

September 4, 2023.

OUTCOME STATEMENT ON WADEMOS REGIONAL CONFERENCE ON DEMOCRATIC DECLINE AND POLITICAL TRANSITIONS IN FRANCOPHONE WEST AFRICA HELD IN ABIDJAN FROM AUGUST 1 – 2, 2023

Preamble

We, the network members of West Africa Democracy Solidarity Network (WADEMOS), pro-democracy actors and democracy and governance experts in the region, and ECOWAS officials having convened in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire from August 1st to 2nd, 2023, under the auspices of the WADEMOS Network to discuss democratic reversals in the sub-region, with a special focus on francophone West Africa and the ongoing political transitions including the recent military takeover in Niger:

Recognize the growing discontent among West African citizens regarding the processes and outcomes of democratic governance against popular expectations that democracy would promote economic well-being for ordinary citizens

Acknowledge that the region since the beginning of the last decade has consistently experienced democratic reversals and is now home to four (4) military coups over the last three years (Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali, Niger), and a failed attempt in Guinea Bissau, which, among others, were triggered and accompanied by a widespread disregard for political and civil liberties, coupled with the worsening insecurity and growing economic hardship

Admit that the spate of deterioration in Francophone West Africa is even more alarming over the last decade. And that, despite initial progress in democratization, almost all the eight countries in the region have experienced major setbacks, including the return of military coups, manipulation of constitutions and electoral outcomes for term extensions, the threat of violent extremism particularly in the Sahel, and the emergence of external forces and influence and its impacts on the region's democratic consolidation

Concede that despite the many challenges, support for democracy and democratic governance remains very strong at the regional level. It is noteworthy that while support for democratic governance remains higher, satisfaction with the expected dividends of democracy remains low and on the decline since the last decade. This is even more concerning, especially in Francophone countries, where a significant two-thirds of citizens express dissatisfaction with the state of democratic governance¹

Recognize efforts by ECOWAS to respond to key threats and reversals experienced in the region and enhance democratic resilience. Notably, we recognize efforts to revise the regional protocol on democracy and good governance particularly enforcing term limits in West Africa

¹ See: Afrobarometer data 2022/2023 (Round 9).

and strengthening regional security and stability including the unconstitutional changes of government in West Africa.

Recommendations

The multi-stakeholder conference delved into various themes surrounding the phenomenon of democratic reversals and provided an opportunity for stakeholders including ECOWAS and civil society to reflect on the factors/drivers of democratic decline generally as well as response strategies to the current transitional processes in francophone West Africa and concluded with the following recommendations:

1.1 To avert the drivers of democratic decline in West Africa

1. ECOWAS should engage in an urgent dialogue with the people – starting at the regional level in a systematic, consistent, transparent, and timely manner to start the process of triggering Vision 2050 in order to make the community a truly “*Community of the People*”. This will help to rebuild trust with the ECOWAS citizenry.
2. In pursuit of reinforcing transparency, meritocracy, and regional interests in the appointment of ECOWAS Commissioners, the establishment of a uniform minimum standard is recommended. This proposal includes the implementation of a rigorous vetting process under the auspices of the ECOWAS Parliament. This will ensure that the appointment of Commissioners aligns with principles of accountability and fairness while addressing the challenges arising from appointments driven by political considerations. Further, officials at the Commission should operate within an environment that fosters their independent execution of responsibilities, free from any form of intimidation or fear.
3. There must be the need for systematic ECOWAS audits of existing mechanisms that are still relevant (Effectiveness of Electoral Management Bodies [EMBs], and other state institutions including AU-APRM Mechanisms to provide early warning) aimed at harmonizing all member state laws and institutional policies around its regional norms – particularly the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (Protocol A/SP1/12/01); ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement; Integration and Security; Supplementary Protocol and Defence and Security Forces relationships to political power, etc.
4. Address the dysfunctionality of ECOWAS Commission and strengthen its independence. It has been hollowed out by the Authority of Heads of State that pursue an inconsistent policy, disempowering the Commission to act independently.
5. The Authority of the Heads of State must assist the Commission in deploying its mandate and ensure that normative frameworks are adopted and implemented with relevant monitoring and enforcement mechanisms. This must be done without interference.
6. ECOWAS should foster closer cooperation among member states to share intelligence, coordinate efforts, and implement joint counter-terrorism strategies.

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7. Civil-society relationship with ECOWAS must be enhanced including the development of a robust CSO-ECOWAS joint early warning coordination systems and response mechanisms on security and governance.

1.2 To address the rapid decline of democracy in Francophone West Africa

1. Strengthen democratic institutions including constitutional review: It is essential to invest in and reinforce the core democratic institutions, such as independent electoral commissions, judiciary systems, parliamentary bodies, etc. This will address the gaps in institutional frameworks that have become susceptible to manipulation by those who seek to consolidate power.
2. Encourage Inclusivity and Political Dialogue: Facilitate inclusive political dialogue that involves all stakeholders, including political parties, civil society, religious groups, women groups, and marginalized communities.
3. Support and strengthen the independence of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs): Provide support and protection to CSOs working to promote human rights, democracy, and good governance. These organizations play a critical role in advocating for democratic reforms and holding governments accountable.
4. Regional Cooperation and learning from best practices: Foster cooperation among Francophone West African countries and regional organizations like ECOWAS to address common democratic challenges collectively. Sharing best practices, experiences, and expertise can lead to greater stability and progress in the region.
5. Establish mechanisms for continuously monitoring performance indicators for democracy to warrant early response and interventions.
6. The need to break free from lingering colonial influence and adopt a more endogenous approach to democracy in West Africa while promoting civic education on democracy.

1.3 To address the Term Limits Conundrum

1. The concentration of power for the executive president and the multiple easy gaps for constitutional revisions facilitate the manipulation of term limits, particularly in Francophone West Africa, therefore, countries must set high constitutional thresholds for changing term limits as part of the deterrence with strict supervision by the ECOWAS Commission.
2. ECOWAS in addition to other multilateral institutions must make use of former presidents who have complied with term limits. The reduced instances of peer pressure and cross-country learning, as witnessed two decades ago with figures like Mathieu Kerekou of Benin and Jerry Rawlings of Ghana stepping down after prescribed terms, have led to fewer opportunities for such positive influences. ECOWAS must leverage the roles played by actors such as the West

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Africa Elders Forum, Council of the Wise, and influential traditional and religious clerics as witnessed in Niger, among others.

3. The dilemma and uncertainty of the afterlife oftentimes scare presidents to leave office. Term extensions are driven by the allure of the presidential office, which sometimes offers absolute privileges with limited accountability. Hence, there is a need to formalize the role of former presidents at national and supranational levels.

4. Harmonize best practices on term limits from constitutions across the region. Also, provide clear text in constitutions against term limits (Example is the Benin Constitution where it is stated that at no time can one be president more than twice in their lifetime).

5. Partners in the fight against the elongation of term limits should include parliaments, constitutional courts, political parties, civil society organizations, international communities, and armies. The inclusion of these stakeholders is crucial as they play different roles in contributing to the maintenance of checks and balances on political power.

6. Address the growing disillusionment among citizens towards elections as a mode of choosing leaders and the decline in support for multi-party competition. This includes harmonizing and adopting best practices for the composition of EMBs and strengthening Inter-Party Advisory Committees (IPAC) and ECOWAS Network of Electoral Commissioners (ECONEC).

7. We should foster the growth of robust political parties and support ambitious individuals in countries where electoral turnovers are evident. These parties and individuals serve as important incentives and checks on incumbents, ensuring that term limits are respected.

8. Involve the private sector in the conversation against term limits and make a business case for term limits and political stability.

- **General Observations and Conclusions on the Political Transitions in West Africa: Assessing the Divergent Transition Processes and Rethinking Approaches and Interventions**

Based on our observations and analysis, we make the following conclusions:

1. ECOWAS must reconsider its framework for overseeing countries in transition. The approach taken by ECOWAS has faced criticism for being overly mechanical and uniform. It's evident that a one-size-fits-all template cannot be effectively applied to all countries. ECOWAS in collaboration with civil society must engage in thoughtful introspection and evaluation of the existing template, in order to ensure that it aligns more appropriately with the unique context and dynamics of each individual country.

2. We strongly call for the setup of an Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC) to provide a common platform and an opportunity for West African CSOs to play an active role in contributing to ECOWAS's values and policies.

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3. ECOWAS and the AU should collaboratively define the APRM's unique role in the transition process of military regimes - as a bridging mechanism, which will aid in the coordination and complementarity between the countries in transition, APRM and the different governance actors/frameworks at the national, regional and continental levels. This will aid in effective and systemic reforms that align with normative frameworks as well as in the cultivation of shared values of democracy by dialogue, through citizenry-driven processes.
4. ECOWAS must enhance trust and confidence by engaging in systematic dialogues with citizens, leading the regional democratization agenda, and spearheading responsive initiatives. The bloc must also strengthen the involvement of CSOs in regional mediations.
5. Explore responses to the growing and emerging alliance among coup makers in the region and its impacts on regional integration and the influence of ECOWAS. We (CSOs in collaboration with ECOWAS) must investigate the intricate interplay of factors shaping the formation and consolidation of this alliance, their motivations, common objectives, and shared ideologies that are driving these juntas to seek mutual cooperation and its far-reaching implications and disruptions towards a harmonious political and socio-economic regional integration. We must evaluate how these alliances among juntas might challenge or reshape ECOWAS's effectiveness and credibility in fulfilling its mandate of promoting regional stability and integration.
6. It is important to broaden our attention beyond nations undergoing political transitions, extending our focus to include fragile states. We need to provide support, such as the AU Africa Facility to Support Inclusive Transition (AFSIT), to bolster democratic resilience.
7. Strengthen inclusion and participation in transitional governance: Military juntas must involve civil society, political parties, youth, women, and minority communities in the transition process. The inclusion of all voices will strengthen the legitimacy of the decisions made and create a sense of shared responsibility for the future of the country.
8. To prevent future coups, it is essential to leverage the current transitional phase as a valuable learning experience and a blueprint for implementing lasting reforms. This must integrate sustainable measures such as electoral and institutional reforms and other relevant reforms that can fortify the country's political landscape. Learnings around the transition process must be documented for future reference.
9. Democracy should move beyond elections and political parties to build trust among citizens and prevent disillusionment that could orchestrate support for other alternative anti-democratic governance systems. This can be achieved by promoting inclusive governance, accountable and transparent institutions, and nurturing active civic engagement.
10. Promote civil-military relations, especially in countries that have never suffered a coup d'état, to bolster democratic stability, reinforce civilian oversight of the armed forces, and cultivate a culture of respect for constitutional governance. We also call for military reforms targeted at creating a professional, accountable, and apolitical military that is committed to upholding democratic values and rule of law.

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11. Civil society must be empowered to engage in persistent civic democracy education, especially in the wake of the escalating surge of anti-democracy narratives that are gaining momentum across West Africa. We must mount a strong campaign against ongoing disinformation targeting democracy and countering the new narrative that pits authoritarianism against democracy is a critical endeavor.

12. CSOs must not be fixated only on the transition process and timelines. We need to repurpose and broaden our interventions to encompass the entire governance journey. This strategic shift is essential for maintaining relevance, particularly in instances where coup makers transition into governance roles.

13. CSOs must work to exert pressure on the AU to reduce the inconsistencies (overlaps) between the AU and ECOWAS by letting the principle of subsidiary apply in the case of unconstitutional changes. It implies that ECOWAS, as a regional body with a more direct understanding of the context and challenges within West Africa, should be given greater authority and autonomy to address cases of unconstitutional changes of government within its member states.

14. CSOs should consider forming a strategic alliance with a well-defined and independent intervention plan that will serve as a comprehensive framework to guide their interventions during transitions.

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About WADEMOS Network

The West Africa Democracy Solidarity (WADEMOS) Network is a non-partisan, independent civil society-led transnational democracy solidarity network consisting of over thirty-five (35) civil society organizations located in 15 countries in West Africa. The purpose of the WADEMOS Network is to mobilize, coordinate, and leverage the collective power of civil society and other pro-democracy actors, resources, and opportunities within the West African Region to advance, defend, and reinvigorate democracy and promote democratic norms and reforms in the sub-region.

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APPENDIX I

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