

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

Venue: Noom Hotel, Abidjan – Cote d'Ivoire

SYNOPSIS FOR PANEL DISCUSSIONS

Background and Context

During the early 1990s, following the end of the Cold War, a wave of significant democratic reforms swept through various political systems in West Africa. The institutional changes of what has been referred to as the third wave of democracy resulted in establishing rule-of-law-based governance systems characterized by constitutionalism and constitutional government, including reforms such as term limits. However, in more recent years, there has been an alarming democratic backsliding with the return of military rule, and the manipulation of constitutions and electoral outcomes for term extensions in a region that once touted itself as a beacon of democracy. The region has also been hit by instability in the Sahel region with a surge in the activities of violent extremists, and attacks on basic freedoms and civil liberties.

The spate of this deterioration is even more alarming in francophone West Africa over the last decade. 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)¹. 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 values². In Senegal, there is 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.

To this end, WADEMOS, a transnational civil society network is convening a multi-stakeholder regional dialogue to discuss democratic reversals in the sub-region with a special focus on francophone West Africa and the ongoing political transitions in Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso. This event is scheduled for August 1 – 2, 2023 in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire, with provisions for virtual participation for remote attendees.

Structure for Discussions:

The panel discussion will consist of an introductory statement by the moderator and panelists, followed by moderated and guided conversations, and conclude with brainstorming potential solutions and the role of CSOs and regional institutions in overcoming the challenges of democratic backsliding within the context of each panel discussion. This will follow an interactive plenary session.

Deliverables

Each moderator is expected to submit a brief note on the key points from the panel session including recommendations for inclusion in the conference outcome statement and communicate.

¹ <https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/01/a-deeper-look-into-the-west-african-coup-wave/>

² <https://www.courrierinternational.com/article/opportunités-devant-le-medef-le-president-beninois-fait->

DAY ONE

Panel Discussion One: Overview of the Various Drivers of Democratic Decline in West Africa

In recent years, West Africa has witnessed significant challenges to democratic governance, posing a threat to the region's stability and development. 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.

This panel discussion aims to explore the complex and interconnected factors contributing to the erosion of democratic principles in the sub-region. By examining the multifaceted challenges faced by the region, this discussion will foster a deeper understanding of the root causes and its cascading effects on democracy consolidation. It will also look at democracy backsliding and its implications for peace, economy, political stability, and inclusion. The panel will further provide potential solutions for a more stable, inclusive, resilient, and democratic West Africa.

Panelists:

1. H. Kwasi Prempeh
2. Chukwuemeka Eze
3. Jeggan Gray-Johnson
4. Aliou Barry
5. Mariam Diallo

Moderator: Kojo P. Asante

Panel Discussion Two: Francophone States as a Special Case of Democratic Decline

West Africa has witnessed a concerning trend of democratic backsliding in recent years, with several countries grappling with issues of weak democratic institutions, processes, and human rights. However, the spate of deterioration in francophone West Africa is even more alarming over the last decade. Almost each of the eight countries constituting the francophone bloc within the region is facing major challenges with democracy and good governance coupled with military interventions in Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso. Between 2020 and 2022, countries such as Cote d'Ivoire, Togo, and Guinea succeeded in extending their stay in power beyond their constitutional mandates. In Benin, President Patrice Talon of Benin has signaled clear reservations towards democratic norms and values. Senegal, one of the most stable democracies in Africa currently experiencing growing apprehension about the rise in suppression of the political and civic space, including violence against opposition figures. In Niger, it was nearly a close call as the country escaped a coup attempt on the eve of President Bazoums's inauguration in 2021 with concerns over the shrinking freedom of assembly.

The panel will provide a deeper understanding of the unique challenges faced by Francophone countries considering historical context, neo-colonial influences, and the political elite clientelism. It will focus on the shrinking civic space, human rights abuses, and the rapid expansion of insurgent groups in the Sahel. The panel will further address the underlying country-specific factors contributing to democratic decline and the emergence of new global powers, their influence, and their effects on democratic consolidation. The panel will look at the responses by institutions and actors at the regional

and national levels. The panel will further offer remedies as to how stakeholders can collaboratively work together to restore and strengthen democratic principles in Francophone West Africa. The panel will refrain from discussing in detail the third term conundrum as session three is specifically dedicated to addressing it.

Panelists:

1. Ibrahima Kane
2. Mathias Hounkpe
3. Augustin Loada
4. Lassane Ouedrago

Moderator: Cheick Fall

Panel Discussion Three: The Term Limits Conundrum

There has been a marked decline in term limit compliance in recent years, reversing the upward trend that had been developing since early 2000 after the region's third wave of democratization. Even in cases where the explicit prohibition against serving more than two terms in office has been stated in the constitution, leaders have gotten around this safety net by weakening oversight institutions like legislatures, constitutional courts, and electoral management bodies. The region since 2019 has seen three presidents of the ECOWAS member states circumventing term limit provisions or manipulating electoral outcomes to stay beyond their mandated terms in Guinea, Togo, and Cote d'Ivoire. ECOWAS in an attempt to fend off the threat of democratic regression has been unsuccessful in reviewing its protocol on democracy and good governance to tackle the abuse of term limits.

This panel will explore the complex and contentious issue of presidential term limits and the manipulation of electoral outcomes in the region and identify opportunities that exist for pro-democracy civil society to engage and influence governance reforms at the regional body. By engaging in a multi-dimensional analysis, the panel will develop actionable strategies and activities to help secure the standardization of Term Limits in West Africa.

Panelists:

1. H. Kwasi Prempeh
2. Aminata Toure
3. Alioune Tine
4. Chukwuemeka Eze

Moderator: Aliou Barry

DAY TWO

Panel Discussion Four: Assessing the Divergent Transition Processes in Mali, Burkina Faso and Guinea

The rising socio-economic and security challenges and the rapid expansion of jihadism have eroded public confidence in institutions of democratic governance in West Africa, as evidenced by several rounds of Afrobarometer data. In some countries, this has galvanized populist or autocratic movements. In West Africa, this has culminated in a spate of coups at an alarming rate, despite the adoption of the Lome Declaration on Unconstitutional Changes of Government and the EOCWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance.

Since the beginning of 2019, the region has seen 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 September 2022). Most of these coups have been greeted with joy as an expression of dissatisfaction with their government's inability to deliver good governance and in the hope that the country's military leaders would drive out corruption and combat jihadist attacks that killed thousands.

ECOWAS in attempts to restore democracy and good governance, has introduced a number of measures against the military juntas in the coup countries, demanding a return or transition to civilian rule as soon as possible. These countries after several negotiation efforts led by the ECOWAS mediation team, and complemented by civil society organizations and socio-political movements have unveiled transitional timetables, charters, and frameworks to steer these countries back to constitutional order, in accordance with the ECOWAS and African Union protocols and decisions.

The Panel will evaluate the complex factors that have shaped the transitional processes, significant changes in the respective political landscapes, inclusion in the transition process, and compliance and effectiveness of regional frameworks. The panel will draw comparisons between Guinea, Mali, and Burkina Faso, assessing the divergent outcomes of their transition processes. Further, the panel will analyze the impact of historical, social, and geopolitical factors on the effectiveness and outcomes of the three transitions. The panel will also explore the role of civil society, international actors, and regional organizations in facilitating or hindering these processes. Finally, the panel will look at the lessons that can be learned from the experience of Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Mali in managing political transitions in West Africa.

Panelists:

1. Eloise Bertrand
2. Mathias Hounkpe
3. Ebenezer Asiedu
4. Alpha Diallo
5. Lassane Ouedrago

Moderator: Ousmane Miphal Lankoande