

Global Controversies Surrounding the CEC Contractor ‘Smartmatic’

As Georgia implements Smartmatic’s e-voting system, global controversies follow close behind. With allegations of manipulated results and corruption across several countries, can this technology be trusted?

The October 26, 2024, parliamentary elections were the first in Georgia’s history to use electronic voting technologies and were highly controversial, with numerous reported irregularities. It is particularly noteworthy that in the 2021 local self-government elections, “Georgian Dream” received [824,755](#) votes, while official 2024 results show 1,119,053 votes for the party. This discrepancy raises concerns about the accuracy of voter lists and suggests potential misuse of technology.

In 2023, one year prior to the elections, the Central Election Commission of Georgia (CEC) signed an [agreement](#) with the international company ‘Smartmatic’ (Smartmatic International Holding B.V.). According to the [contract](#), “from 2023 to 2024, the company ‘Smartmatic’ was to provide the election administration with electronic voting devices and corresponding software.” The total cost of the technology purchase was 54,215,254 GEL.



What does smartmatic stand for?

Smartmatic was founded in 2000 by Venezuelan engineers Antonio Mugica, Alfredo José Anzola, and Roger Piñate, initially based in the United States. With headquarters in London, it has regional offices worldwide, including in Boca Raton, Florida, and offices in Panama and Venezuela.

The company focuses on electronic voting technologies, election management systems, and various services to support and streamline the electoral process. The company's services range from electronic voting machines to software solutions like SmartTally, which provides provisional vote counts.

Smartmatic's systems are designed to handle the entire electoral process, including voter registration, voter authentication, and results transmission. However, as Smartmatic's footprint grew, so did scrutiny over its operations, particularly regarding transparency, security, and alleged vulnerabilities in its systems.

International Issues and Concerns with Smartmatic

Smartmatic has [faced](#) significant controversy in multiple countries, particularly around its practices and integrity in securing election contracts. Recently, the U.S. Justice Department charged three current and former Smartmatic executives with a bribery scheme in the Philippines. According to the indictment, Smartmatic executives allegedly funneled over \$1 million in bribes to a Philippine elections official to secure contracts for the 2016 elections. This scheme reportedly involved creating a "slush fund" by inflating the prices of voting machines, with funds subsequently laundered across several countries, including the U.S. and Europe. "If convicted, Piñate and Vasquez each face a maximum penalty of five years in prison for the FCPA and conspiracy to violate the FCPA counts. Bautista, Piñate, Vasquez, and Moreno each face a maximum penalty of 20 years for each count of international laundering of monetary instruments and conspiracy to commit money laundering," the DOJ [said](#).

These controversies extend [further](#). On November 29, 2023, the Philippines' election commission (Comelec) officially banned Smartmatic from bidding on future election contracts. This decision came after the U.S. Justice Department launched an investigation into the company, referred to as a "corruption probe," to uncover potential wrongdoing involving former Comelec chairman Andres Bautista.

The investigation, led by the U.S., looked into allegations that Bautista accepted bribes from Smartmatic to secure contracts for voting machines in the Philippines' 2016 elections.

Comelec's ruling emphasized the seriousness of these accusations, stating that they posed a direct threat to the credibility of future elections. As a result, Smartmatic's local branch, Smartmatic Philippines Inc., was disqualified from participating in public bidding for election technology. Despite Smartmatic's assertion that no formal charges had been filed against the company itself, Comelec defended its decision, citing concerns about compromised procurement practices that could undermine democratic integrity.

Smartmatic argues that Comelec's decision is unjust and insists that it was denied the chance to present its case. However, U.S. prosecutors allege that Bautista accepted bribes to grant a \$199 million contract to Smartmatic, providing nearly 94,000 voting machines for the 2016 presidential election. Although Bautista denied these claims, U.S. prosecutors requested official Comelec records to strengthen their case against him and other individuals involved.

Venezuela: Manipulated [Turnout](#) Figures in 2017 Election

Smartmatic itself reported that in Venezuela's 2017 National Constituent Assembly election, turnout figures were inflated by at least one million votes. CEO Antonio Mugica revealed that, based on data from Venezuela's automated voting system, the actual turnout was significantly lower than the 8.1 million votes claimed by authorities. While Mugica refrained from stating whether this manipulation altered the election outcome, critics widely condemned the election as an attempt by President Nicolas Maduro's administration to consolidate power by sidelining the opposition-led Congress.

Argentina's Controversy with Smartmatic's *SmartTally* System

In Argentina's 2019 primary elections (PASO), the government's use of Smartmatic's *SmartTally* system for provisional vote counting became a subject of intense debate. *SmartTally*, a software component specifically designed by Smartmatic for handling initial vote counts and result transmission, was intended to expedite the reporting process. However, opposition parties raised alarms, expressing concerns about the potential for manipulation in the data transmission chain.

One point of contention was *SmartTally*'s process of converting scanned ballot images from TIFF to PNG files before transmission to Correo Argentino, the national postal service overseeing vote transmission. Critics argued that this step left room for possible tampering during conversion, pointing to risks that could undermine the transparency of results. Notably, Argentina's National Electoral Chamber, tasked with maintaining electoral integrity, requested additional transparency by allowing political party observers to monitor the transmission process.

Despite government assurances that *SmartTally* would enhance transparency, opposition groups, including Frente de Todos, viewed the system as a potential gateway for electoral interference. Their concerns reflected a historical commitment to fair representation, given Argentina's hard-won democratic freedoms—a sentiment that resonates deeply with nations like Georgia, which have similarly fought for electoral integrity. Though the Argentine government dismissed allegations as baseless, the controversy highlighted the complexities and public skepticism often surrounding Smartmatic's technology.

This case underscores why a close examination of Smartmatic's systems, including *SmartTally*, remains crucial for countries implementing electronic voting technologies, especially where electoral transparency is at stake.

Electoral Integrity at Stake: Malawi's Case

Malawi's decision to partner with Smartmatic for the 2025 general elections has stirred significant debate, with concerns about the company's past performance in other countries. Stakeholders, including the Human Rights Defenders Coalition (HRDC) and various political leaders, questioned the Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC) about its due diligence, citing alleged controversies linked to Smartmatic in countries like Kenya, the Philippines, and Uganda. These concerns primarily revolve around claims of election technology failures or allegations of irregularities in past elections where Smartmatic systems were [involved](#).

In Kenya's 2022 elections, allegations [emerged](#) that three Smartmatic employees, all Venezuelan nationals, illegally accessed Kenya's election servers months before the general election, potentially tampering with electoral data. These individuals reportedly had access to the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) systems and were suspected of manipulating data during the vote count. Concerns included allegations of a "middleware" layer within Smartmatic's system that may have intercepted or altered data between local and central tallying servers, raising serious transparency issues.

Despite these apprehensions, MEC defended its decision, stating that Smartmatic was chosen after a competitive international bidding process and that the commission followed all procurement protocols. MEC Chairperson Annabel Mtalimanja emphasized that canceling the contract without just cause would have legal and financial repercussions. Nonetheless, calls for increased transparency and accountability have persisted, with some [critics](#) suggesting the contract should be reconsidered to protect the integrity of Malawi's electoral [process](#).