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Parliamentary websites in SADC: A missed opportunity for defence transparency?

Introduction

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 16 focuses on the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development as well as accountable and inclusive institutions. SDG16.7 specifically calls for the development of effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels. Yet, the security sector, inclusive of militaries around the world, is often shrouded in secrecy and confidentiality. The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (DCAF) Handbook for parliamentary oversight of the security sector highlights 'secrecy' as one of the key hindrances to transparency in the sector, specifically in emerging democracies. Parliaments provide an important public platform for debate around the military and can play a central role in enhancing security sector transparency, but only if it is easily and readily accessible to the broader society.

Parliaments and defence transparency

The notion of transparency spans not only the SDGs, but also the concepts of Good Governance and Good Security Sector Governance (SSG). Good SSG maintains that information should be readily available and accessible to all affected by decisions as well as the implementation of such decisions. In most democracies, two aspects of parliamentary activity can contribute directly to defence transparency. First, its oversight function is crucial, specifically oversight of defence budgets, policy, procurement, human resources and the deployment of the military. Second, through its representation function, parliaments foster relationships between various defence stakeholders, namely the military, political elites and the broader society. However, these parliamentary actions only contribute to defence transparency if the parliamentary activities itself are transparent and available to the public. In practice, this would require that the use of parliamentary oversight tools such as parliamentary defence debates, at committee and plenary level, be made publicly available

along with written and oral questions. All parliamentary inquiries into the military and oversight visits to military facilities should be reported on in a public manner. Furthermore, all external defence-related reports that pass through parliament, such as audit reports or special investigations, ought to be available to the broader public. With due consideration for very sensitive information, the general availability of this information to the public would align with the democratic and parliamentary principles of transparency and accountability.

Parliamentary websites in SADC

One of the key tools to communicate the above-mentioned defence-related information to the public is a parliamentary website. The Inter-Parliamentary Union's 2018 World eParliament Report notes that "most important improvements attributed to ICT by the parliaments surveyed for that report were in their ability to publish more information and documents online; disseminate information and documents; and ensure timely delivery of information and documents to members. Those enhancements were helping parliaments and their members be more open and transparent towards citizens." The Report noted that 53% of countries' parliaments have electronic legislative management systems. The 2022 World eParliament Report highlight's the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on parliaments, forcing them to become more reliant on technology and introduce hybrid working models which, in turn, made parliaments more accessible to the public. However, previous IPU reports observed a growing gap between parliaments in lower-income countries and those in higher-income countries in relation to electronic legislative management systems. Given that much of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) falls into the latter category, it raises questions around the status of parliamentary websites in the region and, more specifically, to what extent they contribute to defence transparency. This is especially true in the SADC context where many nations are affected by or involved in regional military deployments, notably in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Mozambique.

Of the 16 SADC countries, 14 had functional parliamentary websites with Malawi and the Comoros excluded. In terms of defence relevance, although Mauritius has a website, it can be excluded as the country does not have a standing conventional military force as is the case in other SADC countries. The remaining 13 parliaments all have dedicated defence committees to oversee the countries' military. However, the level of publicly available details of the defence-specific work of these SADC parliaments is cause for concern. As in the table below, seven of the parliaments (54%) provide links with further information on their defence committees with only one parliament (South Africa) providing an updated defence committee calendar, including agenda items. In terms of defence-debate transparency, eight of the Parliaments (62%) have the minutes (Hansard) of plenary debates available on their websites. However, no SADC parliament provides the minutes of defence committee meetings. In lieu of the minutes, only three parliaments (23%) provide links to audio/YouTube recordings of defence meetings. Furthermore, three parliaments (23%) provide parliamentary questions (including those on defence) on their websites. Four parliaments (31%) provide reports on special defence inquiries on their websites while only two parliaments (South Africa and Zambia) provide defence oversight visit reports. No SADC parliaments provide links to the audit reports of the defence departments on their websites.

Table 1: Broad overview of SADC parliamentary websites and defence information

CRITERIA	ANG	BOT	COM	DRC	ESW	LES	MAD	MAL	MOZ	NAM	SEY	RSA	TAN	ZAM	ZIM	TOTAL
General parliamentary website accessibility8																
Does the parliament have a website?	✓	✓	X	✓	✓	✓	✓	X	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	88%
Does the parliament have a dedicated defence committee?	✓	✓	-	✓	✓	✓	✓	-	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	100%
Is there a website link to the defence committee(s)?	✓	X	-	X	X	✓	X	-	X	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	X	54%
Is there access to an updated defence committee calendar, including agenda items?	X	X	-	X	X	X	X	-	X	X	X	✓	X	X	X	8%
Parliament's defence oversight function																
Minutes of plenary debates (Hansard)	X	X	-	X	X	✓	✓	-	X	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	62%
Minutes of defence committee meetings	X	X	-	X	X	X	X	-	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	0%
Links to audio/YouTube recording of defence meetings	X	X	-	X	X	X	X	-	X	X	✓	✓	✓	X	X	23%
Parliamentary questions/Interpellations on defence	X	X	-	X	X	X	X	-	X	X	X	✓	✓	✓	X	23%
Reports of special defence inquiries/sub-committees	X	X	-	X	X	✓	X	-	X	X	X	✓	X	✓	✓	31%
Reports of defence oversight visits and study tours	X	X	-	X	X	X	X	-	X	X	X	✓	X	✓	X	15%
Link to defence audit outcomes	X	X	-	X	X	X	X	-	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	0%

Conclusion

Given the amount of information on defence matters passing through parliaments as well as regular debates, parliaments are central in ensuring that defence-related information is more commonly available to the public. Parliaments are therefore key institutions in fostering broader defence debate, specifically in a democratic context requiring transparency. Parliamentary websites are an ideal tool to present defence-related information to the public. However, SADC parliaments have made poor progress in using its websites as an information-distribution tool, specifically around defence. This shortcoming undermines defence transparency and broader defence-related debate in the region, ultimately weakening the democratic requirement for transparency and accountability.

Recommended for further reading.

Inter-Parliamentary Union (2009) *Guidelines for Parliamentary Websites.* Geneva: IPU

Bernardes, C.B and Bandeira, C.L (2016) Information *vs* Engagement in parliamentary websites – a case study of Brazil and the UK. *Revista de Sociologia e Política,* Vol 24(59) pp. 91-107.

Hamajoda, A (2016) Informing and interacting with citizens: Aa strategic communication review of the websites of the ECOWAS parliaments. *The Electronic Journal of Information Systems in Developing Countries*. Vol 74(4) pp. 1-13.

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