President and Governors	Held 14 Jan
Ethiopia	President	2024
Gabon	Constitutional Referendum	Nov
Ghana	President and National Assembly	7 Dec
Guinea Bissau	President	Nov
Libya	Presidential, Parliamentary and Local	2024
Madagascar	National Assembly	29 May
Malawi	National Assembly and Local	May
Mali	Presidential	Postponed from 24 February
Mauritania	President	22 June
Mauritius	National Assembly	30 November
Mozambique	President, National Assembly and Provincial	9 October
Namibia	President and National Assembly	27 November
Rwanda	President and Chamber of Deputies	15 July
Senegal	President	Held 24 March
Somaliland	President	13 November
South Africa	National Assembly and Provincial Legislatures	29 May
South Sudan	President, National Assembly and Local	December
Togo	Legislative and Regional	29 April
Tunisia	President, National Council and Districts	October

## Why China Should Not Lose Sight

The raft of elections across Africa this year serves as a referendum on the present and future for the [burgeoning young generation in the region](#). Senegal has set the tone by electing a 44-year-old little-known candidate in a ‘[dramatic prison-to-palace rise](#)’, largely propelled by the anger of the youth towards the ruling elite. While Senegal’s presidential election was largely dominated by President [Sall’s decision to delay the election](#) and the [incarceration of popular opposition leaders](#), such as Ousmane Sonko and his protégé Bassirou Diomaye Faye, the underlying factor contributing to the surprising outcome was the growing frustration among the youth caused by widening economic and social inequalities.

Additionally, the strategic decision of the opposition to drum up support by presenting themselves as a generational shift from Senegal’s old political order played a significant role. Most notably, the opposition’s [criticism of Senegal’s elites’ cosy relationship with France](#), the country’s former colonial power, resonated strongly with supporters.

Over the past few years, both politicians and military juntas, supported by popular sentiment, have embarked on a quest to reshape their country's relations with major powers they perceive as exploitative. Citing the overbearing influence of France, for instance, countries in the Sahel and West Africa such as Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Guinea have all witnessed a [surge in anti-France sentiments](#), posing a threat to France's interests across Africa.

While a domino effect akin to [France's current challenges and shrinking footprint in Africa](#) is improbable for China, the abrupt deterioration of France's relationships with some of its long-term partners should nonetheless caution China regarding Africa's domestic politics. Consequently, any perception held by Chinese policymakers of Africa as monolithic, or the notion of Africa as a relatively cohesive coalition in its partnership with China, should be reevaluated. Such views risk overlooking the growing and substantial concerns toward Chinese partnerships in numerous African countries.

Similar to the grievances directed towards France for its perceived overbearing influence over certain African ruling elites, China has faced similar allegations of fostering close ties with African ruling elites or [propping up distrusted and entrenched ruling parties](#). Many African politicians have since turned the [China issue into a political and electoral matter](#). This trend has garnered considerable popular support across several African countries, both in the past and present.

## **Final Thoughts**

Few, if any, in China would worry about an African election and its potential implications for China. However, given the lessons from France's predicaments and the rising manifestations of anti-Chinese sentiments across Africa, the outcomes of African elections should interest Chinese policymakers in terms of how they may shape China's relations with Africa moving forward.

Also, the success of this year's anticipated Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) summit will largely depend on the success and outcomes of Africa's elections as the summit is likely to see a host of new faces from Africa with different or new policy orientations. Ensuring that the China-Africa bond remains strong beyond the year of the African elections is thus important and should be the priority for both China and their African partners.

Based on the foregoing, China should be concerned not only about the outcome of the US presidential election (whether Trump returns or Biden remains) but also about the potential outcomes of the various elections happening across Africa.



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