

The GLOCEPS

Webinar Series | Week 2 Report

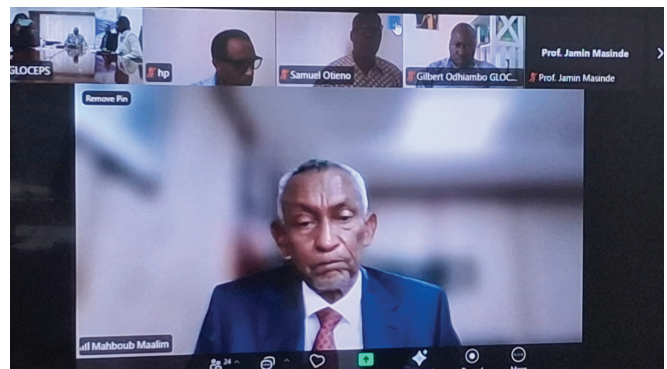
Theme: Institutionalizing the Raila Odinga Legacy: Constitutionalism, Democratic Reform, and the Realization of African Union Agenda 2063

Overview

The Global Centre for Policy and Strategy (GLOCEPS) continued its ten-week webinar series on Institutionalizing the Raila Odinga Legacy: Constitutionalism, Democratic Reform, and the Realization of African Union Agenda 2063, with the second session focusing on the intersection of political decentralisation, devolution, and constitutionalism in an era of populism. The session forms part of a broader scholarly initiative reviewing 21 working papers prepared for a Special Issue of the GLOCEPS Eastern Africa Journal for Policy and Strategy.

The discussion centered on two working papers. The first, "Political Decentralisation and the Quest for Good Governance in Kenya: Institutionalising the Raila Odinga Legacy in Democratic Reforms", by Dr. Samuel Mwiti Njagi, interrogates the extent to which devolution has translated reform ideals into governance outcomes. The second, "Constitutionalism in an Era of Populism: Lessons from Raila Odinga's Reform Struggles for Strengthening Democratic Institutions in Africa", by Mr. Isaac Aliowaku and Dr. Japheth Kwiringira, examines the role of populist mobilization in advancing or constraining constitutionalism.

Taken together, the papers address a central analytical concern: how reformist political visions are institutionalized within complex and often fragile democratic systems.



Strategic Context

Amb. (Eng.) Mahboub M. Maalim, on behalf of Brig. (Rtd) Wilson Boinett, situated the session within Africa's broader struggle to consolidate constitutional governance, accountable leadership, and inclusive political systems. He emphasized that institutionalizing reformist legacies is not merely historical reflection but a strategic necessity for advancing the African Union's Agenda 2063 vision of "The Africa We Want."

Dr. Kenedy Asembo, Executive Director of GLOCEPS, highlighted the urgency of the discussion, noting that democratic institutions across Africa are increasingly strained by rising populism, declining public trust, economic inequality, youth unemployment, and political polarization. He framed the webinar series as a platform for bridging scholarship and policy by refining ideas into actionable governance solutions.

The session was moderated by Mr. Samuel Otieno, with discussants Amb. Salim Salim, Prof. Noah Midamba, Dr. Mumo Nzau, and Mr. Moronge Obonyo,





whose interventions played a critical role in deepening the analytical rigor of the discussions.

Key Highlights: The Promise and Paradox of Devolution

Dr. Samuel Mwit Njagi positioned devolution as the most significant structural expression of Raila Odinga's reformist vision. He traced its evolution from the contested majimbo debates of the 1960s to its constitutional entrenchment in 2010, emphasizing how the creation of 47 county governments has reshaped Kenya's political and administrative landscape by bringing governance closer to citizens.

The paper identifies key gains, including enhanced political participation, improved access to services, and greater visibility of local development priorities. The paper argues that Raila Odinga positively shaped the pillars of good governance. However, it also surfaces a governance paradox: while power and resources have been decentralized, many structural weaknesses of centralized governance have been reproduced at the county level.

Persistent challenges include:

- Fiscal dependency on national transfers.
- Elite capture and localized patronage systems.
- Weak administrative and technical capacity.
- Continued political interference from the national executive.



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In the second paper, Mr. Isaac Aliowaku and Dr. Japheth Kwiringira advance the concept of "reformist populism", describing a form of mobilization that operates within constitutional frameworks to strengthen rather than undermine democratic institutions. Using Raila Odinga as a case study, they argue that opposition-led mobilization through protests, litigation, and negotiation can reinforce institutional accountability when anchored in legal and civic processes. This process can be achieved through institutional pressure and engagement.

However, the paper also implicitly raises tensions around institutional durability, particularly the risks of over-reliance on individual political actors to sustain reform momentum.

Reflections from Discussants

On Political Decentralisation and Devolution

Amb. Salim Salim affirmed the paper's conceptual strength, noting that it effectively captures devolution as a corrective to historically centralized and exclusionary governance systems. He linked its achievements, including expanded participation and improved service delivery, to long-standing reform struggles.

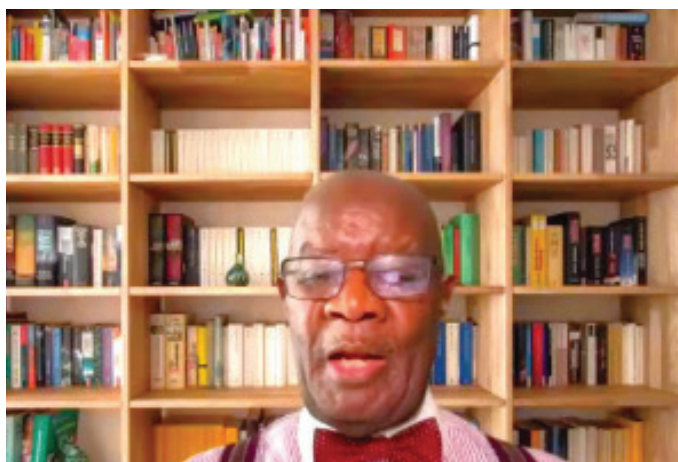
He, however, critiqued the paper on the basis that it assumed that decentralization leads to good governance. He argued that decentralization had also exacerbated certain challenges, such as corruption, political patronage, and ethnicity,





at the county level. He called the authors to look at how it has strengthened or weakened accountability.

Dr. Mumo Nzau introduced a more critical perspective, emphasizing the need to ground the analysis within key devolution scholars, including works by Prof. Peter Wanyande, Prof. Goran Hyden, Prof. Korwa Adar, Prof. Outa Uyungi, and Prof. Gobran Iden. He stressed that without this engagement, the paper risks analytical isolation. He further called for a more critical treatment of Raila Odinga's legacy by examining the gap between aspirational reform rhetoric and implementation realities. He underscored the importance of integrating Odinga's own positions, particularly his emphasis on fiscal decentralization and the principle that resources must follow functions while avoiding uncritical endorsement. He underscored that the paper should look at the empirical dimensions of governance, including responsive and responsible leadership, citizen oversight, and social reciprocity. Bringing the voice of Raila Odinga to the paper was also cited as critical. This could be through integrating notable quotes from Raila Odinga.



On Constitutionalism and Populism

Prof. Noah Midamba commended the conceptual contribution of distinguishing reformist from authoritarian populism, noting that the paper provides a useful framework for understanding how political mobilization can reinforce, rather than

undermine, constitutional order. He noted that the paper should look at how to balance popular participation with constitutional safeguards. This is because, in some instances, populism erodes the checks and balances of the system by concentrating authority in the executive and weakening other arms of government such as the legislature.

Mr. Moronge Obonyo provided a nuanced review, offering critical perspectives and recommendations for strengthening Paper Two:

- **Conceptual Insight:** The paper presents a new dimension to arguments about populism. While populism has often been criticized, particularly from liberal-democratic traditions, Obonyo notes that in the African context, Raila Odinga's populist politics contributed to sustained democratic and constitutional reform rather than undermining governance.
- **Methodology:** The paper relies on secondary sources and covers a wide range of academic literature. Obonyo recommends including seminal works such as Fareed Zakaria's *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad* to enrich the analysis of populism's effects on democracy in transitional contexts.
- **Analysis:** The paper convincingly argues that opposition populism's effectiveness is context-dependent, requiring robust legal frameworks, responsible institutions, and an active civil society. Obonyo suggests a deeper exploration of how these forces intersected with Odinga's populism, including historical events like the 1982 coup.
- **Errata:** Page 13 mischaracterizes Jerry Rawlings as an opposition figure in 1980s Ghana.
- **Risks and Limitations:** Obonyo emphasized the danger of over-personalization of reforms and over-reliance on individual political actors. The





paper should explicitly address these risks to provide a more balanced assessment of reformist populism's sustainability.

Plenary Reflections On Devolution and Good Governance

Participants reframed the evaluation of devolution from constitutional design to governance outcomes, raising fundamental questions:

- Has devolution genuinely empowered citizens or simply redistributed elite competition?
- Has accountability improved, or has corruption been decentralized?
- Is Kenya experiencing devolution in form or in function?

Tangible gains, particularly in service delivery and political inclusion, were acknowledged, but participants emphasized persistent constraints, including corruption, elite capture, weak oversight systems, and fiscal dependency.

The Building Bridges Initiative (BBI) was debated as a potential corrective framework. While some viewed it as an effort to deepen devolution and stabilize governance, others interpreted it as an elite political settlement with possible centralizing effects.

On Populism and Constitutionalism

Participants emphasized that the impact of populism is context-dependent, shaped by institutional strength,

economic inequality, and civic capacity. While reformist populism can catalyze institutional change, its long-term effectiveness depends on whether reforms are embedded within durable institutions.

Key concerns included:

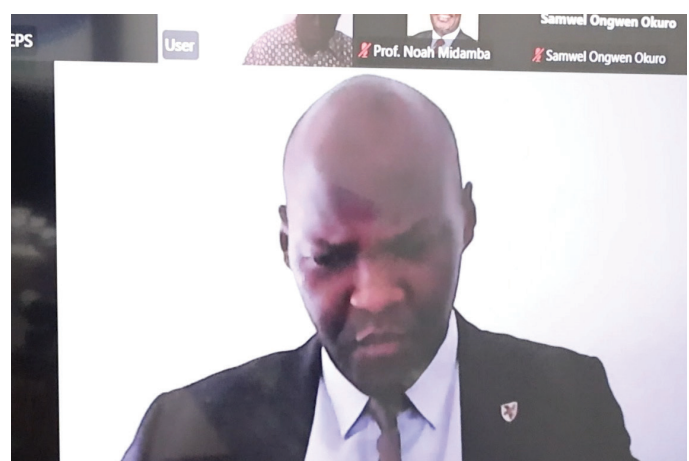
- The sustainability of reforms achieved through political pressure

- The balance between popular mobilization and constitutional constraints
- The risk of institutional erosion in the absence of strong safeguards

Participants identified pathways for strengthening institutional resilience, including judicial independence, electoral integrity, political party development, and civic education. They also noted the dual role of funding institutions in supporting governance reforms while raising concerns about dependency and external influence.

Comparative Insights from Asian Tiger Economies

Comparisons with South Korea and Singapore highlighted that successful governance reforms depend less on constitutional design and more on institutional discipline, bureaucratic capacity, and long-term policy coherence. These examples underscore the importance of strengthening fiscal management, accountability systems, and performance-based governance at both national and county levels.



Raila Odinga's Voice on Devolution and Climate Change

Participants emphasized the need to more explicitly integrate Raila Odinga's voice into both papers. His positions on devolution, fiscal decentralization, and constitutionalism were highlighted as critical to understanding the normative foundations of the



reform agenda. Notably, his framing of devolution as irreversible, his insistence that resources must follow functions, and his linkage of devolution to climate resilience and local environmental governance were identified as key contributions that require deeper analytical integration.

Key Areas for Strengthening the Papers

For Paper One: Political Decentralisation and the Quest for Good Governance

- Strengthen the theoretical framework by explaining why decentralization does not automatically produce accountability.
- Situate the analysis within existing Kenyan scholarship.
- Enhance methodological clarity and incorporate citizen-level data.
- Apply a balanced analytical lens, capturing both gains and limitations.
- Integrate Raila Odinga's contributions critically, not descriptively.
- Draw structured comparative lessons from international cases.
- Examine the role of political parties in shaping county-level governance.
- Anchor analysis explicitly on leadership, citizen oversight, and social reciprocity.

For Paper Two: Constitutionalism in an Era of Populism

- Clarify and operationalize the concept of reformist populism, incorporating Obonyo's insights on distinguishing it from authoritarian populism and specifying context-dependent factors.

- Deepen analysis of institutional safeguards and resilience.
- Examine the role and implications of funding institutions for sustaining reformist agendas.
- Strengthen comparative political economy analysis, including international lessons and historical analogues.
- Critically assess the BBI as a reform instrument.
- Address political party institutionalization and its influence on reform sustainability.
- Integrate Raila Odinga's voice more systematically, including positions on fiscal decentralization, constitutionalism, and reformist populism.
- Analyze risks of over-personalization of reform and reliance on individual political actors.
- Explore interactions between political actors and civil society.
- Incorporate methodological rigor: include secondary and primary sources, historical context, and seminal works such as Fareed Zakaria's *The Future of Freedom*.
- Correct factual errors and clarify historical references (e.g., Jerry Rawlings' role in Ghana).
- Develop clearer frameworks for balancing populism and constitutionalism.

Closing Reflections and Way Forward

In his closing remarks, Amb. Solomon Maina emphasized that the webinar series provides a critical platform for rigorous peer review, analytical refinement, and policy translation. A key insight emerging from the session is that reform success is not automatic but conditional.





Both devolution and populist mobilization demonstrate transformative potential, but their effectiveness depends on institutional strength, fiscal autonomy, political accountability, and sustained citizen engagement.

The legacy of Raila Odinga, therefore, emerges as both aspirational and instructive, highlighting the possibilities of reform while underscoring the limits of change without strong institutions.

As the webinar series progresses, it will continue to interrogate how Africa can move from reform

frameworks to institutionalized outcomes, in line with the aspirations of Agenda 2063.



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