

**KEYNOTE SPEECH**

**BY**

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EXPERT FOR THE SAHEL AT THE U.S. INSTITUTE OF PEACE***

**ON THE OCCASION OF**

**The Launch of the West Africa Democracy Solidarity Network (WADEMOS)**

**15<sup>TH</sup> SEPTEMBER, 2022**

**Kempinski Hotel, Accra – Ghana**

- **Hon. Thomas Mbomba**, Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs and Regional Integration of the Republic of Ghana
- **H.E. Excellency, Charles Abani**, United Nations Resident Coordinator to Ghana
- **H.E. Excellency, Amb. William Awinador Kanyirigi**, Senior Advisor on Governance and Peacebuilding, African Union Commission
- **H.E. Excellency, Dr. Abdel Fatau Musah**, ECOWAS Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security
- **H.E. Excellency, Dr. Aderemi Ajibewa**, Director, of Political Affairs, ECOWAS
- **H.E. Baba Gana Wakil**, ECOWAS Ambassador to Ghana
- **Your Excellencies, Ambassadors, and High Commissioners of the various Diplomatic Missions**
- **Ulla Andren**, Head of Regional Development Cooperation in Africa, Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
- **Representatives of other International Organizations**
- Heads of other civil society organizations
- Distinguished media and professionals
- Distinguished ladies and gentlemen

## 1.0 Introduction

I am very pleased and honored to welcome you all to this very auspicious occasion of the launch of the West Africa Democracy Solidarity Network (WADEMOS), and my heartfelt thanks for the opportunity afforded me to give the keynote speech on such an important occasion.

First, I wish to extend my gratitude to Hon. Thomas Mbomba, Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs and Regional Integration, Ghana, the United Nations Resident Coordinator, ECOWAS Commissioner of Political Affairs, officials of the ECOWAS Member States, Ambassadors, members of the diplomatic corps, development partners (Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, SIDA) and all invited guests for taking the time to attend this very important unveiling. Your presence here is a testament to your recognition and commitment to responding to the threats of democratic backsliding and re-autocratization in West Africa and the need to establish a transnational CSO network such as this to mobilize, coordinate and leverage the collective power of pro-democracy actors to address the erosion of democracy in the region.

**2.0 Your Excellencies, Distinguished Ladies, and Gentlemen**, West Africa became a model for Africa's democratic consolidation following the widespread acceptance of multiparty politics during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Authoritarianism and entrenched one-party regimes gave way to competitive, pluralistic democracy and elections, further opening up the media and civic space. Essentially, the political momentum in West Africa was clearly on the side of the institutionalization of multiparty democracy which

made the subregion a de facto leader of Africa's transition toward democracy. By the year 2000, every West African nation had undergone some measure of democratic reform.

In 2014, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) rejection of the undemocratic retention of power by former President Yahya Jammeh in The Gambia and its threat to apply force resulted in the restoration of democratic order in the country. Similarly, the sanctions imposed by ECOWAS following the recent military incursions in 2020 and 2021 reaffirmed the regional body's intolerance for power acquired through unconstitutional means.

However, despite its democratic gains, the ECOWAS region has suffered major democratic declines. A significant number of Heads of State have manipulated constitutions to undermine term limits in an attempt to extend their stay in power. As was stated earlier, Freedom House's "*Freedom in the World Report 2021*" indicates that five of the 12 worst performing countries with the largest year-on-year score declines are in West Africa, specifically, Benin, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali, and Nigeria. The continent is also tormented by the current spate of military coups. Since 2010, there have been over 40 coups and attempted coups in Africa; twenty out of this number occurred in West Africa and the Sahel. Since 2019, there have been 7 coups with 5 successful and 2 failed – not to mention threats and expansion of terrorist attacks. Exogenic shocks such as COVID-19 and the Russian – Ukraine war have not only worsened economic freedoms but have created more opportunities to roll back civic freedoms.

**Your Excellencies, Distinguished ladies and gentlemen,** despite its daunting challenges, Afrobarometer surveys have revealed that 76% of West Africans still prefer democracy to any form of government – and that is despite the apparent popular support that military governments have received in the region recently. Democracy indeed has a chance of survival if the people see reasons to protect it. But unfortunately, efforts to push back the threat of democratic backsliding have always been left to ECOWAS with little emphasis on a more sustained engagement and collective action among the citizenry and pro-democracy civil society organizations.

It is the more reason why I am so much elated about the timely intervention of a transnational democracy solidarity network, to mobilize, coordinate, and leverage the collective power of pro-democracy actors and opportunities within the region including active engagements with regional bodies and instruments to push back democratic erosion and advance, defend and reinvigorate democratic norms and structures within the region.

**Your Excellencies, Distinguished ladies and gentlemen,** I, urge all of you to deliberately support this worthy course as we build an agency of citizens, and amplify and strengthen the voices and preferences of the larger majority of West Africans to protect our democratic consolidation and inclusive growth.

**Your Excellencies, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,** let me warmly welcome you to the launch of the West Africa Democracy Solidarity Network (WADEMOS). I also look forward to the Conference on Countering Threats to Democracy in West Africa and the ensuing presentations.

I thank you all for your attention.

**-End-**