



International liaison, dialogue and research

Reg no: 2006/020285/08

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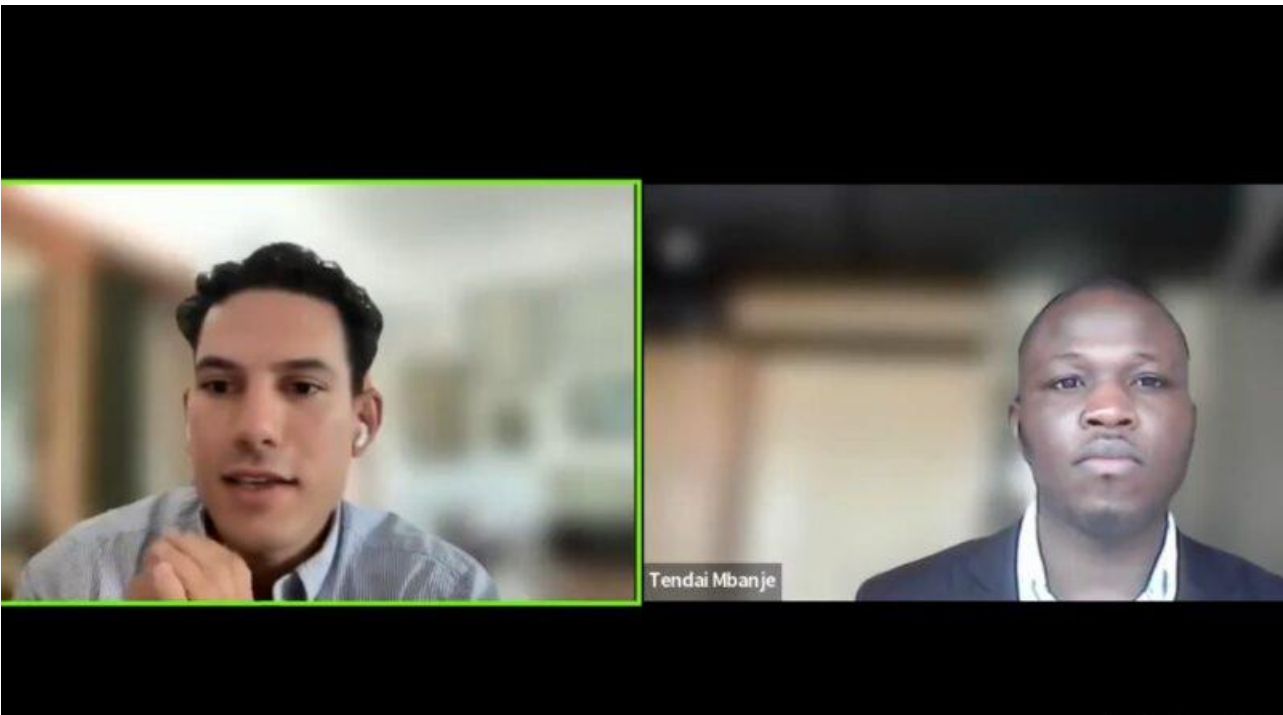
Policy Brief

25 January 2024

Zoom Online Platform

# SALO Regional Public Dialogue

*By Rezah Raftopoulos*



## Executive Summary

On 25 January 2024, the Southern African Liaison Office in collaboration with the Open Society Foundation hosted a virtual public dialogue on Zoom. Speakers included Tendai Mbanje from the Centre for Human Rights, Jasmine Opperman, a security analyst, and Jack Zaba, an election expert. The dialogue focused on recent trends and the regional response to situations of instability, conflict, disputed electoral outcomes, and political violence.

As SADC troops are in the process of being withdrawn from Mozambique (to meet the set July 2024 deadline) and moved to the DRC, SALO sought to examine SADC's military and political approaches to Mozambique, focusing on the lessons learnt and security implications. Furthermore, the dialogue investigated SADC regional instruments in terms of their purpose and implementation regarding the aforementioned concerns; particularly in a context underscored by regional electoral spillover as a result of disputed electoral processes, including those observed in the DRC at the end of December 2023 where the SADC Election Observer Mission (SEOM) in an unprecedented move postponed its decision on whether the elections were credible, free and fair. This approach by the SEOM contrasted with the highly critical report and public stance adopted by the SADC Observer Mission to Zimbabwe earlier in 2023. Additionally, SEOM's commendation of the Eswatini 2023 elections was widely disputed by key Swati stakeholders and regional civil society groups. These contrasting approaches by SADC in Eswatini, the DRC, and Zimbabwe have generated intense debate within the region amongst policymakers, broader civil society, and ordinary citizens.

## Context / Importance of the Problem

### *The Situation in the DRC*

The United Nations Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), MONUSCO, is ending after 20 years. It will be replaced by troops from SADC, led by the South African military. The SADC Mission in the DRC (SAMIDRC) is expected to replace MONUSCO and the East African Community Regional Force (EACRF) to help the national security forces in fighting especially the M23 rebels, a group allegedly supported by Rwanda.<sup>1</sup> The SAMIDRC forces are comprised of South African, Tanzanian and Malawian troops and it began its arrival in the DRC in December 2023. The SAMIDRC regional force is deploying with a mandate to engage Rwanda-backed M23 rebels militarily.<sup>2</sup> The SADC force is expected to attempt, in cooperation with the local security forces, to neutralise the main rebel groups operating in the eastern DRC. This is something that MONUSCO and the EACRF have not been able to do for the last 20 years.<sup>3</sup> The rebel groups have operated in that area for many years, know the terrain, and are integrated with the local population. Violence in the eastern DRC has resulted in a constant struggle for many of the Congolese residents with a record of 6.9 million being

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<sup>1</sup> Mandrup, T. 2024. South Africa to lead new military force in the DRC: an expert on what it's up against. *The Conversation*. 3 January. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/south-africa-to-lead-new-military-force-in-the-drc-an-expert-on-what-its-up-against-219264> [Accessed on: 25/03/24]

<sup>2</sup> African Defense Forum. 2024. *MONUSCO Withdrawal begins first phase*. 2024. 6 February. Available at: <https://adf-magazine.com/2024/02/monusco-withdrawal-begins-first-phase/> [Accessed on: 25/03/24]

<sup>3</sup> Mandrup, T. 2024. South Africa to lead new military force in the DRC: an expert on what it's up against. *The Conversation*. 3 January. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/south-africa-to-lead-new-military-force-in-the-drc-an-expert-on-what-its-up-against-219264> [Accessed on: 25/03/24]

internally displaced.<sup>4</sup> Tensions between the DRC and Rwandan governments are at a critical state and more than 120 armed groups continue to disrupt the stability and peace within the DRC region.<sup>5</sup> The M23 Rebels operate in the hills close to the Rwandan border and claim to be fighting in defence of ethnic Congolese Tutsis against tribal discrimination in the DRC.<sup>6</sup> The United Nations and the DRC, however, say the group is being funded by Rwanda to control Kinshasa's minerals, causing a serious diplomatic rift in the region.<sup>7</sup> The SAMIDRC mandate focuses on an offensive military operation as it has become necessary to redesign and reconfigure SADC involvement in the DRC. As such, it will not just be a peacekeeping mission. Firstly, it aims to advance an offensive military operation aimed to assist the Congolese army, which was already trying to repel, drive out, and eliminate the resurgence of armed groups. Secondly, it aims to stop the armed groups completely, to disarm them, to assist the local security which has limited capacity, and also to complement SADC efforts to dialogue, negotiation, and mediation over the past years. So, from the perspective of the mission mandate the SADC goals can be seen as different to that of MONUSCO's peacekeeping mission.

In the SALO dialogue, various issues around SAMIDRC replacing MONUSCO were discussed. The concerns pertained to how effective SADC troops will be against M23 in terms of skill and firepower, although this is not the first time that Southern African troops will face the rebels. In 2013, the United Nations Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) was established, specifically to target and neutralise M23 and it largely helped push M23 out that year, leading to its decade-long silence.<sup>8</sup> Troops from Malawi, Tanzania and South Africa formed that intervention force, but experts say that M23 has since grown more formidable and commands a great deal more firepower than in 2013, while the South African army forming the core of the mission has suffered from years of underfunding. There are also issues around the sustainability of the SADC mission. MONUSCO's annual budget was one of the UN's most expensive at around \$1 billion per year to sustain its military operations.<sup>9</sup> Thus there are concerns about whether SADC can meet these funding needs for its military campaign and whether it can sustain the offensive operations if the conflict continues in the long-term.

President Felix Tshisekedi was sworn in for a second five-year term following elections in December 2023 which saw allegations of irregularities and voter disenfranchisement, outlining deep problems with the country's democratic and electoral institutions. The extent of the President's landslide victory has raised questions about the whole process and opposition candidates and citizens viewed the country's synchronised presidential, local, provincial, and

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<sup>4</sup> African Defense Forum. 2024. *MONUSCO Withdrawal begins first phase*. 6 February. Available at: <https://adf-magazine.com/2024/02/monusco-withdrawal-begins-first-phase/> [Accessed on: 25/03/24]

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Al Jazeera. 2024. *Could a Southern African military force help bring stability to DRC?* 15 January. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/2/15/can-a-southern-african-military-force-help-bring-stability-to-drc> [Accessed on: 25/03/24]

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Xinhua News. 2024. *UN peacekeeping mission starts withdrawal from DR Congo*. 14 January. Available at: <https://english.news.cn/20240114/caf4d1915b464bd8b497af63361fdb87/c.html> [Accessed on: 26/03/24]

national polls as a 'farce'.<sup>10</sup> The international community, opposition and civil society groups continuously warned about deficiencies in CENI's (Independent National Electoral Commission) pre-election preparations. An observer mission of the Catholic Church and Church of Christ in the Congo documented 5,402 significant irregularities at polling stations, such as malfunctioning voting devices, unopened polling stations and ballot stuffing.<sup>11</sup> Site de la Mission d'Observation Électorale (SYMOCEL), a domestic observer group, reported that two-thirds of polling stations opened late, and only 57% complied with procedures.<sup>12</sup> The international community has again overlooked serious electoral flaws just as it happened in the 2018 elections.<sup>13</sup> The UN called for a probe only into reports of hate speech and inciting violence, and the AU and SADC have not taken a definitive position.<sup>14</sup> Persistent allegations of irregularities, fraud and political manipulation in the 2018 and 2023 elections have damaged public trust in the electoral process and eroded the credibility of democratic institutions across the DRC. The country desperately needs independent electoral commissions and robust judicial institutions.

### *The Situation in Mozambique*

When looking at the situation in Mozambique, one can look at SADC's presence in the region to combat the insurgency and its decision to withdraw its troops. Mozambique's Armed Defence Forces (FADM) are taking a more prominent role in counterterrorism operations, as troops from the Southern African Development Community Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM) have begun preparations for its drawdown and exit plan. The insurgency in the northeastern province of Cabo Delgado continues to terrorise civilians and confound multinational security forces with its resilience. Rwandan and SAMIM forces have "significantly downgraded" Ansar al-Sunna, a violent extremist group also known as Islamic State Mozambique (ISM).<sup>15</sup> After more than two years of fighting, the terrorist group is down to "160 to 200 battle-hardened fighters," according to a United Nations monitoring team report. Remnants of the insurgent group are moving south in search of resources and recruits as Mozambican forces flush them from their strongholds. Mozambican President Filipe Nyusi described ISM as "on the run" and appealed to Mozambican young people to resist recruitment attempts.<sup>16</sup> Experts say many challenges remain for Mozambican forces to effectively carry out counterterrorism operations without foreign backing. According to the conflict observatory website Cabo Ligado, which is published by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project:

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<sup>10</sup> Mooloo, N & Hoinathy, R. 2024. DRC misses another opportunity to build a democracy. *Institute for Security Studies*. 7 February. Available at: <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/drc-misses-another-opportunity-to-build-a-democracy> [Accessed on 26/03/24]

<sup>11</sup> Mooloo, N & Hoinathy, R. 2024. DRC misses another opportunity to build a democracy. *Institute for Security Studies*. 7 February. Available at: <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/drc-misses-another-opportunity-to-build-a-democracy> [Accessed on 26/03/24]

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> African Defense Forum. 2024. *With SADC Withdrawing, Mozambican Forces Step to the Front*. 20 February. Available at: <https://adf-magazine.com/2024/02/with-sadc-withdrawing-mozambican-forces-step-to-the-front/> [Accessed on: 27/03/24]

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

*“ISM’s initial growth and the subsequent resilience of its remaining core have exposed FADM’s structural weaknesses, reflected in its lack of tactical and strategic sophistication, indiscipline amongst troops and outdated equipment”.*<sup>17</sup>

The FADM forces have been left to fill the security vacuum with SAMIM’s withdrawal but have reportedly not been up to the task.<sup>18</sup> On 18 January, FADM abandoned the strategic village of Mucojo, effectively handing the insurgents unbridled access to the Macomia coast.<sup>19</sup> Mozambican security forces are known to be suffering from a shortage of food and many soldiers have not been paid in months.<sup>20</sup> If the Mozambican military is struggling to fulfil its current responsibilities, it is difficult to see FADM coping with an expanded role when SAMIM completes its withdrawal. Amid this uncertainty, the resumption of TotalEnergies’ LNG project in northern Cabo Delgado risks adding another element of unpredictability to the conflict. The project will create an obvious target for the insurgents to attack, or at least disrupt, and the highest standards of protection will be needed to avoid a repeat of the catastrophic attack at Palma in March 2021.<sup>21</sup> Mozambique is in a precarious situation as its need for security is expected to increase this year while the supply of security resources is set to diminish, leaving it vulnerable to insurgency forces.

### *SADC and elections in Zimbabwe and the region*

The historically cautious SADC Electoral Observation Mission (SEOM) was critical of Zimbabwe’s 2023 elections and put forward a report noting the violations of regulations and SADC principles.<sup>22</sup> Other issues noted by the SEOM Report were a lack of transparency around the voter roll, the contentious delimitation report, skewed access to state media, voter intimidation, and deeper structural concerns including the conflation of party and state interests, the manipulation of the judiciary, and problematic legislation. Most of these issues have been recurring items in SADC reports on Zimbabwe’s elections in the past two decades. However, the mention of structural and systemic challenges reflects a break from the past, exposing various concerns that opposition and civil society have repeatedly raised.<sup>23</sup> Following this unprecedented criticism, ZANU-PF and the government pushed back, attacking the SEOM report and its team leader, Zambian politician Dr Nevers Mumba. Other observer missions received the same treatment, including a personal attack on the European Union observer mission head.<sup>24</sup> The ruling party’s aggressive reaction suggests it deemed the SEOM findings serious and damaging.

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Gould, T. 2024. What does the end of SAMIM mean for Cabo Delgado. 2024. *Zitamar News*. 29 January. Available at: <https://www.zitamar.com/what-does-the-end-of-samim-mean-for-cabo-delgado/> [Accessed on: 27/03/24]

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Gukurume, S. 2024. Zimbabwe’s Disputed Elections and the SADC Observer Mission. *Social Science Research Council*. 15 February. Available at: [https://kujenga-amani.ssrc.org/2024/02/15/zimbabwes-disputed-elections-and-the-sadc-observer-mission/#\\_edn1](https://kujenga-amani.ssrc.org/2024/02/15/zimbabwes-disputed-elections-and-the-sadc-observer-mission/#_edn1) [Accessed on: 02/04/24]

<sup>23</sup> Institute for Security Studies. 2023. *Zimbabwe fails its democracy test*. 4 September. Available at: <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/zimbabwe-fails-its-democracy-test> [Accessed on: 02/04/24]

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

In the dialogue hosted by SALO, it was noted that ZANU-PF is unlikely to concede any ground and as far as SADC is concerned, it has returned to its default mode. SADC's style can be seen as a collective management style grounded in comradeship and the primacy of stability rather than confrontation or action.<sup>25</sup> The belief is that SADC is unlikely to muster the political consensus and willpower to put Zimbabwe back on the agenda for a rerun of the election. Not all member states will be comfortable with SEOM's findings, which could set an unwelcome precedent that represents a departure from its previous approach. Several SADC leaders, including the presidents of South Africa, Namibia, Tanzania and Botswana, have congratulated Mnangagwa, which suggests that while SADC probably will not backtrack on its SEOM report, it will park the concerns rather than elevate them to a rejection of the election result.<sup>26</sup> The regional and international communities will likely seek a conciliatory approach focused on peace and stability as previously noted.

Some analysts in the dialogue attributed SADC inaction in Zimbabwe to a lack of political will, given the regional ties and vested interests which are not necessarily based on human rights and democratic standards, but on alliances based on the legacy of liberation parties. One speaker gave the example of Eswatini in which there were numerous concerns raised about the credibility of the polls, but in the end, the SADC Mission reported "*peaceful, calm, and well-organised elections that satisfied the revised SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections*".<sup>27</sup> As such, the issue of what a free and fair election entails is contentious when the minimum requirements for credible elections (peace and security) fall short of the on-the-ground experiences of the electoral environment that include human rights violations and logistical challenges, such as in Eswatini and Zimbabwe.

## Policy Critiques

**SADC interests at the state-to-state level are not aligned with the democratisation needs of the people on the ground in the region:**

- MONUSCO prioritised peace and security at the expense of human rights, credible elections, and the logistical challenges that the DRC faced during the electoral cycle.
- SAMIM withdrawal is a premature response to the decrease in insurgent attacks in Mozambique.
- Authoritarianism and dictatorship take advantage of the global inconsistencies and lack of respect for international law to oppress the people and their fundamental human rights. Democratisation in the SADC region is being challenged.

## Policy Recommendations

**SADC needs more inclusive approaches to addressing conflicts:**

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Institute for Security Studies. 2023. *Zimbabwe fails its democracy test*. 4 September. Available at: <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/zimbabwe-fails-its-democracy-test> [Accessed on: 02/04/24]

<sup>27</sup> O'Regan, V. 2023. Eswatini's parliamentary elections get nod of approval from observer missions. *Daily Maverick*. 2 October. Available at: <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2023-10-02-eswatinis-parliamentary-elections-get-nod-of-approval-from-observer-missions/> [Accessed on: 03/04/24]

- Military intervention should be complemented by peacebuilding efforts that address issues of inequality, discrimination, and sensitivity to religion and culture to minimise the risk of recruitment.

**SEOM reports must be used to re-engineer the advocacy agenda around electoral reforms:**

- Civil society groups must continue to robustly engage and advocate for human rights efforts to go hand in hand with SADC missions.
- Emerging and opposition leaders with linkages to civil society can be agents for reform domestically and at the regional level. It remains imperative to challenge the status quo of power throughout every electoral cycle.

**Engagement efforts between SADC and the AU are essential:**

- Conflict in the region and on the continent is often transnational and interconnected, which makes early warning systems, military and humanitarian support, and other coordinated interventions crucial to peace-making, peace-building, and peace-keeping.

## Conclusion

SALO provided a public platform for stakeholders and civil society to engage on some of the challenges throughout the SADC region. In a year in which six SADC countries (twenty African countries overall) are scheduled to have presidential or national elections, it is ever important to evaluate the state of governance and democratisation on the continent. Analysing the most recent electoral cycles for many countries reveals a regression towards authoritarianism as state leaders have sought to consolidate power and stifle dissent. As such, observer mission reports offer crucial insight into the state of affairs in a given country, and civil society organisations must advance the call for democratisation and progressive reforms by continuing to engage regional bodies such as SADC to act on these findings in the interest of citizens on the ground. The future remains uncertain, but SALO will continue to report on, provide platforms for the advancement of, and advocate for the rights of all people.

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*The analysis and recommendations included in this report do not necessarily reflect the view of SALO or any of the donors or conference participants, but rather draw upon the major strands of discussion put forward at the event. Participants neither reviewed nor approved this document. The contents of the report are the sole responsibility of SALO and can under no circumstances be regarded as reflecting the position of the donors who provided financial assistance for this policy dialogue session.*

**About the Southern African Liaison Office:**



The Southern African Liaison Office (SALO) is a South African-based not-for-profit civil society organisation which, through advocacy, dialogue, policy consensus and in-depth research and analysis, influences the current thinking and debates on foreign policy, especially regarding African crises and conflicts.

*SALO would like to thank the Open Society Foundation for their direct support*

