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DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING IN WEST AFRICA:
NATURE, CAUSES, REMEDIES

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This paper was commissioned by the Kofi Annan Foundation ahead of the 2021 Kofi Annan Peace and Security Forum. The theme of the Forum is 'Democracy and Governance in the Context of Complex Crises in West Africa' and this paper, authored by Professor E. Gyimah-Boadi, provides an overview of democratic trends in West Africa in recent years to inform and provide context for the discussions. This paper delivers a brief history of democratic consolidation in West Africa after the Cold War, assesses and seeks to explain recent backsliding of democratic norms and values, and highlights the democratic peace dividend in West Africa and the link between democracy, human rights, and security.

About the author

E. Gyimah-Boadi is co-founder and board chair of Afrobarometer, a non-partisan, pan-African research institution conducting public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, the economy, and society in over 30 countries. Boadi is also former executive director of CDD-Ghana and a professor of political science at the University of Ghana, Legon.

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I. West Africa's post-Cold War democratic revolution

At independence, West African nations typically adopted liberal democratic constitutions and systems of political governance similar to those prevailing in their respective colonizer's country.

A few years later, nearly all of them discarded those systems, citing the need to contain fissiparous tendencies within the often ethno-regionally and culturally divided new nation, as well as the imperative of securing the minimum political and social peace required for pursuing the all-important goals of rapid socio-economic development.

Accordingly, constitutions were amended or replaced, usually to increase the president's powers at the expense of the judiciary, legislature, and other independent state agencies. Nearly all West African countries succumbed to some form of autocratic rule in which media, speech, and associational freedoms were curbed, opposition parties eliminated or outlawed, political opponents and dissenters repressed or co-opted. Elections became largely farcical rituals designed to ensure retention of the incumbent president and party. And the barrel of the gun became a common means of effecting changes in government in countries in the subregion,

many of which looked like garrison states with gun-toting security personnel. By 1989, when the Berlin Wall came down and the Cold War ended, West Africa was dominated by countries with one-party/no-party/military/one-man autocratic regimes. In the subregion, only Senegal and arguably the Gambia had systems of government that could be described as democratic, maintaining open electoral systems even if they were dominated by single parties since independence.[1]

However, West Africa's authoritarian political systems and leadership largely failed to bring economic development, political stability, and national unity to their citizens. Indeed, by 1989, hardly any country in the subregion had realized the independence-era dream of material prosperity and political stability, with the possible exception of Côte d'Ivoire under President Félix Houphouët-Boigny and the Democratic Party of Côte d'Ivoire (PDCI). Rather, they were stuck in a rut of political turmoil, civil unrest, coup d'états, and military insurrections. The region's powerhouse,

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[1] Multiple parties were allowed, but not without fetters. Senegal had only two leaders, both from the same party, in more than 30 years after independence.

Nigeria, was going through political convulsions driven by economic malaise and extreme corruption under autocratic military regimes. Benin's economy had been brought to its knees by civil unrest and was reeling under Marxist-Leninist one-party autocratic rule. Civil war broke out in Liberia in 1989, and in Sierra Leone in 1991. Côte d'Ivoire's nearly three-decade run of economic success was giving way to decline and violent civil conflict in the 1990s. At the same time, neo-liberal economic reform in Ghana under the government of Jerry John Rawlings was fast losing momentum. Indeed, in 1990, the average score[2] on the United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Index for the 15 ECOWAS member countries was an abysmal 0.169. Cabo Verde, which enjoyed the highest rating among these 15 countries, scored 0.428, compared to the USA's 0.976, which placed sixth on the index for that year.

As elsewhere in Africa and the world, a wave of political liberalization and democratic transitions swept across the West African subregion in the late 1980s and early 1990s. These dramatic pro-democracy developments began in Benin, where university students, schoolteachers, civil servants, and some church groups embarked on street protests, forcing President Mathieu Kérékou to concede to holding a "sovereign national conference" in February 1990. The conference, which was chaired by the Catholic prelate Monseigneur Isidore de Souza and broadcast live, resulted in the formulation of a new liberal democratic constitutional order for Benin (with guarantees of human rights, freedom to organize political parties, etc.). The events in Benin proved highly contagious in the

The region's powerhouse, Nigeria, was going through political convulsions driven by economic malaise and extreme corruption under autocratic military regimes.

subregion. Guinea, Mali, Niger, and Togo convened their own versions of a sovereign national conference between 1990 and 1993, typically paving the way for new liberal democratic constitutions or amendments to existing ones. Similar political liberalization trends in other West African countries saw Côte d'Ivoire (which did not hold a "sovereign national conference" as such) amending Article 7 of its constitution to allow the formation of other parties to compete against Houphouët-Boigny's PDCI.[3] And in Ghana, the 10-year-old Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) government led by Flight Lieutenant J.J. Rawlings began preparations to return the country to multiparty democratic rule in 1992.

By the mid-1990s, the political momentum in West Africa was clearly on the side of the institutionalization of multiparty democracy, including multiparty elections. Over the next decade, competitive elections were to become a regular feature of politics in the region, with some producing reasonably free and fair outcomes (including electoral turnovers in Benin, Cabo Verde, Ghana, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone), making West Africa the de facto leader of Africa's transition toward democracy.

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[2] The scores are on a 0-to-1 scale, with 1 being the highest level of development attainable.
[3] The PDCI had been Côte d'Ivoire's sole legal party since 1960.

To be sure, residues of authoritarianism lingered,

notably in the Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, and Togo. But no West African country entered the 21st century without undergoing some measure of democratic reform. By and large, West African countries came to be governed under (more or less) democratic constitutions. Significantly, many of the constitutions provide for some degree of separation of powers between the executive and judiciary, as well as an entrenched bill of rights anchoring independent judiciaries, public protectors, human-rights and anti-corruption commissions, and election management bodies. In a subregion notorious for its de jure or at least de facto "presidents for life" during its first 30 years of independence, the imposition of limits on the number of terms a president is allowed to serve (ranging from Ghana's two four-year terms to Senegal's two seven-year terms) may be the most important measure of the degree of constitutionalism in the new democratic era.

Moreover, parliaments in West African nations have grown stronger,

making some level of legislative oversight over the presidency and executive branch not uncommon (at least in minimalist terms of endorsing executive-initiated legislation and nominations to ministerial positions, the annual budget, and public accounts). The Ibrahim Index of African Governance's scores on "legislative checks on the executive" for Benin (92.0 in 2011 and 2012, 86.5 in 2013 and 2014, and 92.5 in 2015) and for Ghana (88.8 in 2011, 82.4 in 2012-2014, and 86.7 in 2015) provide a measure of the progress some ECOWAS countries made during the period in this area of democratic governance.

An ever-expanding network

of private FM radio and free-to-air and cable television, newspapers, and magazines in many West African nations since the mid-1990s has significantly reduced the state's monopoly on the news media. Official censorship has been considerably relaxed in most countries, which has made it possible for nascent investigative journalistic practice to emerge and for the local media to occasionally expose official wrongdoing. No wonder that five of the eight African countries ranked in the top 50 on the 2002 Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index belong to the ECOWAS region.[4] From 2010 to 2015, the Ibrahim Index ratings of media freedom for the ECOWAS region ranged between 69.2 and 71.9, which was at least 10 points higher than the score obtained by every other African region in that period.

Associational freedoms have been similarly expanded,

which has enabled a civil society resurgence in the region, with national and subregional organizations undertaking a vast array of civic advocacy and other activities to countervail state and official power. They promote social, economic, and political inclusion as well as equity, clean elections, governmental transparency, and accountability, typically with financial, technical, and moral support from the international community.[5] The vibrancy of civil society in the 2010-2015 period was captured in the Ibrahim Index's 59.8 average score for "civic checks and balances" in the ECOWAS region – an indicator of the degree of involvement of cooperative associations, interest groups, and civil society organizations in national-level policy making. This is the highest score for any region in Africa over the period.

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[4] Cabo Verde, Benin, Senegal, Mali, and Nigeria. Reporters Without Borders, "Reporters Without Borders publishes the first worldwide press freedom index," October 2002

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Senegal.

It is also noteworthy that the AU and ECOWAS now routinely deploy teams to independently monitor elections in member countries.

Yet another measure of the embrace of democratic norms

in the subregion, even if largely symbolic, may be found in the Economic Community of West African States Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance A/SP1/12/01 Supplementary to the Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping, and Security enacted some 20 years ago. Together with other pro-democracy conventions and protocols adopted by the African Union (AU), which denies official recognition to governments and leaders who ascend to power through "unconstitutional" means, ECOWAS effectively proscribes change of government through military coups.[6] The enforcement of

regional pro-democracy conventions and protocols resulted in ECOWAS's denial of official recognition to and suspension of membership of the governments of Togo (2005), Guinea (2008-2009), Niger (2009-2011), Côte d'Ivoire (2010-2011), and Mali (2012). This contrasts sharply with the situation prevailing before the 1990s, when military despots were a common sight at meetings of African heads of state. It is also noteworthy that the AU and ECOWAS now routinely deploy teams to independently monitor elections in member countries. Levels of democratic governance in African countries are also among the items assessed under the AU/New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM).

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[5] Examples include the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP), founded in 1998, which undertakes advocacy with a focus on peacebuilding, human rights, and anti-corruption; the Center for Democracy and Development (West Africa/Nigeria) and the Ghana Center for Democratic Development, created in the late 1990s to complement broader national and subregional efforts to strengthen democracy and accountable governance; the Coalition of Domestic Election Observers (CODEO) and West Africa Election Observers Network (WAEON), which promote election fairness and integrity; and the Media Foundation for West Africa, which has been championing media freedom and professionalism.

[6] See the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, 30 January 2007; NEPAD Declaration on Democracy, Political, Economic and Corporate Governance, 18 June 2002; and Economic Community of West African States Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance A/SP1/12/01 Supplementary to the Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security, 1 January 2001

Freedom House's Freedom in the World ratings provide a measure of West Africa's political liberalization progress in the decade after the 1990s democratic transitions. On average over the decade 1981-1990, nine of the 15 ECOWAS countries were rated annually as "not free." That number decreased to five for the decade 1991-2000, and then to three for the decade 2001-2010.

Correspondingly, figures for ECOWAS countries rated "partially free" and "free," respectively, increased from five and one over the decade 1981-1990 to seven and three over the decade 1991-2000, to eight and four over the decade 2001-2010. Similarly, Freedom House's rating for political rights in the 15 ECOWAS member countries was 5.53 in 1990. By 2000, this had improved considerably, to 3.93, and by 2010, it was 3.8.

On average over the decade 1981-1990, nine of the 15 ECOWAS countries were rated annually as "not free."

II. Peace and development dividends of West African democratization

Long perceived as one of Africa's most violent regions, West Africa was to enjoy significant peace and stability in the first decade and a half of the new millennium.

It may be difficult to establish a direct causal link between the democratic reforms of the 1990s and the unprecedented peace that prevailed in the subregion during the period. And indeed, disputes over the outcomes of multiparty elections triggered violent conflicts and civil wars in West African nations such as Nigeria, Liberia, and Sierra Leone.

Still, the democratization of political systems – particularly constitutionalism, including independent judiciaries and election management bodies and constitutional limits on presidential tenure – significantly contributed to making orderly political succession (instead of military coups) a regular feature of politics in West Africa. Credible elections became a key instrument in restoring peace and stability in several war-ravaged countries. For example, the elections that brought Ahmad Tejan Kabbah back to power in 2002 paved the way for the restoration of peace and post-war reconstruction in Sierra Leone. And the end of the Second Liberian Civil War was officially affirmed with the election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf as president in the 2005 polls.

It may be reasonably argued that regularly scheduled elections with the reasonable expectation among competing parties and candidates that power would be handed over to the legitimate winners were a key factor in the near-disappearance of military coups in the region during this period. And as perceptively noted by Alexandre Marc, Neelam Verjee, and Stephen Mogaka, the incidence of civil war in West Africa dropped off dramatically at the beginning of the new millennium, "suggesting large-scale political violence is on the wane."[7] Battle deaths declined across the subregion. Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea-Bissau entered a post-conflict stage and successfully conducted multiparty elections. After a brief relapse in 2010 following elections, Côte d'Ivoire returned to stability.[8]

[7] Marc, Alexandre, Neelam Verjee, and Stephen Mogaka. "Responding to the challenge of fragility and security in West Africa" (2015). Fragility, Conflict, and Violence Group, World Bank.
[8] According to Benjamin Maiangwa, unconstitutional changes of government accounted for a high percentage of the conflicts in the ECOWAS region in the period 1989-2020. These included Liberia (1989-2005), Sierra Leone (1991-2002), Côte d'Ivoire (1992-2002 and 2010-2011), Guinea Conakry (2007-2010), and Guinea-Bissau (2005-2009). See Benjamin Maiangwa, "Has ECOWAS made West Africa a safer place? Yes, but its track record is lumpy." 31 March 2021

To be sure, intensely fraught multiparty politics and rigged elections provoked bitter sectarian conflict, military coups, and civil war in the 1990s in Côte d'Ivoire, which shattered that country's 30-year record of ethnic harmony and prosperity. But no other West African country was in economic and social development distress during its democratic transition.[9] Rather, democracy's socio-economic development "advantage" was very much on display in the subregion in the first 10-15 years of the new millennium. Nigeria enjoyed significant stability and economic recovery in the 2000s after it rid itself of General Sani Abacha's brutal dictatorship. Indeed, achievement of peace and resumption of economic growth in Sierra Leone and Liberia since the 2000s are closely related to the democratic settlement (internationally supervised credible elections and orderly transfer of power) in the two countries. The 2000s saw Ghana enter a new growth phase, producing a remarkable increase in the size of its economy in less than a decade and becoming a lower-middle-income country. The period also saw poverty levels reduced to less than 30% by 2007 (from nearly 40% in 1998-1999, and well on target to reach the UN Millennium Development Goal), as well as impressive human resource development initiatives (including national health insurance, capitation grants for students in basic schools, and a pilot school feeding program) and substantial investments in infrastructural development (including a new dam and hydro-electricity project).

Vast improvements in the economic performance of West African nations in the 2000s (relative to the previous decade) are reflected in statistics from the World Bank and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Over the period 1980-1990, the average rate of annual GDP growth for the 15 countries that currently comprise the ECOWAS was 1.98%. The same 15 countries averaged an annual GDP growth rate of 3.76% over the next decade (when the region's democratic transitions were in bloom). And in the first decade of the 21st century, they averaged 4.38%. On the UNDP's Human Development Index (HDI),[10] the 15 ECOWAS countries recorded an average of 0.169 in 1992. By 2010, this average would more than double, reaching 0.374.

West African economic and social development progress in the 2000s no doubt benefited greatly from the relatively generous international development finance environment of that period. Progress on democratic governance became part of the eligibility criteria for concessionary development assistance and grants from Western/G7 nations and multilateral/international financial agencies. The era's aid modalities,[11] such as debt relief for highly indebted poor countries (HIPC), Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) budget support, and the U.S. government's Millennium Challenge Account grants, heavily favoured countries that the West deemed to be doing well on the "good governance" front. But the story of Guinea-Bissau provides a fair illustration of the fate that was to befall the few countries in the region that largely skipped the third wave of democratization in the 1990s and 2000s.

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[9] Alexandre et al., op. cit.
[10] HDI scores range from 0 to 1, with 0 indicating the lowest quality of life possible in a country and 1 indicating the highest quality of life.

MAURITANIA

MALI

N

SENEGAL

GUINEA

BURKINA FASO

TOGO

BENIN

NIG

SIERRA LEONE

IVORY COAST (CÔTE D'IVOIRE)

GHANA

LIBERIA

Togolese man, Lome, Togo.

The scramble for power among the country's elite essentially eliminated the voice of the people in the governance of the country and left the state and economy at the mercy of leaders enjoying unfettered impunity.

Attempts at sustaining the democratic framework instituted in Guinea-Bissau in 1994 were swiftly suppressed with brute force. The scramble for power among the country's elite essentially eliminated the voice of the people in the governance of the country and left the state and economy at the mercy of leaders enjoying unfettered impunity. At the same time, the country was unable to harness its oil and other mineral resources for its own progress. Constant military interference and corruption made the country a sweet spot for Latin American drug cartels, giving Guinea-Bissau the reputation of a narco-state. The narco-political economy also saddled the country with economic oligarchs wielding enormous power but not democratically accountable. As a result, a country geographically well-positioned to take advantage of global trade has remained abysmally poor – ranked as "low" on the HDI in 2020, with a score of 0.48. The World Bank estimates that as of 2019, Guinea-Bissau had a per capita GDP of $697, compared to an ECOWAS regional average of $1,297.

[11] The Millennium Challenge Corporation provides grants to countries that have been determined to have good economic policies and potential for economic growth within a sound democratic framework. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Multi-Donor Budget Support was not merely a financing instrument; it was also an instrument with the potential to promote, in the long run, support democratic accountability.

III. The subregion's democratic governance backsliding in recent years

West Africa's reputation as a trailblazer in democratic governance in Africa still holds true in many ways. For the most part, leaders in the subregion continue to be chosen through electoral processes that are largely democratic.

Most incumbents have observed presidential term limits, including the recent example in Niger, where Mahamadou Issoufou has become the first president in that country's history to peacefully hand over power upon the conclusion of his term. However, more recent developments in West Africa present a far less sanguine picture of democracy and governance. While the ballot box has remained the chief mechanism for choosing leaders, election quality is declining.

Incumbent presidents have become bolder in their vote-rigging and opposition-suppression schemes, apparently taking advantage of the West's distracted attention (focused instead on combating violent extremism and other geopolitical threats) as well as lax enforcement of democracy and clean-election protocols by African continental and subregional bodies. Tell-tale signs of declining election competitiveness and quality in the region include the low voter turnout recorded in Nigeria (34.75% in 2019), Benin (50% in 2021), Burkina Faso (50% in 2020), and Côte d'Ivoire (54% in 2021). Incredibly large margins have marked victories by incumbent presidents, particularly

those controversially seeking third terms, such as Alassane Ouattara's 94% in Côte d'Ivoire (2020), Patrice Talon's 86% in Benin (2021), and Faure Gnassingbé's 71% in Togo (2020).

Moreover, elections in the ECOWAS region are increasingly rife with intimidation and violence. About 20 Guineans were killed during violent disputes over that country's October 2020 elections, in which the 82-year-old Alpha Condé, who had already served the permitted maximum two terms, was again declared winner. Ouattara's vote margin reflects the controversy that surrounded that election, which was largely boycotted by the opposition and fraught with irregularities and violence that claimed the lives of about 85 Ivoirians.

There is also evidence of a resurgent willingness to circumvent the ballot box as the sole acceptable means of political change. Recent developments in Mali and Niger raise justifiable concerns about the specter of the return of the gun as a regime-changing tool in West Africa. A unit of Niger's military attempted a coup in March 2021, just days ahead of the scheduled inauguration of a newly

elected president. Worse still, a military coup in Mali has removed the president and prime minister of an interim government put in place by ECOWAS leaders, less than a year after a coup toppled the government of Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta and dissolved the National Assembly and Constitutional Court. The leader of both coups, Col. Assimi Goïta, has now installed himself as president of the transition government.[12]

Signs abound that democracy may be receding in some West African countries. High hopes for democratic renewal in the Gambia after the removal of long-ruling dictator Yahyah Jammeh (by Gambian citizens with the help of ECOWAS) have largely failed to materialize. In Nigeria, the government's brutal crackdown on youthful #EndSARS protesters against police abuses was a reminder of that country's checkered democratic-governance record.

In a region that came close to adopting constitutional term limits as an ECOWAS regional norm just a few years ago,[13] moves by incumbent presidents to extend their tenure beyond the constitutionally allowable limit are becoming commonplace. This was quite a rare occurrence in West Africa when Blaise Compaoré made an ill-fated attempt to change Burkina Faso's constitution via referendum in October 2014. But democratically elected presidents in Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, and Togo have all recently won third terms in breach of term-limit provisions in their constitutions, provoking constitutional crises and violent protests typically led by the youth. In Guinea, Condé – who had ridden to power on a wave of

street protests against perpetual incumbency – claimed a third term despite widespread opposition and fatalities associated with his inauguration. And through his parliamentary allies, President Adama Barrow has managed to block a term-limit provision in the new Gambian constitution. .

Opposition parties persist, but their activities and leadership are increasingly circumscribed or even criminalized. For instance, during his first five-year term as president, Benin's Talon jailed opposition candidates or forced them into exile, including the first and second runners-up in the 2016 polls, Lionel Zinsou and Sebastien Ajavon; the country's first female presidential candidate, Reckya Madougou, was charged with terrorism just one week ahead of the 2021 polls.

Talon's moves demonstrate that disturbing signs of democratic stagnation and regression have emerged even in countries widely regarded as some of the continent's best democratic performers. Ranked as "free" by Freedom House since the early days of its political transition, Benin dropped to "partly free" in 2019.[14] The outcome of presidential polls in March was never in doubt, as Talon has systematically dismantled the institutions essential for preserving pluralism and maintaining checks and balances. He put his former personal lawyer in charge of the country's previously distinguished Constitutional Court, engineered a de facto one-party legislature by barring opposition parties from fielding candidates in the 2019 parliamentary polls,

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[12] Events in Burkina Faso may have been harbingers of this retrogressive development in West Africa. In 2014, a popular uprising overthrew longtime President Blaise Compaoré. An army unit loyal to the ousted president staged a coup in September 2015, just one month ahead of planned general elections, though it was foiled by a popular movement.
[13] CGTN Africa, "Gambia and Togo oppose presidential term limits," May 20, 2015, https://africa.cgtn.com/2015/05/20/gambia-and-togo-oppose-presidential-term-limits/
[14] A full set of Freedom House's country status assessments and scores from 1973 to 2021 can be found at https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world, in the document titled "Country and Territory Ratings and Statuses, 1973-2021 (Excel Download)."

President Macky Sall has changed election and defamation laws to constrain the opposition and the media.

and imposed a virtual media blackout on the presidential campaign. Senegal, too, enjoyed a "free" ranking in 2002-2007 and 2012-2018 but has slipped back to "partly free" status. President Macky Sall has changed election and defamation laws to constrain the opposition and the media. In early March, he imposed an Internet blackout in an attempt to quell widespread urban protests following the government's controversial prosecution of opposition leader Ousmane Sonko for alleged rape.

Threats to democracy are even observed in Ghana, which continues to earn a "free" ranking first bestowed in 2000. Parliament has ratified developmentally questionable international agreements submitted by the executive branch, often under "certificates of urgency".[15]

The special prosecutor, whose office was established in 2018 as part of the government's anti-graft efforts, resigned in 2020, alleging government attempts to downplay and interfere with his report. This trend extends into the protection of rights and freedoms, as demonstrated by attacks by homophobic individuals and state officials on groups they think are supportive of LGBTQ rights.

Regression in the status of the region's democracy is reflected in the Global Freedom Status rankings in Freedom House's 2021 Freedom in the World report: Five of Africa's 12 worst performers are in West Africa (Benin, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali, and Nigeria). Senegal and Benin both fell from the "free" category to being "partially free" between the 2019 and 2020 reports. Benin alone lost 13 points on the report's 100-point scale, a remarkable drop for any democracy. This leaves Ghana and Cabo Verde as the only "free" countries in the region.

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[15] These include the 2018 Sinohydro bauxite mining deal with China, whose environmental risks include possible damage to the Atewa rainforest, the source of some of Ghana's major rivers. Another, the Agyapa minerals royalties deal, was hurriedly passed in 2020 despite an opposition boycott and red flags from Ghanaian and international media and anti-corruption watchdog groups. See Amin, K. (2020). Ghana: What is going on with the controversial Agyapa Gold Royalties deal? Transparency International. 26 November.

IV. Factors accounting for West Africa' democratic governance backsliding

Domestic Factors

Despite the institution of formal constitutional rule, many West African constitutions remain bereft of the spirit of constitutionalism. [16]

Even in the few advanced constitutional democracies, such as Ghana and Senegal, political, economic, and symbolic power continues to be concentrated in the executive (and arguably in the ruling party, which often is the president's party). Broad discretion in the exercise of authority enjoyed by presidents and their appointees effectively negates the voice of the people as expressed via elections, print and electronic media, and even lawsuits.

More than anything, the unwillingness of political elites – particularly presidents – to relinquish authoritarian control has stymied democratic progress in the region. Leaders tend to be either uninterested in or hostile toward reforms that might rein in their power, strengthen institutional checks and balances, or mandate compliance with transparency and accountability obligations (such as freedom-of-information laws or the mandatory disclosure of public officeholders' assets). Pro-democracy reform efforts, particularly those promoting constitutionalism, have been blocked and/or manipulated in Benin, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Mali, Senegal, and Côte d'Ivoire in recent years. Condé's proposals to amend the Guinean constitution last year included highly progressive provisions such as banning female genital mutilation and under-age and forced marriages, giving spouses equal rights in a divorce, declaring that no one gender would make up more than two-thirds of government institutions, ensuring fairer distribution of wealth in favour of young people and the poor, and lowering the minimum age for parliamentary candidature to 18 years. But they were offered largely as "sweeteners" to gain voters' approval in the controversial referendum to amend the constitution to allow for a third term.

[16] Prempeh, H. Kwasi. "Progress and retreat in Africa: Presidents untamed." Journal of Democracy, 19(2), (2008), 109-123.

Following the broad acceptance as the sole legitimate mechanism through which political power may be acquired, elections have become the principal focus of domestic political competition in Africa.[17] Polls have come to represent the first line of battle in the proxy war for democracy and then state capture. In West African countries, as elsewhere, this begins with the co-optation of election management bodies by incumbents and their parties, who stack them with partisan hacks (whose complicity and connivance are essential to the retention of political power). Gerrymandering ensures a parliamentary majority for the president's party and facilitates making the legislature a rubber stamp for presidential decisions.

Manipulation of the electoral process has also commonly involved voter suppression through restrictive voter-registration laws, padding of the voter roll with "ghost names," and voter intimidation. Ballot tampering, ballot-box stuffing, willful wrong vote tallying or results announcement, and hacking into poll results transmission systems are other forms of electoral fraud deployed in democracy-capture schemes.[18] In Nigeria's 2019 gubernatorial elections in Kano, for example, election assistants allege that thugs chased away helpers from the opposition PDP party; stuffed fake papers into the ballot boxes; put a second thumbprint on papers favouring the PDP, thereby invalidating them; and threatened election assistants with death if they didn't go along with the rigging and confirm the false results.[19] In Benin's presidential elections this year, reports alleged widespread ballot-box stuffing, sequestration of observers, and intimidation of voters.[20]

The growing presence of international media and PR consultants brings additional challenges for democratic politics, particularly for election integrity, in West Africa. De facto power-holders are increasingly resorting to the services of these high-priced firms to launder their image and to conduct and disseminate the results of "opposition research." Recent examples of this type of electoral malpractice in Africa include the reported involvement of the British political consulting firm Cambridge Analytica in Nigeria's 2015 elections. A Nigerian billionaire supporting the candidature of President Goodluck Jonathan is reported to have paid the firm an estimated £2 million for activities aimed at undermining opposition candidate Muhammadu Buhari's campaign. This included the reported hacking of the opposition leader's emails to access his health records.[21]

Election campaigns, including primaries and other internal party polls, have become extremely expensive. They are key drivers of the escalating cost and increasing monetization of politics in African democracies. Desperate to achieve success at any cost, unprincipled parties and candidates in African elections, source funds from a variety of donors,

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[17] This explains the great lengths to which presidents have gone (e.g. constitution manipulation, voter suppression, intimidation and harassment of political opponents) to win victory at the polls in Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, and Benin in the past seven months.
[18] Cheeseman, Nic, and Brian Klaas. How to rig an election. Yale University Press, 2018.
[19] Sandner, Philipp. "Violence and fraud in Nigeria's gubernatorial elections." DW, June 23, 2021, https://www.dw.com/en/violence-and-fraud-in-nigerias-gubernatorial-elections/a-48083171
[20] Sasse, Allegresse, Aaron Ross and Frances Kerry. "Vote counting in Benin after election marked by violent protests." Reuters. April 11,2021. https://www.reuters.com/world/benin-votes-president-after-week-violent-protests-2021-04-11/
[21] Cadwalladr, Carole. Cambridge Analytica was offered politicians' hacked emails, say witnesses. (2018).

The domestic political economy is another hurdle obstructing West African democratization. West African economies have posted high growth rates in recent years. The regional average for the past 10 years was 5.08%.

including crooked local and external investors, especially those seeking to secure sweetheart deals in the oil, gas, and other extractive-commodity sectors.

The domestic political economy is another hurdle obstructing West African democratization. West African economies have posted high growth rates in recent years. The regional average for the past 10 years was 5.08%; in 2013, Côte d'Ivoire's GDP grew by 8.9%, and Ghana's by 8%. Yet that growth has not always been matched by more jobs, and its benefits have not been shared evenly among citizens. The masses of poor people who have been left behind economically are susceptible to vote-buying and recruitment into partisan thuggery, which presents a mortal danger to democracy in the region.

State dominance over the formal economy has remained largely intact despite the economic liberalization programs of the 1980s and 1990s and the sway of globalization. The domestic private sector typically is weak and small (though much larger today than it was in the first two decades of independence). This leaves the state as the key source of formal-sector employment; the chief dispenser of coveted land, mineral, forestry, and other natural resources; and the source of lucrative construction and supply contracts. Extremely limited opportunities outside the state sector for accumulating personal wealth and influence make capturing the state and the economic, political, and social resources that it controls the main object of electoral competition in West African polities. This dynamic is a key driver of the clientelization of democratic politics in Africa. The state's dominance of economic opportunity in West African nations is also a source of the pervasive fear of government reprisals and the resultant self-censorship among citizens, including journalists and civil society actors. State dominance of export commodities, particularly oil, gas, and other extractives that are typically controlled by the central government, also undermines accountable government, as does West African governments' extremely limited reliance on domestic taxation.

Lingering authoritarian political culture, rooted in the status quo ante of precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial Africa, is another factor hampering democratization's progress in West Africa. Manifestations of deficits in democratic citizenship and civic culture suggest little regard for the deep values of democracy such as tolerance and respect for the rights of minorities.[22]

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[22] This is echoed in instances of citizens and the press in the region's democracies goading their governments to pass legislation to criminalize homosexuality because they believe that such laws would protect religious and community values. In the latest round of Afrobarometer surveys, only one in seven adult West Africans (14%) say they would "strongly like," would "somewhat like," or "would not care" if they lived next door to homosexuals (see Figure 1 in the Appendix).

This vestige of "divide and conquer" under colonial rule still plagues democratic politics in the region, and has produced devastating outcomes in Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone, among others.

Afrobarometer survey findings reveal a relatively weak sense of civic duty among West Africans. Only four in 10 citizens (41%) in the region believe it is voters' responsibility to ensure that members of Parliament (MPs) do their job; a majority (55%) assign this responsibility to the president, to local government councillors, to the MPs themselves, or to their political parties (Figure 2). Similarly, only four in 10 (39%) citizens think it is the voters' responsibility to ensure the president does his job, and almost six in 10 (56%) assign this responsibility to the elected officials or their political parties (Figure 3). Recognition of the voter's watchdog responsibility over the president is as low as one in four in Nigeria (25%), and not much higher in Niger (29%), Senegal (30%), Guinea (30%), and Mali (31%). And West Africans, like other Africans, are far more likely to contact informal leaders than their elected representatives. Four in 10 (42%) say they contacted a traditional leader at least once during the previous year about important problems, about three times the proportion who contacted an MP (13%) (Figure 4). Only a quarter (25%) say they contacted their local government councillor, while 21% contacted a political party official.

Though somewhat abated, ethno-regional divisions continue to be a common feature of West African polities. This vestige of "divide and conquer" under colonial rule still plagues democratic politics in the region, and has produced devastating outcomes in Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone, among others. It facilitates the mobilization of voters along sectarian lines, fosters winner-take-all and non-inclusive approaches to politics and to the sharing of dividends of economic growth, and enables corruption, nepotism, and impunity – all of which engender feelings of exclusion and undermine faith in democratic institutions and processes.

EXTERNAL FACTORS

The external environment for democratization in West Africa has also become increasingly inauspicious – in marked contrast to the global and regional setting that prevailed in the first decade and a half of the subregion's democratic rebirth. The embrace of democratic-governance ideals by African regional bodies and political leadership in the early 2000s has proved short-lived. The New Partnership for African Development's African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), initially touted as an example of the pro-democracy orientation of a new breed of African leaders, has lost steam. The promise of peer appraisal of an African nation's democratic-governance achievements and shortcomings per common benchmarks has largely faded away. APRM assessment standards and protocols have been progressively diluted, and less-than-clear metrics are now being used, apparently to accommodate those typically reluctant democrats, incumbent leaders; the whole exercise lacks clear consequences for good or poor performance.

Above all, the West African democratic governance project

suffers from the absence of robust champions of democratic governance. In the 2000s, the region was lucky to have towering leaders with an unambiguous commitment to democratic principles and practices, such as presidents John Kufuor, Abdoulaye Wade, Olusegun Obasanjo, and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who were also avid promoters of the NEPAD/APRM. Together with the iconic Kofi Annan and the skillful international public servant Mohamed Ibn Chambas, they intervened to de-escalate the wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia and facilitate democratic elections. By contrast, today's ECOWAS leaders may appear more committed to the region's economic rather than constitutional convergence.

The same can be said of inadequate ECOWAS and AU mechanisms for systematically

monitoring developments within West African states and alerting the community at large about emerging threats to democracy. This leaves reaction rather than prevention as the only option available to regional leaders in the event of a serious crisis.[23]

The global environment has been no less discouraging of West African democratic

development in the past decade. As the pro-democracy impetus that emerged from post–Cold War international events has receded in recent years, so, too, has the external aid that it generated for African pro-democracy movements and processes (local Transparency International chapters, domestic election-watchdog organizations, and other public-accountability advocacy groups). This unfavourable trend has been driven by a number of developments, roughly dating from the end of the first decade of the new millennium, particularly the 2008-2009 global financial and energy crisis, which heightened Western nations' preoccupation with redressing resultant domestic and regional economic and social dislocations. It caused some Western governments to de-emphasize democratic governance in their foreign policy and development partnership designs in favour of more transactional approaches to their Africa policy and diplomatic relationships. Their economic and political-diplomatic initiatives toward West Africa over the next decade were to become more sharply focused on securing geo-strategic and commercial advantages such as energy and markets, stemming illegal migration, and countering terrorism as well as the growing influence of China and other new major actors in Africa.[24]

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[23] The value of proactive regional leaders' intervention was demonstrated in Togo in 2005 when the country was on the verge of a major political crisis following the death of long-serving President Gnassingbé Eyadéma. The military's quick move to install his son, Faure Gnassingbé, as president provoked intense opposition. Citing the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance provision that "every accession to power" be made "through free, fair and transparent elections," ECOWAS leaders compelled Gnassingbé to relinquish power and hold elections, which he won. Violent conflict was averted, and a semblance of democratic order was restored. This compares favourably with ECOWAS actions and inactions regarding Benin. Benin's democracy has been in decline since 2010, as ECOWAS and regional leaders have looked on. Freedom House has downgraded Benin's democracy from "free" to "partly free," and the Economist Intelligence Unit downgraded it from a "flawed democracy" to a "hybrid regime."

[24] The West's growing inclination toward keeping dealings with West African leaders expressly transactional was clearly expressed in the rather loud silence of France and the United States regarding Ouattara's third-term bid in Côte d'Ivoire. Ouattara forced one of his main rivals, Guillaume Soro, into exile in December 2019. Subsequently, Soro has been sentenced to life imprisonment in absentia, and his political movement has been dissolved. The French, who commended Ouattara when he initially announced that he would not be running for re-election after his second term, went silent after he changed his mind.

Though it appears to be receding now, the recent global extractive-commodity boom has also negatively impacted democratization in West Africa, particularly in resource-rich nations such as Nigeria, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea. The boom increased the region's appeal to China and other fast-growing non-Western economies that care little about accountable governance in their client states and external partners.[25] The new patrons' vigorous courtship is providing national governments with alternative non-Western markets, trade partners, and sources of military and development aid. With an enhanced ability to enter into barter agreements for loans and secure credit from international capital markets, resource-rich West African countries are now less dependent on foreign (especially Western) aid, with all its accountable-governance and other conditionalities. Incidentally, the governments of these resource-rich African countries are also less reliant on the taxation of their citizens, which typically generates bottom-up demands for accountable governance.

Unfortunately, democratization has done little to tame kleptocratic politicians and their cronies in West African states. Worse still, their looting activities are well served by the proliferation of fail-safe offshore platforms in places like Malaysia, the United Arab Emirates, the Caymans, and the Virgin Islands. In Nigeria, while the Federal and Delta State governments continue to lock horns over £4.2 million returned after being stolen by former governor James Onanefe Ibori,[26] economists, legal practitioners, and civil society organizations have expressed concerns over indications that returned loot, such as $1.5 billion returned after being looted by former President Abacha, is being re-looted. The country's Economic and Financial Crimes Commission said the value of jewelry seized from former Minister of Petroleum Resources Diezani Alison-Madueke stood in excess of $35 million, while retrieved funds in excess of $60 billion from illegal oil deals, said to have been hidden in Texas bank accounts by suspect public officials at the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation, are alleged by the Special Presidential Investigation Panel to have been misappropriated by top government officials.[27] The Panama Papers, a dossier on financial and attorney-client information for more than 214,488 offshore entities that was leaked in 2016, detail how Togo's vast reserves of phosphates, which are directly managed from the office of President Gnassingbé, were sold for two-thirds of the going rate, with the proceeds stashed in offshore accounts.[28]

The recent decline of democracy in the West, and in the United States in particular, has severely damaged their ability to stand up for democracy in West Africa and elsewhere. Indeed, the assault by then-President Donald Trump and his associates on U.S. democratic institutions, processes, and values was a precious propaganda gift to West African leaders and their allies inclined toward authoritarianism and anti-democratic governance.

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[25] Indeed, China is pushing an alternative non-democratic, but ostensibly superior, development model.

[26] BBC, "James Ibori: UK returns $5.8m stolen by ex-governor to Nigeria," May 18, 2021 https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-57161645.

[27] Guardian Nigeria, "Concerns over alleged re-looting of over $1.5b Abacha booty," May 21, 2021, https://guardian.ng/news/concerns-over-alleged-re-looting-of-over-1-5b-abacha-booty/

[28] DW, "Panama Papers: Africa's elite are plundering their countries," October 18, 2017, https://www.dw.com/en/panama-papers-africas-elite-are-plundering-their-countries/a-41004488

The past seven years or so have seen the dramatic rise of rightwing populist parties and leaders in the United States, Europe, Asia, and Latin America, undermining institutional checks and balances and the rule of law as these leaders try to consolidate their grip on political power. West Africa's elected officials are finding great comfort in the resurgence of illiberal role models provided by China's Xi Jinping, Russia's Vladimir Putin, and Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, as well as arguably Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro, Hungary's Viktor Orbán, the Philippines' Rodrigo Duterte, and others.

RISKS TO DEMOCRACY, PEACE, AND DEVELOPMENT RELATED TO DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES

Digital technologies have undoubtedly brought significant advantages for the democratic-governance agenda in West Africa. They have greatly facilitated citizens' efforts to exact accountability from their government, as seen in the mobilization of the #EndSARS protesters in Nigeria. But as elsewhere in the world,[29] they also present grave dangers to democracy, peace, and development in West Africa.

The increasing use of expensive e-voting systems in West African elections – ranging from biometric voter registration and verification to electronic voting and results transmission – comes with serious risks to election fairness and integrity. National election management bodies (typically with the incumbent government's support) have entered into procurement agreements with vendors in an industry that is, so far, poorly regulated, making the technologies highly favourable to incumbent presidential candidates and parties. The risks of collusion between buyers and vendors and between election management bodies and incumbent parties are also high for technologies that are generally poorly understood by independent poll watchers and the public, susceptible to hacking, and vulnerable to rogue vendors who can create backdoor channels to allow access to "unauthorized persons."[30]

Unfortunately, democratization has done little to tame kleptocratic politicians and their cronies in West African states. Worse still, their looting activities are well served by the proliferation of fail-safe offshore platforms in places like Malaysia, the United Arab Emirates, the Caymans, and the Virgin Islands.

[29] See "Technology doesn't stand still, neither can democracy." Commission on Elections and Democracy in the Digital Age, launched in January 2019 at Stanford University. An initiative of the late UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, the commission aimed at prompting countries that have few, if any, defensive mechanisms against 21st-century threats to the integrity of elections. launched in January 2019 at Stanford University. An initiative of the late UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, the commission aimed at prompting countries that have few, if any, defensive mechanisms against 21st-century threats to the integrity of elections.
[30] Cheeseman, Nic, Gabrielle Lynch & Justin Willis. (2018) "Digital dilemmas: The unintended consequences of election technology." Democratization, DOI:10.1080/13510347.2018.1470165

Meanwhile, advances in information technology have increased avenues for West Africans to access and consume information, but the same digital technologies have also vastly expanded possibilities for spreading misinformation, fueling polarization, and manipulating citizens through the creation and dissemination of fake news.[31] Encrypted peer-to-peer platforms such as WhatsApp and other social media have been deployed to spread rumors and stoke violence, and fake news has been micro-targeted at specific communities to stir violence and attempt to sway elections.

Governments may have legitimate reasons for acquiring and deploying spyware and other digital surveillance technologies to protect public order and state security. But the same technologies are highly susceptible to deployment to curtail political freedoms and civil liberties. Such abusive use of digital technology has been reported in Benin, where government agents have deployed spyware to infiltrate and monitor the activities of journalist Ignace Soussou and others regarded as hostile to the president. Last year a court in Ghana sentenced three former senior government officials to jail terms for purchasing the Israeli surveillance firm NSO Group's spyware Pegasus, which allows agents to effectively take control of a phone, surreptitiously controlling its cameras and microphones from remote servers and vacuuming up personal data and geolocations.[32] Much as companies like NSO Group have claimed that they only license their software to governments for "fighting crime and terror" and that they investigate credible allegations of misuse, activists argue that the technology has instead been used for human rights abuses.

Similarly, last year Nigerian state security forces were suspected of using spyware to infiltrate and undermine #EndSARS protest organizers. This was after Front Line Defenders, a non-profit advocacy group for human rights, had concluded in a 2018 report that the Nigerian government "has conducted mass surveillance of citizens' telecommunications."[33]

VIOLENT EXTREMISM, INSURGENCY, OTHER GROWING SECURITY CHALLENGES, AND DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE IN WEST AFRICA

Some of the nastiest challenges confronting West Africa's democratic governance today, and contributing to its backsliding, may be best described as episodic. Key among them are the growing security threats in parts of the ECOWAS region. The aftermath of the "Arab Spring," and particularly the civil war in Libya and the death of Muammar Gaddafi, have thrown up multiple security challenges for West Africa, especially in its Sahel regions.[34]

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[31] See Megan Forrester. (2020) Analysis | Fake news may contribute to political polarization. https://www.thepanthernewspaper.org/2020election/analysis-fake-news-may-contribute-to-political-polarization

[32] Times of Israel. "Ghana jails 3 ex-government officials for spyware deal with Israel's NSO Group." May 13, 2020. https://www.timesofisrael.com/ghana-jails-3-ex-government-officials-for-spyware-deal-with-israels-nso-group/

[33] "Ghana jails 3 ex-government officials for spyware deal with Israel's NSO Group" https://www.timesofisrael.com/ghana-jails-3-ex-government-officials-for-spyware-deal-with-israels-nso-group/

[34] Kwesi Aning, E., Frank O. Okyere, and Mustapha Abdallah. "Addressing emerging security threats in Post-Gaddafi Sahel and ECOWAS Response to the Malian Crises." (2012). https://www.africaportal.org/publications/addressing-emerging-security-threats-in-post-gaddafi-sahel-and-ecowas-response-to-the-malian-crises/

In Niger and Mali, tensions and outbreaks of violence between government forces and Tuareg rebels and other ethnic groups from the northern parts of both countries have become more frequent and deadly since the death of Gaddafi and the return of the Tuareg and other mercenaries who had fought on his side. The resultant spread of extremism, radicalization, illicit trafficking, and terrorism has greatly compounded the security threats posed by existing complex and unresolved governance challenges (notably corruption, economic mismanagement, and social, political, and economic exclusion) in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, northern Nigeria, and Senegal. But these growing security threats also appear to provide convenient cover for democratically elected governments to abridge freedoms and retreat from democracy. The Malian defense and security forces were reportedly behind dozens of forced disappearances and executions in their bid to counter terrorism.[35] In March and April 2020, Niger's army reportedly enforced the disappearance of about 100 citizens as part of its Operation Almahou counter-terrorism program, while about 30 Burkinabè were arrested and extrajudicially killed by the Groupement des Forces Anti-Terroristes.[36] And in spite of rampant extrajudicial killings, the 300,000 troops of the Nigerian Armed Forces and a $2 billion budget have failed to extirpate Boko Haram, thanks to corruption and inconsistent leadership from officers and politicians.[37]

COVID-19'S IMPACT ON DEMOCRACY, GOOD GOVERNANCE, AND ELECTORAL INTEGRITY

COVID-19 has brought new threats to democratic processes across West Africa. The pandemic triggered excessive coercion in the enforcement of public health measures; at one point, more Nigerian citizens had reportedly been killed by security agents "enforcing" pandemic-related restrictions than by the coronavirus.[38] Some governments took advantage of the pandemic to introduce repressive legislation and curb civil liberties and media freedoms – with the risk that they may extend COVID-19 emergency measures beyond the needs of the moment.[39] Activists and journalists have been harassed and arrested for releasing government statistics or otherwise reporting on COVID-19 in Senegal, Nigeria, and elsewhere on the continent.[40] And numerous governments have used concerns about purported sharing of fake news about the pandemic as a pretext to restrict media and information sharing.[41]

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[35] U.S. Embassy in Mali, "Country reports on Mali" Bamako, 2020, https://libguides.westsoundacademy.org/c.php?g=457482&p=3155657

[36] Amnesty International, "Sahel: Soldiers rampage through villages killing people under guise of anti-terror operations," June 10, 2020. https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/06/sahel-soldiers-rampage-through-villages-killing-people/

[37] Rotberg, Robert I. and John Campbell. "Buhari's Nigeria is a failed state," Foreign Policy. May 27, 2021. https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/05/27/nigeria-is-a-failed-state/

[38] BBC. "Coronavirus: Security forces kill more Nigerians than Covid-19." April 16, 2020. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52317196

[39] Gyimah-Boadi, E., and Carolyn Logan. "Global response to COVID-19 in Africa must protect lives, livelihoods, and freedoms." OECD Development Matters. April 8, 2020. https://oecd-development-matters.org/2020/04/08/global-response-to-covid-19-in-africa-must-protect-lives-livelihoods-and-freedoms/

[40] Repucci, Sarah & Amy Slipowitz, Freedom in the world 2021: Democracy under siege. Freedom House. https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2021/democracy-under-siege

[41] Asunka, Joseph, and Carolyn Logan. "Access denied: Freedom of information in Africa falls short of public expectations." Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 452. (2021). https://afrobarometer.org/sites/default/files/publications/Dispatches/ad452-access_denied-freedom_of_information_in_africa_falls_short_of_public_expectations-afrobarometer_dispatch-17may21.pdf

Overriding institutional checks and balances and sidestepping democratic
processes such as legislative approval may have been justified by the exigencies of the COVID-19 pandemic. But for a region whose national constitutions have strong proclivities toward executive dominance, emergency powers come with a real risk of causing further damage to institutional safeguards. Similarly, involving the military and other armed security in the enforcement of COVID-19 restrictions and the distribution of pandemic-related relief packages may have been unavoidable, considering the administrative limitations of many West African states. But that also has come with the risk of increased state repression as well as exposure of state security personnel to corruption.

The COVID-19 pandemic is rife with opportunities for corruption, such
as fraud in the procurement of vaccines, over-pricing of supplies, diversion of dedicated resources, and unfair distribution of relief supplies.[42] Reports of irregularities and corruption in the management of COVID-19 relief items and funds in some West African countries (e.g. the Gambia, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone),[43] provoking uproar and protests in some of them, not only impede the effectiveness of those measures but also undermine the already low levels of popular trust in elected government leaders,[44] and even the legitimacy of core state institutions. The COVID-19 pandemic and related concerns about public safety, national security, and financial capability did introduce a genuine element of dilemma into decisions about whether to move ahead with national elections. Still, all elections scheduled for 2020 in West African countries took place with the exception of legislative and local government elections and referendums in Liberia, the Gambia, and Nigeria that were postponed to later in the year, confirming the regional norm of elections as the only legitimate mechanism for choosing governments.

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[42] World Justice Project. Corruption and the COVID-19 pandemic. 2020. https://worldjusticeproject.org/sites/default/files/documents/Corruption%20Design%20File%20V4.pdf

[43] For example, Nigeria reportedly received US$3.4 billion in emergency financial assistance from the International Monetary Fund in April 2020 to support its COVID-19 response. Two months later, Nigeria's Federal government announced a US$6 billion stimulus. Yet a survey by Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics found that by July 16, just 12.5% of the poorest quintile of respondents had received some form of food assistance since the pandemic began. Another nongovernmental organization known as CivicHive revealed through the Bureau of Public Procurement that the federal health ministry had spent $96,000 on 1,808 ordinary face masks.
Oduor, Michael. "Africa's Covid-19 corruption that outweighs pandemic," AfricaNews. May 25, 2021. https://www.africanews.com/2021/05/25/africa-s-covid-19-corruption-that-outweighs-pandemic/
Africa Briefing, "Covid-19 corruption spurs political upheaval across Africa." September 4, 2020. https://africabriefing.org/2020/09/covid-19-corruption-spurs-political-upheaval-across-africa/ (2020)
Financial Times, "Africa's Covid-19 corruption: 'Theft doesn't even stop during a pandemic.' " https://www.ft.com/content/617187c2-ab0b-4cf9-bdca-0aa246548745

[44] Trust in elected officials is already very low in West Africa. Across the 14 West African countries surveyed in Afrobarometer Round 8, only half (51%) say they trust the president and his officials "somewhat" or "a lot," while about four in 10 find their local government councillors (44%) and MPs (38%) trustworthy (Figure 5). These three institutions are least trusted in Nigeria and Liberia. Popular trust in all three institutions has declined since 2011/2013 – by 9 percentage points for the presidency, 5 points for local government councillors, and 13 points for MPs (Figure 6).
The correlation between trust and corruption is strong. For example, Pearson's r for the correlation between trust in the president and perceived corruption in the office of the president for Afrobarometer Round 7 is -.387, significant at the 0.01 level. See Bratton, Michael, and E. Gyimah-Boadi. "Do trustworthy institutions matter for development? Corruption, trust, and government performance in Africa." Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 112. (2016). https://afrobarometer.org/sites/default/files/publications/Dispatches/ab_r6_dispatchno112_trustworthy_institutions_and_development_in_africa.pdf

In Guinea, the AU cancelled its election observation mission, and suspicions over the verification of 2.5 million names on the electoral roll were never resolved.

However, holding elections amid the pandemic (as Benin, Guinea, Mali, and Ghana did) sometimes came at the expense of election quality and integrity. In Guinea, the government used the pretext of containing COVID-19 to suppress planned street protests against the constitutional referendum to extend presidential tenure by another two terms. The pandemic also offered President Condé the perfect excuse to postpone the high-level ECOWAS meeting in Conakry, where the visiting heads had hoped for a final opportunity to convince him not to proceed with the referendum.

The pandemic has meant limited coverage, if any, by independent domestic and international observers at the polls outside national capitals. In Guinea, the AU canceled its election observation mission, and suspicions about the verification of 2.5 million names on the electoral roll were never resolved. Worse, in Mali, where President Keïta had cited the election's crucial role in resolving conflict in the country as the reason for moving ahead with the scheduled polls, the kidnapping of opposition head Soumaïla Cissé and the closure of more than 270 polling stations due to security concerns were key triggers for post-election violence and the August military coup.

The pandemic has meant the near absence of independent domestic and international observers at the polls or at most fairly limited coverage of such observers beyond national capitals. In Guinea, the AU cancelled its election observation mission, and suspicions over the verification of 2.5 million names on the electoral roll were never resolved. And vote-buying was likely rife in the elections in which Covid relief items could be easily dispensed as some form of political patronage (as done by the incumbent party NPP and presidential candidate Akufo-Addo, in Ghana's December 7 polls).

Worse is Mali where President Keita had cited election's crucial role in the resolution of conflict in that country as the reason for moving ahead with the scheduled polls. However, the kidnapping of the head of the opposition Soumaila Cisse on March 26, 2020, while campaigning; and the closure of over 270 polling stations due to security concerns were key triggers for the post-election election violence and August military coup.

V. Risks to peace, development, and human rights in the region

The democratic recession taking place across ECOWAS countries presents serious risks to peace, development, and human rights in the entire subregion.

First, it is taking place against the backdrop of fairly strong and generally sustained popular aspirations for democracy, accountable governance, and freedom. Data from the latest round of Afrobarometer surveys, as well as trends observed over time, confirm that most ordinary West Africans remain unflinching in their insistence on democracy and core democratic norms and institutions.

Support for democracy, multiparty competition, the rule of law, and accountability is relatively constant or has even increased over the past decade. Ordinary West Africans also remain fairly consistent in their aspirations for respect of their human rights.

Across 14 West African countries covered in Afrobarometer's Round 8 surveys (2019/2021), large majorities express a preference for democracy over any other form of government (75%) and reject authoritarian alternatives such as one-man rule (86%), one-party rule (84%), and military rule (72%) (Figure 7). Burkina Faso is the only

country where fewer than half of citizens (44%) reject military rule.

They are equally supportive of other core democratic institutions and processes. Eight in 10 adult West Africans (81%) in the Afrobarometer survey say they want to choose their leaders through regular, open, and honest elections, including 56% who agree "very strongly" with this view (Figure 8). Support for elections is a strong majority view in all 14 countries, with the highest endorsements found in Liberia (90%), the Gambia (88%), Benin (87%), and Sierra Leone (87%).[45] Similarly, 81% of West Africans support the idea of imposing a two-term limit on presidential tenure (Figure 9). Togo, where the constitution allowed Gnassingbé to stand for election in 2020 after having already served three terms,[46] is near the top in support for term limits (87%). Guineans, too, strongly favour term limits (77%), though Condé claimed a third term anyway.[47] And an average majority of six in 10 (61%) endorse multiparty competition as essential to give citizens choices in who governs them (Figure 10).[48]

[45] Mali (where two coups d'état have been staged in 10 months) and Togo (whose recent election was characterized by Internet shutdowns, opposition oppression, and a 71% win for the incumbent government) joined Nigeria in recording the lowest support for elections in West Africa.
[46] Aljazeera, "Togo changes law to let president stand for two more terms." May 9, 2019.

Across 13 West African countries tracked regularly since 2011/2013, support for democracy has remained unchanged (76%).

West Africans also largely endorse

government accountability and fundamental freedoms. When asked to choose between a government that is accountable and one that is efficient, six in 10 West Africans (60%) "agree" or "strongly agree" that it is more important for a government to be accountable to the people than to "get things done" (Figure 11). Preference for accountable governance is a majority view in 12 of the 14 West African countries surveyed, reaching highs of about eight in 10 in Cabo Verde (80%), Ghana (78%), and the Gambia (75%).[49] Majorities also express support for fundamental personal freedoms. Two-thirds (67%) of citizens across the region in our survey demand freedom of association, reaching highs of about eight in 10 in Togo (83%), Côte d'Ivoire (83%), Benin (81%), and Senegal (79%) (Figure 12).[50] Popular support for media freedom is also high (67%), a majority view in all 14 countries, reaching 76% in Cabo Verde and 72% in Senegal. However, religious freedom

enjoys only middling support in the region: Just a slim majority (53%) insist on the absolute freedom of religion and worship without any government interference.[51]

What's more,

support for democracy and democratic institutions has remained consistently high over the years. Across 13 West African countries tracked regularly since 2011/2013, support for democracy has remained unchanged (76%) (Figure 13). One-man rule – the most resisted form of authoritarian rule – is as unpopular in 2019/2021 as it was in 2011/2013 (83%), and rejection of one-party rule and military rule has remained the position of a solid majority, though opposition has weakened slightly since 2011/2013 (from 84% to 80% and from 74% to 71%, respectively). What Afrobarometer calls "demand for democracy" – the proportion of citizens who both prefer democracy and reject all three authoritarian alternatives, has remained fairly steady (49% in 2019/2021).

Similarly, citizens' endorsement

of democratic norms and institutions has held firm over time. Support for presidential term limits (80% in 2011/2013 vs. 81% in 2019/2021) and multiparty competition (63% vs. 61%) remain unchanged (Figure 14).[52]

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[47] Aljazeera, "Guinea electoral body says Alpha Condé won third term in office," October 24, 2020. https://www.dw.com/en/at-least-4-dead-in-senegal-protests/a-56782432

[48] While this is the majority view in 11 West African countries, reaching 74% in Cabo Verde and 73% in Côte d'Ivoire, almost four in 10 West Africans (37%) do not think multiple political parties are necessary as they "create division and confusion." Senegal is the only country where support for multiparty democracy is a minority view (46% vs. 53%). Malians and Liberians are evenly split.

[49] Even in Niger and Guinea, where accountable governance does not win out over efficiency, it is the preference of large minorities (44% and 46%, respectively).

[50] Liberia and Sierra are the only countries where this is a minority view (40% and 38%, respectively).

[51] A sizeable minority (46%) say they would tolerate government regulation of religious speech. Support for religious freedom is most strongly embraced in Liberia (72%), while the lowest levels of support are expressed in Mali (29%) and Burkina Faso (33%), both of which are Muslim-majority countries that have experienced major incidents of extremist violence.

[52] Although still high, support for elections has declined marginally (5 percentage points) from 86% to 81%. This decline may reflect a growing popular understanding that elections, especially poor-quality ones, are not, by themselves, enough to guarantee democracy, or even just better governance.

In fact, popular demand for accountable governance has increased significantly, from 48% in 2011/2013 to 59% in 2019/2021.

Not all trends in popular support for fundamental rights in West Africa have been positive:

There has been a modest 5-percentage-point decrease in support for freedom of association across the 13 countries tracked between 2011/2013 and 2019/2021 (Figure 15).[53] However, support for media freedom has rebounded from a drop to 45% in Round 7 (2016/2018) to a strong majority (67%) in 2019/2021.[54]

Lagging supply of democracy and accountable governance

While West Africans clearly aspire to democratic, accountable governance and freedom, Afrobarometer survey findings reveal inadequate levels of perceived delivery of these goods by their governments. Only a slim majority (55%) of West Africans describe their country as "a full democracy" or "a democracy with minor problems" (Figure 16). Indeed, a majority of Malians (74%), Guineans (59%), Ivoirians (55%), and Togolese (55%) describe their countries as either non-democracies or democracies with major problems.

Satisfaction is even lower: Only four in 10 West Africans (41%) say they are "fairly satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the way democracy works in their country. Majorities express satisfaction in just four countries:

Ghana (66%), Sierra Leone (56%), Burkina Faso (55%), and Benin (51%). At the other extreme, fewer than one in four Malians (22%) and Cabo Verdeans (23%) are satisfied.

Moreover, only 38% of West Africans see their government as providing a full supply of democracy, a group that Afrobarometer defines as those who 1) describe their country as mostly or completely democratic and 2) are satisfied with the way democracy works. This is 11 percentage points lower than the 49% average demand for democracy – an indication that supply is not keeping pace with demand when it comes to democratic governance.

Other indicators of democratic-governance supply also lag behind demand. For example, across the 14 countries surveyed in 2019/2021, 70% of citizens say their country's most recent national election was generally free and fair (Figure 17). But this is 11 percentage points lower than the proportion (81%) who demand free and fair elections as the most legitimate way of choosing leaders (Figure 8). West African citizens also perceive official impunity in their country. An average of 56% say officials who commit crimes "often" or "always" go unpunished (Figure 18), a perception that is highest (almost seven in 10) in Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, Mali, Senegal, and Togo. And a majority (56%) assess the level of corruption in their country as having worsened during the year preceding the survey, including 38% who say it "increased a lot" (Figure 19).

[53] Significant declines are recorded in six countries, including the region's leading democracies – Senegal (-12 percentage points), and Ghana (-10 percentage points).
[54] Significant gains in popular support for unfettered media were recorded in 11 of the 13 countries, including Senegal, where support more than doubled (from 30% to 72%), as well as in Mali, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, and Benin (gains of 25, 22, 17, and 15 percentage points, respectively). Cabo Verde and Niger are the only two countries recording declines in this view (-7 and -5 percentage points, respectively). Support for religious freedom, which was a minority view in 2016/2018, rose by 6 percentage points (from 45% to 51%), with significant increases recorded in seven countries, led by Senegal (25 percentage points), Liberia (21 points), Sierra Leone (15 points), and Ghana (12 points). The two countries with the lowest support for religious freedom show divergent trends: an increase of 6 percentage points in Mali and a decrease of the same proportion (-6 percentage points) in Burkina Faso.

These gaps between popular demand for democratic governance and supply should be expected to set the scene for tensions and conflicts pitting citizens against governments and political elites.

Democratic backsliding in West Africa is also taking place amidst growing citizen frustrations with the economic and social conditions in which they live. Impressive growth achieved by the countries in the region over the previous two decades obscured underlying structural deficiencies and uncertainties such as persistent fiscal deficits and vulnerability to global commodity prices and public debt. Even more politically damaging, poverty and inequality have also persisted, highlighting the poor quality of the region's growth and its inability to create employment for its rapidly growing youthful and mainly urban-based populations. For example, West Africa was home to six of the 10 fastest-growing economies in Africa – Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, Ghana, Burkina Faso, Benin, and Niger – in 2018. But few appear to have benefited from growth in most of the countries in the region. Extreme poverty and inequality remain endemic. In 2020, 13 of the 15 ECOWAS countries fell in the "low" category in the HDI, with Niger rated at the very bottom of the 189-country list.[55] An Oxfam report highlights the region's extreme inequality in the following terms: It has the least public health care coverage and the smallest proportions of the population with access to water on the continent, as well as the greatest number of countries with citizens living on less than $1.90 a day.[56]

It is also instructive to note that 11 of the 15 countries in the region are rated as having either low income equality or very low income equality, according to a 2017 UNDP Regional Bureau for Africa report.[57] In Nigeria, which boasts several dollar billionaires, 60% of the population lives on less than $1.25 a day.[58] And on a continent where 77% of people are less than 35 years old, the labour force participation rate in West Africa as of 2021 is only 58.3%, slightly below a world average of 60.3%.[59] These negative features of the region's economic and social development profile can only be worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic, which was estimated to have caused a 2.0% economic contraction and a 4.3% drop in real output in West Africa in 2020, according to the African Development Bank.[60]

Afrobarometer survey data underscore the gap between ordinary West Africans' economic and social development expectations and delivery by their governments. According to the latest Afrobarometer survey, adults across 14 West African countries cite the following as "the most important problems facing this country that government should address": health (cited by 37% as one of their three priorities), infrastructure/roads (31%), education (30%), water supply (29%), unemployment (28%), and security and crime (21%) (Figure 20).

[55] A UNDP. Human development report. (2020). http://hdr.undp.org/en/2020-report
[56] Oxfam. West Africa: Extreme inequalities in numbers. https://www.oxfam.org/en/west-africa-extreme-inequality-numbers
[57] UNDP. 2017 Africa sustainable development report: Tracking progress on agenda 2063 and the sustainable development goals. https://www.africa.undp.org/content/rba/en/home/library/reports/africa-sustainable-development-report.html
[58] Oxfam. West Africa: Extreme inequalities in numbers. https://www.oxfam.org/en/west-africa-extreme-inequality-numbers
[59] International Labour Organization. Report on employment in Africa (Re-Africa): Tackling the youth employment challenge. 2020. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---africa/---ro-abidjan/documents/publication/wcms_753300.pdf
[60] African Development Bank. West Africa economic outlook: Coping with the covid-19 pandemic. July 2020. https://www.afdb.org/en/documents/west-africa-economic-outlook-2020-coping-covid-19-pandemic

Unfortunately, government responses to citizen expressions of discontent with economic and political misgovernance, corruption, official impunity, and abuse of office and human rights are increasingly inappropriate, and sometimes simply misguided.

However, their assessments of their government's performance in addressing their policy priorities are mostly negative. Three-quarters of West Africans give their governments poor marks on creating jobs (77%) and improving the living standards of the poor (75%), while two-thirds say the same about the management of their economies (64%). When it comes to providing public services, about six in 10 think their government is doing "fairly badly" or "very badly" on providing water and sanitation services (61%), improving basic health services (58%), reducing crime (58%), maintaining roads and bridges (56%), providing a reliable supply of electricity (56%), and addressing educational needs (55%).

These gaps between popular aspirations for material welfare and inadequate fulfillment have been key drivers of political discontent and instability. They have inspired heated protests that rocked big cities across the region in the past few years. Citizens' displeasure with the performance of their government in Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, and Togo took the form of protests against third-term bids by their leaders. In Nigeria, #EndSARS protests that began as a condemnation of police brutality have expanded to include demands for good and accountable governance.

Inappropriate government responses

Unfortunately, government responses to citizen expressions of discontent with economic and political misgovernance, corruption, official impunity, and abuse of office and human rights are increasingly inappropriate, and sometimes simply misguided. Indeed, official responses to political dissent are increasingly censorious, betraying an unwillingness to dialogue credibly, much less yield to citizens' demands. Citizen acts of protests are likely to be denigrated as politically motivated, subversive, treasonous, and even terroristic. Individuals or groups that criticize the government, try to expose official wrongdoing, or demand fairness, respect for their dignity, and equitable treatment face official victimization and brutal repression. In Senegal, for example, clashes between police and supporters of arrested opposition leader Ousmane Sonko have left at least five people dead. [61,62] The #EndSARS protests in Nigeria were met with violent repression by the state, including the killing of protesters, and the Buhari government has gone so far as to ban Twitter, ostensibly to curb the use of the social media app to promote secession as well as the proliferation of #EndSARS protests.[63]

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[61] France24, "Clashes in Senegal kill one after arrest of opposition leader Sonko," March 4, 2021, https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20210304-clashes-in-senegal-kill-one-after-arrest-of-opposition-leader-sonko
[62] DW, "At least 4 dead in Senegal protests." March 6, 2021, https://www.dw.com/en/at-least-4-dead-in-senegal-protests/a-56782432
[63] This authoritarian move to ban Twitter has been largely thwarted by the nation's social media savvy youth.

The ECOWAS region is rich in courageous individuals from all walks of life – activists, journalists, opposition leaders, ordinary citizens, even some government officials – seeking to push back against authoritarian actions and expand the boundaries of democracy and freedom.

But these authoritarian responses to legitimate expressions of discontent by citizens fail to take into account the emergence across the subregion of citizens determined to confront misgovernance and resist oppression. Indeed, the ECOWAS region is rich in courageous individuals from all walks of life – activists, journalists, opposition leaders, ordinary citizens, even some government officials – seeking to push back against authoritarian actions and expand the boundaries of democracy and freedom.

Despite Nigerian security forces' use of deadly force against crowds demonstrating to stop police brutality, the protests won major concessions, including dissolution of the dreaded Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS).

Ghana's Manasseh Awuni has joined the iconic Anas Aremeyaw Anas to promote a new brand of broadcast media focused on anti-corruption crusading and investigative journalism. From his base at the African Center for International Law and Accountability (ACILA) in Accra, William Nyarko helps families of Ghanaians, Togolese, and Nigerians killed by Jammeh in 2005, as well as survivors, to seek justice from the Truth, Reconciliation, and Reparations Commission in the Gambia, at the same time as he mentors young investigative journalists.

And a new generation of audio and visual artists such as cartoonist Tilapia (Ghana) and satirist and social commentator Adeola Fayehun (Nigeria) are making unique and creative contributions to the key task of speaking truth to power in their countries and across the African continent.[64]

The increasing presence of these intrepid and highly resourceful, tech-savvy, mainly youthful activists in the streets, on social media, and in courtrooms has brought new vigour and dynamism to popular challenges against abuses of power and human rights, corruption, and other forms of misgovernance. Take one of the personalities leading the #EndSARS movement – the vibrant 22-year-old university student Rinu Oduala. One of the first to take to the streets after a video went viral of a man allegedly killed by the notorious SARS, she set up camp outside the Lagos governor's office, demanding that the police unit be disbanded. An astute media strategist with more than 300,000 Twitter followers, she knew how to rally people on social media to join her, organizing blankets for people who ended up sleeping outside the state government buildings for 72 hours before police attacked them. The Nigerian government has felt so threatened by her that her bank account has been frozen. Then there is Aisha Yesufu, co-founder of the Bring Back Our Girls Movement, which has been working over the past six years to rescue schoolgirls kidnapped by Islamist Boko Haram militants. She was among #EndSARS protesters who were tear-gassed by police in the capital, Abuja. But she refused to back away from the fracas, and a photo of her defiance became one of the symbols of the #EndSARS movement.

In the end, government repression and a lack of credible responses to poor governance and neglect, endemic poverty, inequality, and youth unemployment are likely to aggravate popular discontent and deepen mistrust between citizens and their government. Worse still, they provide fertile grounds for the Islamic State and other violent extremist groups to make inroads into more territories in West Africa, especially its Sahel regions.

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[64] In Nigeria, musicians, actors, comedians, and social media influencers were key to the success of the #EndSARS protests.

VI. Summary & Conclusions

Democratic governance progressed steadily across the ECOWAS region in the first decade and a half of the new century, nurturing peace and socio-economic development.

However, democratic governance has begun to recede in the ECOWAS region in recent years. Afrobarometer and anecdotal evidence shows that this runs counter to the preferences and aspirations of ordinary citizens, which are largely pro-democratic.

Over-time trends in Afrobarometer data also reveal persistent and possibly widening gaps between popular expectations of democratic and accountable governance and its feeble delivery by governments and political elites. In addition, democratic backsliding in West Africa is occurring against the backdrop of growing public discontent over governments' failure to address citizens' need for jobs, health care, education, infrastructure, and security. Both of these factors can be expected to fuel political discontent and instability in the region.

Moreover, moves by governments and political elites aimed at authoritarian control and state capture do nothing to address the disconnect between citizens' expectations of material welfare and their daily reality. In fact, the growing tendency of West African governments to brutally suppress expressions of dissent and close avenues for registration of grievances is most inappropriate. For one thing, citizens and citizen groups across the region are not relenting in their determination to push back against repression and insist on their aspirations for economic well-being, democratic governance, and freedom. And authoritarian responses fail to take account of the emergence of discontented, mainly youthful West Africans who are resourceful, not easily intimidated, and adept at using digital communications technologies.

In the absence of credible pro-democratic and inclusive governance from state and subregional actors, the ECOWAS region may, therefore, be entering a dangerously intense and prolonged phase of confrontations between government and political elites, on the one hand, and disaffected citizens and communities, on the other. Threats to democracy and accountable governance cannot be separated from broader concerns about growing security challenges, including existing and emerging threats posed by unrest and insurgencies across the subregion. ECOWAS regional leaders and their continental as well as global partners/allies must find ways of closing this gap between popular aspirations for democracy, freedom, and socio-economic development and the reality of inadequate and even failing delivery.

VII. Considerations

Some considerations for halting and reversing the trend in democratic retreat in West Africa include:

ECOWAS and its continental and international allies should:

I. Strengthen the independence and technical capacities of national election management bodies.

II. Strengthen laws and regulations to ensure credible regulation of political (especially election campaign) financing.

III. Strengthen national and ECOWAS capacities to independently observe elections, including deployment of the parallel vote tabulation (PVT) methodology and pre-election and exit polling.

Between and beyond elections, they should:

IV. Help create systems and/or strengthen capacities for individual states to self-monitor democratic-governance progress and retreat in their countries (along the lines of NEPAD/APRM).

V. Help create systems and/or strengthen local civil society capacities to independently monitor democratic-governance progress and retreat in their countries and to inject findings and observations into national and subregional channels and processes for democratic governance, peace promotion, and conflict management.

VI. Consider establishing an ECOWAS Democratic Governance Monitoring and Crisis Intervention Group (including retired presidents, army and security chiefs, prominent business/civic leaders, and academics) to monitor compliance with ECOWAS/AU democracy and good-governance norms between elections and to act on early warning signals of threats against democratic-governance processes in the subregion.

VII. Enhance investments in the rule of law, accountable governance, and conflict management at the country level, in times of peace and before conflict.

VIII. Entrench constitutionalism in West African national constitutions and promote reforms to enhance constitutionalism, particularly to strengthen the independence of the judiciary/constitutional courts, election management bodies, human-rights and anti-corruption bodies, and supreme audit bodies. Special emphasis should be placed on the mode of appointment and removal of the leadership of

these bodies, as well as their funding. Perhaps the time has come for ECOWAS to return to its earlier agenda of adopting a protocol to limit presidential tenure as a constitutional norm in the subregion, taking note of Afrobarometer data indicating consistently high levels of support for the norm.

IX. Promote vertical accountability by reinforcing non-state, civil society, and media defense walls, including establishing an ECOWAS fund for constitutional and legal defense activities of relevant press commissions, human rights groups, etc.

X. Address pervasive inclusion deficits in West African nations. In particular, close gender and youth gaps in representation, participation, and distribution of the tangible/material and other benefits/dividends of democracy. Critically re-examine francophone West African systems of proportional representation, which many civil society organizations and academics in the subregion advocate but which seem to produce weak parliamentary opposition, as well as the anglophone first-past-the-post system, which is prone to the weaknesses of winner-take-all but produces strong opposition. Considering the youthful age of West Africa's populations, consider placing a cap on the maximum age at which individuals may be eligible to contest to be president.

XI. Finally, since one cannot have a democracy without democrats, increase investments in the creation and sustenance of democratic citizenship. This should include enhancing civic-duties and civic-culture components in basic school curricula as well as national-level civic education.

A young woman,
Ghana, West Africa.

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