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PRESS RELEASE

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COMMUNIQUE OF THE WEST AFRICA ELECTION OBSERVERS NETWORK (WAEON) GENERAL ASSEMBLY MEETING

Introduction

The West Africa Election Observers Network (WAEON), comprising 13-member organisations from West African countries, convened a two-day General Assembly and Executive Council meeting from August 26 - 27, 2024. The meeting was to foster solidarity among member organisations to address the growing threats to electoral integrity and domestic election observers in the region. WAEON also used this opportunity to assess the pressing issues concerning democracy, governance, and the socio-political landscape in West Africa.

Challenges to Democracy and Election Observation in West Africa

Although West Africa spearheaded the continent's third wave of democratisation and one time led best practices on the African continent, democratic norms have been deteriorating recently. Democratic backsliding in the sub-region is a serious setback and a subject of great concern for the region and its people.

As WAEON, we have observed a disturbing trend of coup d'etats (in Guinea, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger), constitutional manipulations, electoral irregularities, abuse of incumbency, worsening insecurity (particularly in the Sahel region) and weakened democratic institutions. Democracy has been defaced with impunity, corruption and misuse of power for personal gain. This decline is gradually undermining the people's confidence in their governments and their electoral processes, disintegrating the region (with the intended withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger from the ECOWAS bloc), while threatening the overall stability of the region.

The challenges and gaps that undermine the effectiveness of the electoral processes have produced governments whose legitimacy is now being questioned. The use of violence during elections, coups, and various attacks on civic space and civil societies, has raised a sense of doubt, hatred and unrest whenever governments which employ these means are given mandates to rule. To make matters worse, these governments have shown low responsiveness to the needs of the populations they govern, raising serious concerns about the quality and integrity of electoral competition and political governance in West Africa. The Afrobarometer's recent flagship publication, 'Africa Insights' shows that a key driver of declining dissatisfaction with democracy over the last decade in Africa is governments delivery of socio-economic goods. Most West African countries show high rates of

disapproval with governments' delivery of socio-economic goods and corresponding dissatisfaction.

WAEON is also concerned about the growing citizens' distrust of political and governance institutions and actors, which is at an all-time high according to the Afrobarometer Surveys. For example, trust ratings dropped in the presidency (11%), judiciary (13%) and electoral management bodies (13%) between 2011/2013-2021-2023. The constant drive by some incumbent governments to unconstitutionally extend their term limits has pushed some African leaders to employ various dubious means to remain in office. Some have even gone to the extent of employing 'fake observers' to discredit the claims of credible independent observers as a means of silencing opposition and spreading misinformation and disinformation. Uprisings from these happenings and other suppressive actions have been met with arbitrary arrests and detentions, with Senegal being a clear example. This mistrust is putting even the more stable democracies in West Africa to the test and is a significant barrier to achieving lasting peace and development in the region.

Recommendations

Following these concerns, the WAEON General Assembly makes the following recommendations:

1. WAEON urges all West African governments to recommit to upholding democratic values, including free and fair elections, respect for a free civic space, abiding by constitutional term limits, respect for human rights, and the independence of the judiciary and media.
2. WAEON calls on ECOWAS to effectively implement the ECOWAS of the people agenda. It is essential for ECOWAS to reconnect with the citizens of West Africa and ensure that its initiatives and policies reflect the voices and needs of the broader populace, not just those of the ruling class.
3. WAEON calls on media professionals to ensure that the discourse around elections and governance is informed by experts, independent and non-partisan observer groups, and legitimate organisations committed to the long-term stability and development of the region.
4. WAEON calls on political leaders to restore the trust of their citizens in democracy by demonstrating responsiveness to their needs and adhering to constitutional term limits. Ensuring the integrity of electoral processes and accountability is crucial for maintaining legitimacy and stability in the region.
5. WAEON calls on political parties in the sub-region to undertake a needed introspection and reform as aggregators and promoters of citizen aspirations and needs, to promote inclusion, effective political participation, governmental accountability and a progressive developmental agenda.
6. Governments across West Africa must prioritise good governance by implementing robust anti-corruption measures, enhancing transparency, and fostering inclusive economic policies that provide opportunities for all citizens.
7. WAEON recommends an African peer review of governments to distort the tendencies of incumbents abusing state power through constitutional manipulations.

Conclusion

The WAEON General Assembly calls upon all stakeholders—governments, civil society organisations, media, and citizens—to actively engage in upholding and advancing democratic principles across West Africa. The challenges we face require collective effort, vigilance, and unwavering commitment to integrity and transparency in our electoral processes and governance. We urge the region to recommit to these values, ensuring that democracy is not only preserved but strengthened for the future stability and prosperity of West Africa.

The WAEON General Assembly reaffirms its commitment to promoting electoral democracy, good governance, and the protection of human rights in West Africa. The Network will continue to monitor developments in the region and advocate for the necessary reforms to ensure a prosperous and stable future for the West African region.

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Signed:

Rev. James Albert Lahai
Chair, WAEON
September 4, 2024

About WAEON

WAEON is an independent, non-partisan and non-religious network of citizen election observation /monitoring organizations in West Africa. Currently, WAEON consists of Citizens' Election Observation Groups in 13 West African countries, which include Burkina Faso, Benin, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea, Gambia, Ghana, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo.

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