African nations adopt digital and social media guidelines

The Association of African Election Authorities (AAEA) has launched a set of principles and guidelines aimed at getting the most out of digital and social media, while mitigating its potential harms.

Image source: Cienpies Design – 123RF.com

The guidelines, launched on Tuesday, 27 February, emphasise the dangers of social media abuse, and call for responsible use and accountability from both platform owners and users.

The launch event was attended by 16 African Election Management Bodies (EMB) from countries that will hold elections in 2024 and 2025.

The guidelines encourage African EMBs to develop a clear and comprehensive plan for responsible social media use during election campaigns. It emphasises the critical roles governments and regulatory bodies can play in safeguarding electoral processes across Africa.

In addition, the guidelines encourage African states and regulatory authorities to refrain from imposing measures that might disrupt access to the internet, and to digital and social media.

Furthermore, they call on social media operators to treat political parties and candidates equitably and ensure that their online messaging, including that of their supporters, does not undermine electoral integrity or contravene human rights.

Icasa revises political advertisement regulations for upcoming elections
28 Feb 2024

Protecting integrity and credibility

Speaking at the launch in Johannesburg, the AAEA President, who is also the Chairperson of the Mozambique National Election Commission, Reverend Carlos Simao Matsinhe, said the guidelines are an invaluable resource for protecting elections integrity and credibility.

He said the fight against disinformation is critical because left unmitigated, it can have a deleterious impact on the credibility of elections. He urged EMBs to socialise the guidelines in their respective countries.

South Africa, through grant funding by the African Renaissance and International Cooperation Fund, played an important role in developing the guidelines.

Image source: @SAgovnews

In his keynote address, South Africa's Deputy President, Paul Mashatile, pledged the country's support for socialising the principles and guidelines.

"The reality is that the political environment during elections is tense and volatile, and we should use social media with responsibility to ensure that the content we share is credible and accurate. I urge political parties that participate in robust debate on social media to uphold ethical standards and refrain from going too far in being unjust, deceptive, or hateful," said Mashatile.

The Chairperson of the Electoral Commission of South Africa, Mosotho Moepya, urged all stakeholders to play their role in ensuring that the guidelines are widely socialised and implemented, not only to increase voter confidence and trust in electoral processes, but also to ensure the deepening of democratic values.

Echoing Moepya's sentiments, the representative of the African Union Commission (AUC), Ambassador William Awinador-Kanyirige, said the adoption of the guidelines will play a huge role in the transformation and handling of elections in Africa.

"The existence of these principles and guidelines will go a long way in inspiring other countries to follow the same steps, thus promoting peaceful elections," he said.

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