

REGIONAL CONVENING

**DEMOCRACY DECLINE IN WEST AFRICA: A FOCUS ON FRANCOPHONE WEST AFRICA AND
POLITICAL TRANSITIONS IN GUINEA, MALI AND BURKINA FASO**

1st – 2nd August 2023

Concept Note

Background and Context

West Africa became a model for Africa's democratic consolidation following the widespread acceptance of multiparty politics during the late 1980s and early 1990s. By the year 2000, almost every country in West Africa had implemented some form of democratic reform, including setting presidential term limits and opening the civic space. Today, the region since the beginning of the last decade has experienced a number of democratic reversals. West Africa which led the third wave of democratization in Africa is now home to three unconstitutional changes in government and plummeted with the general abuse of political and civil liberties, corruption, and mistrust (in election management bodies) that have been brewing in light of worsening insecurity and growing economic hardship. Drawing on recently collected data from Afrobarometer, about 60.4% of citizens within the region are not satisfied with the way democracy works – an increase from 55.3% in the previous round (R7). This is against popular expectations that democracy would promote economic wellbeing for ordinary citizens; democracy still appears to be benefitting a few people on the continent.

Afrobarometer surveys have consistently shown that citizens are increasingly unhappy about the way their democracy works. Issues of weak democratic institutions (such as independent judiciaries, electoral bodies, and anti-corruption agencies), shrinking civic space, persistent poverty, and the widening gap of inequality and perceptions of corruption, are factors for people's dissatisfaction with democracy within the region. However, the spate of deterioration in francophone West Africa is even more alarming over the last decade. Despite initial progress in democratization, several countries in the region have experienced major setbacks, including manipulation of constitutions and electoral outcomes for term extensions, the expansion of violent extremism, and abuse of the right to protest and assembly. Between 2020 and 2022, countries such as Cote d'Ivoire, Togo, and Guinea succeeded in extending their stay in power beyond their constitutional mandates. President Patrice Talon of Benin has signaled clear reservations towards democratic norms and values¹. During an encounter with France's top business association, he stated that he has no intention² to "*uphold democratic principles*" describing authoritarian measures as "*necessary*" to ensure the country's economic development. These statements have raised concern in Benin, a country once considered a model of democratic transition in West Africa.

Senegal, one of the most stable electoral democracies in Africa is also facing rising tensions in what many democracy watchers have denounced as a retreat from democracy and an indictment on the country's

¹ See: <https://www.courrierinternational.com/article/opportunites-devant-le-medef-le-president-beninois-fait-applaudir-le-recul-democratique-de-son-pays>

² Ibid.

democratic credentials. After years of speculation, Senegalese President Macky Sall shocked many when he announced that he will not seek a third term in office. Despite this declaration, the country in recent years has experienced a growing apprehension about the rise in suppression of the political and civic space, including violence against opposition figures as evidenced by various democracy indicators watchdogs.

Many governance experts have expressed confidence in Niger as a new beacon of democratic stability in the region following the country's first peaceful transfer of power from one elected president to the other in April 2021. However, it was a close call as the country escaped a coup attempt on the eve of President Bazoum's inauguration³. Human rights defenders continue to voice concerns over the shrinking freedom of assembly⁴.

The region has witnessed the emergence of new global powers who have increasingly projected their influence. An example is Russia's involvement through its pseudo-state security actors such as the Wagner group in many of these countries and its possible adverse impacts on the region's democratic consolidation. Furthermore, the United Nations Security Council's vote to end its decade-long peacekeeping mission in Mali after a request from its military government to withdraw troops raises concerns about the overall peace and collective security in the sub-region. The rise in anti-French sentiments in francophone West Africa, evidenced by attacks on French Embassies, regular protests in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, calls for the exit of French military and the ransacking of French-owned businesses, demonstrate the deep-seated frustration and anger towards perceived French influence, policies and historical legacy in the region.

In other countries, dissatisfaction with the processes and outcomes of democratic governance has galvanized populist or autocratic movements. Since the beginning of 2019, the region has suffered 8 coups (five successful and three failed). Two in Mali (2020 and 2021), one in Guinea (2021), and two in Burkina Faso (Jan. 2022 and Sept. 2022)⁵. Most of the coups have been greeted with joy as expressions of dissatisfaction with their governments to deliver good governance and in the hope that the country's military leaders would drive out corruption and put down jihadist attacks that have killed thousands. Disappointingly, these coups have calcified into remorse in each of the three instances. The juntas have unveiled transitional timetables and charters that will chart a pathway back to democracy. However, these juntas have only become new perpetrators of the same old authoritarianism – prolonging transitional timetables and failing to provide citizens the much-needed economic security and protection against the growing terrorist insurgencies. ECOWAS, in attempts to restore democracy and good governance, has introduced a number of measures including mediations and sanctions against the military juntas in the coup countries, demanding a return or transition to civilian rule as soon as possible. Indeed, nowhere in West Africa is safe, and almost each of the eight countries constituting the francophone bloc within the region is facing major challenges with democracy and good governance.

Despite these challenges, Afrobarometer surveys have revealed that 76% of citizens within the region still prefer democracy to any form of government. However, the socio-political situation within the region is fast

³ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/31/heavy-gunfire-heard-near-nigers-presidency>

⁴ See: <https://www.fidh.org/fr/regions/afrique/niger/niger-un-decret-de-plus-une-liberte-fondamentale-de-moins>

⁵ See: <https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/01/a-deeper-look-into-the-west-african-coup-wave/>

deteriorating and could escalate if the necessary response measures and interventions are not deployed to ease tensions, restore calm and trust, and avoid the capture of democratic institutions and processes.

It is for these challenges that the West African Democracy Solidarity Network (WADEMOS) exists with the primary purpose to harness opportunities and resources within the region to respond effectively to the threats of democratic backsliding.

WADEMOS undertook a political assessment of countries undergoing political transitions in West Africa, namely Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Mali. The study sought to examine the regional mediation systems and the general state of transitional governance in each country including the patterns and gaps that might derail the return to civilian rule. It also analyzed the geopolitical factors, and interest in the subregion and its possible impacts on the transitional processes in these countries and West Africa's democratic consolidation. Amongst others, the study further proposes policy recommendations targeting key actors and institutions within the sub-region at national and regional levels.

Against this context, WADEMOS is convening a stakeholders' regional dialogue to discuss democratic reversals in West Africa with a special focus on francophone West Africa and particular attention to the ongoing political transitions in West Africa. The convening will provide opportunities to reflect on the processes and mechanisms as well as response strategies to the current transitional processes and the threats to democracy generally in francophone West Africa. It will also create the platform for civil society to effectively engage with appropriate structures within the region particularly as ECOWAS Heads of State are scheduled to meet in December and propose recommendations for successful transitions whilst mitigating the democratic reversals across the sub-region. `.

OBJECTIVES

Through this convening, WADEMOS Network seeks to achieve the following:

1. Reflect on the progress, challenges, and prospects for the political transitions in Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Mali within the context of the proposed timelines and transition charters.
2. Review and analyze the current state of democracy decline in West Africa with a focus on francophone West African countries.
3. Propose recommendations to promote responses from key actors, institutions, and stakeholders on the decline in francophone West Africa and towards the effective political transition to civilian rule in countries under unconstitutional changes in government.

PARTICIPANTS

The convening will bring about 30-40 democracy and governance experts from civil society, academia, and the regional economic community.

DATE AND VENUE OF THE EVENT

The event is scheduled for 1st – 2nd August 2023, in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire.

See attached for the draft Agenda.