

POLITICAL ECONOMY ANALYSIS

The Reformed Elections for Enhanced
Democracy and Inclusion
(REDI) Programme



Abridged Report



Disclaimer

This Political Economy Analysis Report presents a comprehensive assessment of the political, institutional, and socio-economic dynamics shaping Kenya's democratic and electoral landscape. The report analyses the formal and informal structures, actors, incentives, and power relations that influence governance, electoral processes, and citizen participation, providing strategic evidence to guide adaptive programming, strengthen conflict-sensitive implementation, and inform policy engagement under the Reformed Elections for Enhanced Democracy and Inclusion (REDI) Programme.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Kenya has implemented extensive electoral reforms since the 2007/08 post-election crisis, including constitutional, legal, institutional and technological changes intended to strengthen electoral integrity, accountability and inclusion. However, key challenges—including political polarisation, fragile public trust, electoral violence, underrepresentation of marginalised groups and recurring disputes—persist because reforms have largely strengthened the formal electoral architecture without changing the underlying political incentives and informal practices that shape political behaviour. Elections remain high-stakes contests for access to state power, resources and economic opportunities, while ethnic mobilisation, patronage networks and elite bargains continue to influence how formal institutions operate. The Political Economy Analysis therefore concludes that effective reform must be politically informed and focus on feasible interventions that improve transparency, accountability, inclusion, citizen engagement, communication, technology and dispute preparedness while recognising the interests and incentives of powerful actors. For the REDI Programme, this means adopting an adaptive, politically informed approach focused on rebuilding public trust, strengthening accountability and citizen participation, promoting inclusion, and addressing conditions that contribute to electoral violence.

Kenya has undertaken one of the most extensive electoral reforms over the last two decades. Following the 2007/08 post-election crisis, the country introduced major constitutional, legal, institutional and technological reforms aimed at improving electoral integrity, reducing political violence, and strengthening accountability, among other objectives. These reforms culminated in the Constitution of Kenya 2010, the establishment of independent institutions, expanded judicial oversight of elections, a more elaborate electoral legal framework, and significant investment in election technology to ensure elections are free, fair, and credible.



Despite these reforms and substantial investments by government, development partners, civil society organisations and electoral institutions, many electoral challenges continue to recur.

Persistent Challenges Despite Electoral Reforms

01



Electoral contests remain highly polarised and disputed

02



Public trust in electoral and governance institutions remains fragile

03



Political violence and tension continue to emerge around electoral periods

04



Women, youth, persons with disabilities and other marginalised groups remain underrepresented

05



Disputes over electoral outcomes continue to dominate public debate

This Political Economy Analysis was commissioned by Act! under the Reformed Elections for Enhanced Democracy and Inclusion (REDI) Programme to understand the deeper political, institutional, economic and other factors that shape Kenya's electoral governance and outcomes. This is a problem-driven PEA seeking to answer the question:

Why Do Electoral Problems Persist Despite Sustained Investments In Electoral Reforms, Laws, Institutions and Electoral Management Systems?

The analysis finds that Kenya's reforms have improved the formal architecture of elections but have not fundamentally changed the underlying incentives that shape political behaviour.

Electoral competition remains organised around access to state power, public resources, public appointments, development opportunities and economic influence. This makes elections high-stakes contests in which winning and losing are perceived to have far-reaching consequences for political elites, communities and interest groups.

The report further finds that formal institutions operate within a powerful informal context shaped by ethnic mobilisation, patronage networks, and elite bargains.

These informal institutions often influence how formal laws are applied, enforced or undermined. As a result, legal and institutional reforms have often improved electoral administration without changing the political behaviour that undermines credible, peaceful and inclusive elections.

The study also shows that public trust and confidence in key electoral institutions remain low, and pose a central challenge.

Even when institutions perform their formal mandates, perceptions of bias, selective enforcement, political capture or lack of transparency can undermine legitimacy. Trust in electoral institutions, political parties, Parliament and security agencies remains fragile, although institutions such as religious leaders, traditional leaders and some CSOs enjoy comparatively higher levels of confidence.

The study concludes that reform feasibility is dependent on political incentives, especially that the main challenges contributing to problems in elections are linked to how political elites view reforms – they undermine reforms that threaten their interests.

Some reforms may be normatively attractive but politically difficult because they threaten entrenched interests, redistribute political opportunity or affect political financing. More feasible reforms are those that improve transparency, preparedness, inclusion, communication, dispute readiness, technology accountability and citizen engagement without immediately threatening the core interests of powerful actors.

For the REDI Programme, the study underlines that electoral reform programming should be politically informed, adaptive and sensitive to incentives, interests and informal rules.

REDI's relevance lies especially in its focus on rebuilding trust, strengthening citizen engagement, supporting inclusion, strengthening accountability ecosystems, and paying attention to conditions that contribute to violence. Nonetheless, the programme will need to continuously adapt to Kenya's changing political environment.

“Kenya's electoral reforms have strengthened the rules and institutions of elections, but have yet to transform the political incentives, informal power networks and fragile public trust that shape how those reforms work in practice.”

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Kenya's electoral system has undergone significant transformation since the return to multiparty politics in the early 1990s and especially after the 2007/08 post-election crisis. The crisis exposed serious weaknesses in electoral management, underscoring the need for comprehensive constitutional reform.

The Constitution of Kenya 2010 sought to address some of the historical challenges. It introduced devolution, strengthened checks and balances, expanded rights, created independent commissions and entrenched principles of transparency, accountability, inclusion and fairness in electoral governance. Parliament subsequently enacted electoral laws to operationalise the Constitution and strengthen electoral administration.

However, Kenya's electoral challenges have persisted. The 2013, 2017 and 2022 presidential elections all generated disputes, although in different ways and with varying levels of intensity. The 2022 elections demonstrated progress in terms of relative peace and judicial dispute resolution, but also exposed vulnerabilities in electoral management, public communication, results transmission, institutional cohesion and trust in IEBC.

Looking towards the 2027 electoral cycle, Kenya faces a complex electoral environment. This is marked by delayed institutional reforms, late reconstitution of the electoral commission, emerging issues around voter registration, heightened youth awareness, growing public concern over the cost of living and governance, and an increasingly influential digital information ecosystem.

It is within this context that REDI was designed. The programme seeks to support peaceful, credible and inclusive elections by strengthening national cohesion and stability, electoral institutions and stakeholder engagement, citizen participation, and election monitoring and observation.

Purpose and Objectives of the PEA

The purpose of the Political Economy Analysis is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the formal and informal political, institutional, economic and social factors that shape Kenya's electoral landscape. The study seeks to identify the actors, interests, incentives, power dynamics, opportunities and constraints that influence electoral governance, democratic participation, conflict dynamics and prospects for reform.

Analytical Framework and Methodology

The study adopted a problem-driven PEA approach. The central organising question is: **Why do challenges in Kenya's elections persist despite investments in electoral reforms, including improvements in policies, laws, institutions and practice?**

THE ANALYSIS FOCUSED ON SIX INTERRELATED DIMENSIONS

01

Elite Bargains

Elite bargains, including the formation of coalitions, patronage dynamics, ethnic mobilisation and negotiated political settlements.



02

Rules of The Game

Analysed the formal and informal rules of the game, especially how electoral laws and institutions interact with ethnicity, patronage, campaign financing and informal power relations.



03

Actor Power and Interests

Mapped actor power and interests to identify who can enable or block credible elections and why



04

Electoral Conflict Dynamics

Examined electoral conflict dynamics, including triggers, drivers and early warning issues



05

Inclusion Lens

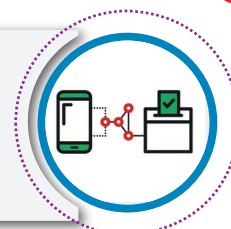
Applied an inclusion lens to assess barriers affecting women, youth, persons with disabilities and marginalised groups.



06

Digital Ecosystem

Examined the digital ecosystem, including misinformation, disinformation, online mobilisation, cyber harassment and the role of technology in



The methodology combined desk review, key informant interviews, focus group discussions, expert consultations and validation processes. Key informant interviews engaged actors from electoral institutions, civil society, media, academia, observer groups, and community groups.

Focus Group Discussions were conducted in Nairobi, Uasin Gishu, Murang'a and Kajiado counties to reflect regional diversity, political competitiveness, urban-rural dynamics, conflict risks and participation barriers.

FEATURES OF KENYA'S ELECTORAL POLITICAL ECONOMY



01 | Elections as High- Stakes Contests

A central finding of the PEA is that Kenya's elections are high-stakes contests because political power is widely perceived as the route to accessing state resources. It is also the route to public appointments, development projects, economic opportunities and influence. This perception shapes the behaviour of political elites, parties, financiers and voters.

Elections have become more than periodic mechanisms for choosing leaders. They have become struggles over access to and distribution of power, inclusion, and access to economic opportunities. This explains why electoral competition is intense, polarised and resistant to purely technical and administrative reforms.



02 | Ethnicity and Coalition Politics

Ethnicity remains a powerful organising framework in Kenyan politics. Political elites mobilise communities around ethnic and regional identities and then negotiate coalitions capable of winning national power. Since no single ethnic group can win the presidency alone, political success depends on coalition-building.

This produces electoral blocs that are often of near-equal numerical strength resulting in razor-thin margins of victory in presidential elections. Presidential elections tend to be closely fought and decided by narrow margins. Narrow margins heighten suspicion, increase incentives to contest results and make losing coalitions more likely to question the legitimacy of outcomes.

Issue-based politics is evolving but has not replaced ethnicity. Although governance concerns, youth mobilisation, economic grievances and issue-based politics are becoming more visible, they have not yet displaced ethnicity as the dominant organising logic of electoral competition.



03 | Elections and Economic Performance

The PEA notes that elections tend to affect economic performance. Growth often slows around election periods due to uncertainty, fear of violence, delayed investment and disruptions in economic activity.

In some cases, growth recovers after political settlements are reached and elite pacts restore predictability. This reinforces the importance of political stability but also highlights the costs of electoral uncertainty.



04 | Elite Bargains and Governance

Elite bargains are a recurring feature of Kenya's political system. They include the 2008 Grand Coalition Government, the 2018 Handshake and more recent Broad-Based Governance arrangements. Such bargains often emerge after contested elections or periods of political tension.

Elite bargains can reduce political tensions, but they also carry democratic costs by weakening accountability. Such pacts limit opposition oversight, reduce accountability shift political negotiations outside formal institutions and reinforce public perceptions that elections do not fully determine political outcomes.

This creates a paradox: elite bargains may stabilise the country in the short term while weakening democratic accountability in the long term.

FORMAL AND INFORMAL INSTITUTIONS

Formal Electoral Architecture

Kenya has a dense formal electoral context; there are many formal rules and the deeper challenge is the persistent tension between formal rules and informal political incentives. The Constitution provides the foundation for electoral governance and establishes principles of transparency, accountability, fairness, inclusiveness and credibility. Electoral governance is further guided by statutes such as the Elections Act, Political Parties Act, IEBC Act, Election Campaign Financing Act, Leadership and Integrity Act and related regulations.

There are several institutions in the electoral ecosystem.

The formal institutions include the IEBC, the Judiciary, the Office of the Registrar of Political Parties, Parliament, the National Cohesion and Integration Commission, security agencies, the ODP, the EACC, the Office of the Data Protection Commissioner and the National Treasury.

These institutions collectively support voter registration, election management, political party regulation, nomination dispute resolution, electoral dispute settlement, election security, prosecution of election offences, candidate integrity vetting, data protection and financing of the electoral process.

Informal Rules of the Game

Alongside formal institutions are a powerful set of informal rules and practices. These include ethnicity, patronage networks, informal campaign financing, political brokerage, elite bargaining, negotiated compliance and selective enforcement.

These informal rules shape the electoral cycle in several ways. During voter registration, citizens may be mobilised through ethnic, regional or generational appeals rather than purely civic arguments. During party nominations, local elites influence candidate selection through money, clan structures, patronage and proximity to party leaders. During campaigns, development promises, public appointments, and promises of state projects become part of mobilisation. During polling and tallying, suspicion of institutional bias is often heightened by memories of previous disputed elections. After elections, elite bargains may be used to manage conflict but can also weaken formal accountability.

Actors, Power and Interests

The PEA emphasises that actors in Kenya's electoral ecosystem differ in power, interests and incentives. Those with high power do not always have strong incentives to support credible elections, while those with a strong interest in reform often lack the power to shape outcomes.



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Figure 1: Indicative interests associated with actors in each power / interest quadrant

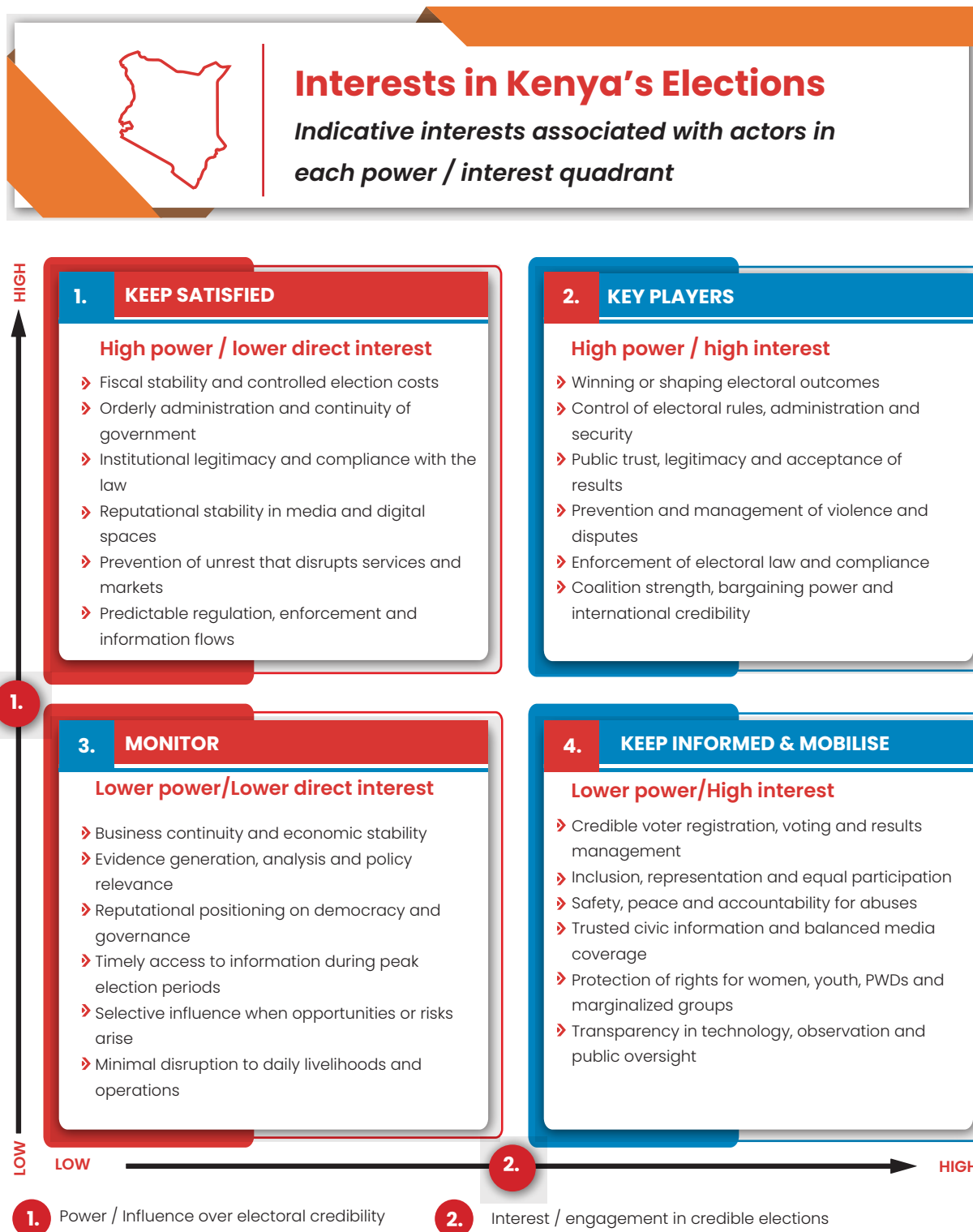
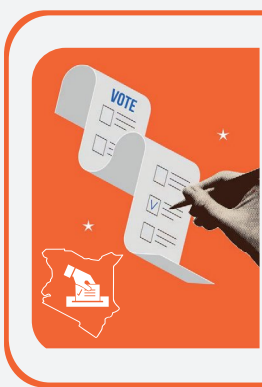


Figure 2: Indicative interests associated with actors in each power / interest quadrant

Key message: Electoral behaviour is shaped not only by who holds power, but by the interests and incentives each group brings to the process.

Note: Positioning is indicative. Interests reflect the incentives, priorities and concerns that shape behaviour around electoral credibility.

CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL DYNAMICS AND CHALLENGES

Electoral Reform Has Not Changed Underlying Incentives

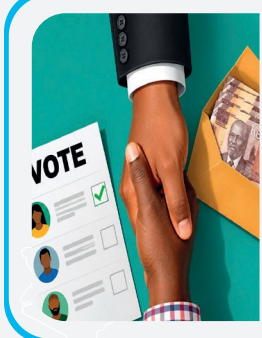
The main reason electoral problems persist is that reforms have not changed the incentives driving political competition. Laws, institutions and technology have improved, but the deeper political economy remains shaped by patronage, ethnic mobilisation, expensive campaigns, weak internal party democracy, selective enforcement and elite bargaining.


Informal Rules Often Override Formal Rules

Formal institutions are important, but their performance is often shaped by informal political practices. Political actors may comply with rules when it suits them and challenge or undermine them when compliance threatens their interests. Where enforcement is perceived as selective, actors are incentivised to test institutional limits.


Public Trust Is Fragile and Uneven

Trust is central to electoral legitimacy. When citizens do not trust electoral institutions, even well-managed elections can be contested. The PEA shows that trust is uneven across institutions. Religious leaders, traditional leaders and some civil society actors enjoy relatively higher trust, while electoral institutions, political parties, Parliament and police face lower levels of confidence.


Elite Bargains Weaken Voter Agency

Elite bargains can reduce tensions and stabilise the country, but they can also weaken voter agency. When political outcomes are renegotiated after elections, citizens may feel that their votes matter less than elite negotiations. This can reduce confidence in elections and weaken democratic accountability.



Conflict Risk Is Organised, Incentivised and Cumulative

Electoral conflict does not arise suddenly. It is often cumulative and shaped by mobilisation, inflammatory rhetoric, contested nominations, local grievances, land and resource disputes, mistrust in institutions and elite incentives. Conflict prevention therefore requires early, localised and continuous engagement across the electoral cycle.



Youth and Gen Z Are Politically Alert

The study finds that young people are not simply apathetic. Many are politically aware, digitally connected and concerned about governance, accountability, unemployment, corruption and the cost of living. The Gen Z protests demonstrated that young citizens can mobilise outside traditional party structures.

However, youth engagement is often issue-based, fluid and distrustful of conventional political institutions. REDI should therefore support youth agency in ways that are not limited to voter turnout, but include accountability, civic voice, digital engagement and issue-based mobilisation.



Inclusion Barriers Remain Structural

Women, youth, persons with disabilities and marginalised groups face structural barriers throughout the electoral cycle. These barriers include high campaign costs, political intimidation, weak party nomination systems, gender stereotypes, limited access to financing, inaccessible civic information, exclusion from party networks and online harassment.



Digital Space Is Both an Opportunity and a Risk

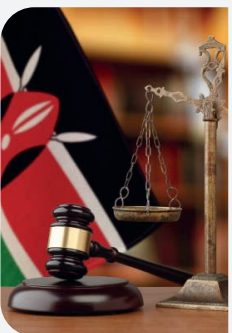
Digital platforms are now central to electoral mobilisation, civic education, campaign messaging and citizen monitoring. They create opportunities for participation, transparency and youth engagement. At the same time, they amplify misinformation, disinformation, hate speech, manipulated content and political polarisation.



Election Observation Should Be Full-Cycle and Technology-Capable

Traditional election observation focused mainly on polling day is no longer sufficient. The PEA shows that risks emerge throughout the electoral cycle: voter registration, party nominations, procurement, technology deployment, campaign conduct, data protection, results transmission, dispute resolution and post-election accountability.

Observation should therefore be full-cycle, citizen-facing, inclusive, technology-capable and linked to accountability mechanisms.



Reform Feasibility and Pathways for Change

The PEA makes a key distinction between reforms that are desirable and reforms that are politically feasible. A reform may be technically sound but politically difficult if it threatens or weakens elite control or changes the balance of power.

Prioritising reforms by risk and impact to guide where to focus and how to start



Figure 1: Prioritising reforms by risk and impact



HIGH IMPACT



LOW RISK

High- Impact, Low- Risk Reforms

These are the most promising entry points for REDI before 2027. They include strengthening voter registration and voter registration integrity, improving civic and voter education, countering misinformation and hate speech, enhancing transparency in procurement and results transmission, supporting open electoral data, and promoting stakeholder engagement, dialogue and issue-based coalitions.



High-Impact, High-Risk Reforms

These reforms are important but politically difficult. They include strengthening IEBC independence and capacity, deepening political party reforms, comprehensive campaign finance reform, ending electoral violence and intimidation, improving security sector neutrality and strengthening judicial and electoral dispute resolution reforms. These require careful sequencing, coalition-building and sustained engagement.



Low-Impact, Low-Risk Reforms

These include minor administrative guideline updates, routine stakeholder meetings, commemorative awareness activities, non-essential reporting requirements and small-scale training workshops without follow-up. They may be useful but should not dominate programme resources.



High-Risk, Low-Impact Reforms

These include attempts to overhaul the entire electoral system before 2027, abolish or radically restructure key institutions, prosecute high-level political actors without broad political consensus, dismantle entrenched patronage networks in the short term, or overhaul all election laws simultaneously. Such reforms may be politically costly and unlikely to yield proportionate benefits before 2027.

IMPLICATIONS FOR REDI

The findings suggest that REDI's Theory of Change is broadly valid but should be refined to reflect the political realities identified in the PEA. The programme correctly identifies national cohesion, institutional strengthening, citizen participation and election observation as key pathways. However, it should more explicitly recognise that these pathways depend on political incentives, institutional independence, public trust, civic agency and adaptive learning.



Rebuilding Trust in Electoral Institutions

REDI should support initiatives that improve transparency, accountability and public communication by electoral institutions. This includes public engagement by IEBC, communication around technology, clarity on voter registration, transparency in procurement, and timely engagement with stakeholders.



Supporting Full-Cycle Electoral Engagement

REDI should avoid concentrating only on election-day activities. It should engage throughout the electoral cycle: voter registration, party nominations, campaign monitoring, technology procurement, results transmission, dispute resolution and post-election accountability.



Investing in Youth and Citizen Engagement

Youth engagement should be treated as a strategic priority. REDI should support youth-led civic initiatives, digital civic education, issue-based organising, citizen monitoring and accountability platforms. Youth should not be viewed merely as voters but as agents of democratic renewal.



Strengthening Electoral Accountability Ecosystems

REDI should strengthen the wider accountability ecosystem, including civil society, media, observer groups, faith-based actors, peace actors, fact-checkers and oversight institutions. This ecosystem can increase transparency, detect risks early and sustain pressure for accountability.



Promoting Inclusion

REDI should support women, youth, persons with disabilities and marginalised communities across the electoral cycle. This includes accessible civic education, support for aspirants, monitoring of party nominations, protection from violence and online abuse, and advocacy for inclusive reforms.



Strengthening Digital Integrity

REDI should treat the digital space as a central electoral arena. This requires monitoring misinformation, supporting fact-checking, improving media literacy, strengthening digital rights protections and promoting responsible use of technology by electoral actors.



Thinking and Working Politically

Given Kenya's fluid political environment, REDI should adopt adaptive programming. This means continuously monitoring political dynamics, actor incentives, emerging risks and reform windows. Programme decisions should be guided by regular political economy updates rather than fixed assumptions.



Stakeholder Engagement Strategy

REDI should pursue a differentiated stakeholder engagement strategy based on power, interest and incentives.

01

For high-power, high-interest actors such as the IEBC and the Judiciary, engagement should focus on practical reforms, trust-building, institutional preparedness and accountability.

02

For high-power, low-interest actors, REDI should identify incentives for cooperation and avoid framing reforms in ways that trigger unnecessary resistance. Engagement should emphasise efficiency, credibility, stability and public confidence.

03

For low-power, high-interest actors such as citizens, youth, women, persons with disabilities, CSOs, observers and community groups, REDI should strengthen voice, coordination, evidence generation and advocacy.

For media and digital actors, REDI should support responsible reporting, fact-checking, misinformation response and public access to credible information.

For development partners, REDI should promote coordination, shared political analysis, realistic reform prioritisation and adaptive programming.

RISK MANAGEMENT AND ADAPTIVE PROGRAMMING

The PEA identifies several risks that REDI should monitor continuously. These include delayed reforms, mistrust in IEBC, contested voter registration, disputes over technology, misinformation and disinformation, shrinking civic space, political violence, weak enforcement of rules, elite polarisation, youth discontent, exclusion of marginalised groups and resistance to reforms affecting political financing or party nominations.

REDI should manage these risks through regular political economy updates, scenario planning, early warning systems, adaptive work planning, flexible funding, coalition-building and strategic communication.

The programme should distinguish between immediate 2027-facing priorities and longer-term structural reforms. Immediate priorities should focus on operational credibility, trust-building, inclusion, civic education, observation, technology transparency, election security and dispute preparedness. Longer-term reforms should include campaign finance regulation, deeper party reforms, institutional independence, cost of politics and structural inclusion

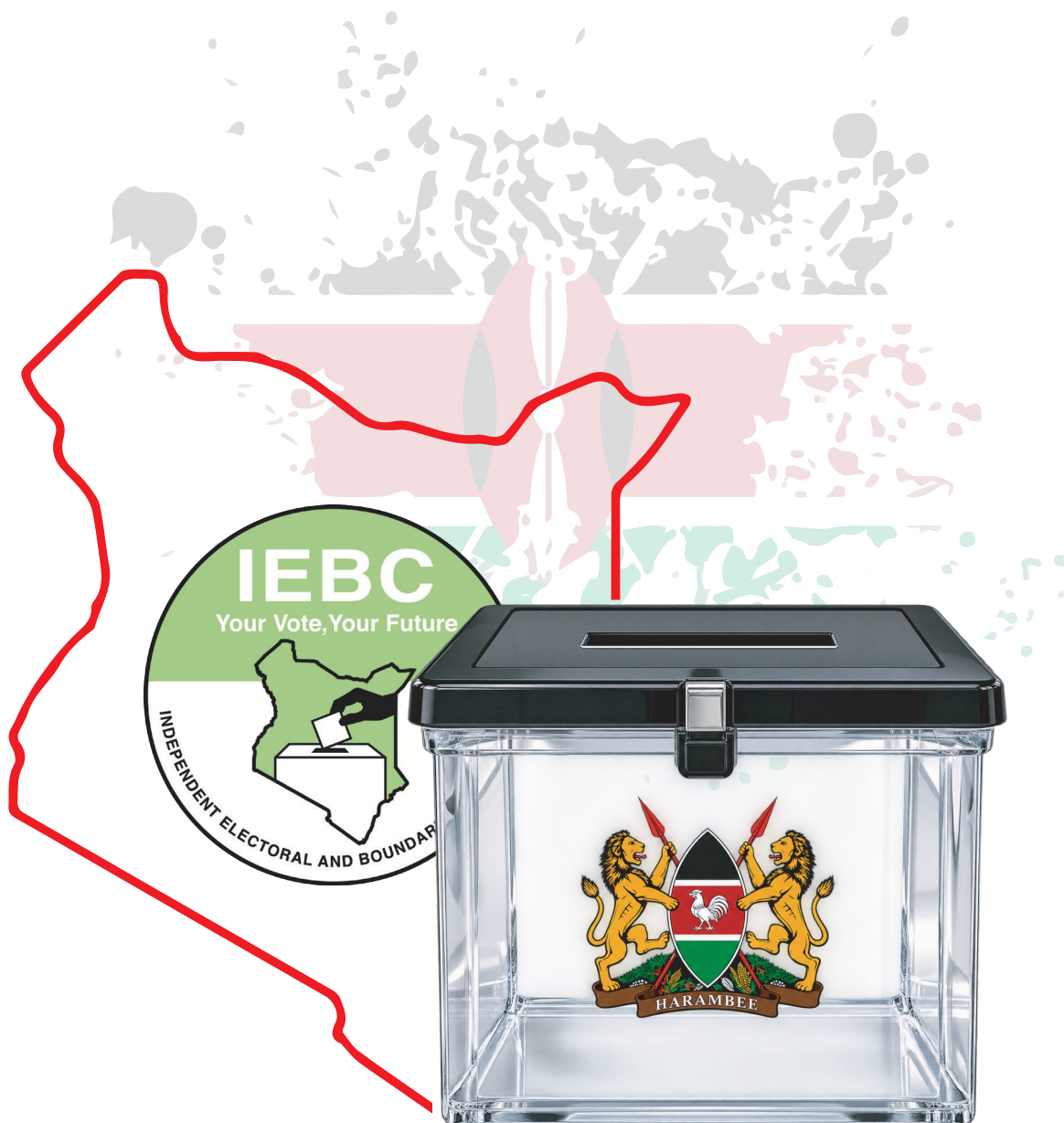


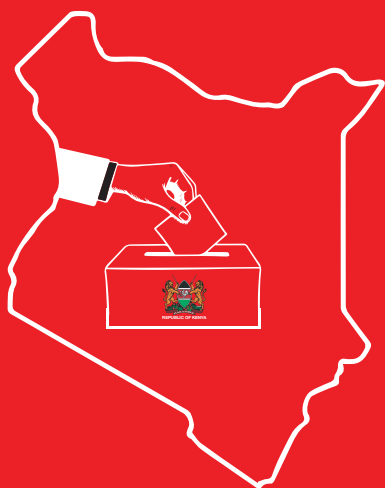
Building credible elections requires more than institutional reform—it requires continuous risk monitoring, trust-building, inclusion and the flexibility to respond to Kenya's evolving political realities

CONCLUSION

Kenya's electoral challenges persist because reforms have not fundamentally changed the incentives, interests and informal power relations that shape electoral competition. Indeed, the administration of elections has improved significantly. However, patronage politics, ethnic mobilisation, elite bargaining, weak party democracy, selective enforcement and low public trust continue to shape political behaviour.

Sustainable democratic progress will require more than technical improvements. It will require politically informed strategies that address incentives, strengthen trust, support accountability, empower citizens, promote inclusion and adapt to changing political realities.





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