

**A REPORT ON THE
LAUNCH OF THE WEST AFRICA
DEMOCRACY SOLIDARITY
NETWORK (WADEMOS)
& CONFERENCE ON
COUNTERING THREATS
TO DEMOCRACY
IN WEST AFRICA**



This report was produced by the Secretariat of the West Africa Democracy Solidarity Network (WADEMOS). WADEMOS is a non-partisan, independent civil society-led transnational democracy solidarity network. The WADEMOS Network consists of over 35 Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) located in 15 countries in West Africa.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AfDB	African Development Bank
AFLED	Femme Leadership et Development Durable
Afiximbank	African Export-Import Bank
APRM	African Peer Review Mechanism
AU	African Union
AUDA-NEPAD	African Union Development Agency- New Partnership for Africa's Development
AU DPAPS	African Union Department of Political Affairs, Peace and Security
AU-ECOSOCC	African Union- Economic, Social and Cultural Council
AU-PSC	African Union Peace and Security Council
CDD-Ghana	Ghana Center for Democratic Development
CDD-West Africa	Centre for Democracy and Development, West Africa
CDG	Center for Democratic Governance
CODEO	Coalition of Domestic Election Observers
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease
CSO	Civil society organizations
ECOWAS	Economic Community for West African States
EMBs	Election Management Bodies
FIDA	International Federation of Women Lawyers
FNDC	National Front for the Defense of the Constitution
GACC	Ghana Anti-Corruption Coalition
IDEG	Institute for Democratic Governance
I-RECKE	African Union Inter-Regional Knowledge Exchange
MFWA	Media Foundation for West Africa
NETT4Peace	African Union Network of Think Thanks for Peace
OSIWA	Open Society Initiative for West Africa
Sida	Swedish International Development Agency
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNECA	United Nations Economic Commission for Africa
VE	Violent extremism
WACSI	West Africa Civil Society Institute
WADEMOS	West Africa Democracy Solidarity Network
WANEP	West Africa Network for Peacebuilding
WILDAF	Women in Law and Development in Africa

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the early 1990s, West Africa led the third wave of democratization in Africa. This was characterized by constitutionalism, the rule of law, a multi-party system of governance, freedom of expression and association, and media pluralism, among others. As a result, the region, in the early 2000s, started recording progress in political and economic governance. West Africa became the model for the rest of Africa.

However, in the last decade, the region has become the spotlight for democratic reversals. These setbacks include a repressive political environment, amendment of constitutions, manipulation of electoral outcomes for term elongation, and the emergence of new actors who have succeeded in staging coup d'états to remove constitutionally elected governments from power. Fueled by terrorism and violent extremism, these reversals have been intensified by geopolitics and rising insecurity, particularly in the Sahel bloc.

Countering the threats to democratic governance requires collective actions by both state and non-state actors, including regional and supranational organizations. Consequently, many interventions have been initiated by regional bodies such as the Economic Community for West African States (ECOWAS) and the Africa Union (AU) and complemented by civil society organizations (CSOs) to reverse the trend of democratic decline, yet progress has been slow.

It is in the above context that the West Africa Democracy Solidarity Network (WADEMOS) was formed with the primary purpose of harnessing opportunities and resources within the region to respond effectively to the threats of democratic backsliding. The WADEMOS Network was launched in Accra on September 15, 2022, as an initiative of the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana) in collaboration with regional CSO partners—the West Africa Civil Society Initiative (WACSI), the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP), and the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA). As a transnational civil society network, WADEMOS brings together CSOs from across the ECOWAS Region, numbering about 35 at its inception, to build bridges of solidarity and common purpose in consolidation and promotion of democracy in West Africa. By so doing, WADEMOS mobilizes collective voices and resources to promote, support, and defend participatory, people-centered governance and democratic development in the region.

The launch of WADEMOS was followed by a conference on September 16, 2022, under the theme "Countering Threats to Democracy in the West." Specifically, the launch sought to:

1. Popularize and communicate with Africans about the establishment of a new regional initiative
2. Lay the foundation for mobilization, ownership, engagement with citizens, and pro-democratic forces for policy influence;
3. Commence engagement between WADEMOS and stakeholders such as governments, inter-governmental bodies at the regional and global levels, and international development agencies;
4. Provide an opportunity for reflection, analysis and discussion on the state of democracy in West Africa, drawing on evidence from recent developments, existing issues, experiences, and challenges; and
5. Foster conversation with regional and continental bodies on their response mechanisms to democratic regression in the region.

The inauguration of WADEMOS and the democracy conference were attended by dignitaries from the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS), the AU, the ECOWAS, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Regional Integration, the diplomatic corps, government representatives, academia, governance experts, WADEMOS Network members, CSOs across West Africa, journalists, artists, creatives, writers, and bloggers, and women and youth-led organizations.

The outcomes from the two-day regional events were expected to contribute to responding to the current challenges with democratic governance in West Africa. Additionally, the report is expected to generate policy-informed debate and discussions in the public space.

The main sessions and discussions centered on topics such as: the overview of the state of democracy in West Africa, threats to states and regional peace and security, ECOWAS responses to presidential term limit evasions and unconstitutional changes of government in West Africa, Civil society and citizens' responses to democratic backsliding in West Africa, among others.

After the two-day deliberations, the conference proposed the following recommendations:

- a) The need to address the shrinking civic spaces across the sub-region that is hindering the work of CSOs, media, and civic participation governance.
- b) Collaborate to design strategies and approaches to address insecurity, particularly terrorism and violent extremism.
- c) Assist countries transitioning into democracy and heading into elections.
- d) Defend front-line democratic defenders and human rights activists across the region
- e) Work with the ECOWAS to institute a regional framework to address third-termism.
- f) Build the capacity of CSOs in the transitional countries to participate effectively in the transitional processes.
- g) Work with the business sector to advocate pro-democratic practices across the region.
- h) Work with ECOWAS to strengthen democratic institutions and good governance in the region.
- i) Work with ECOWAS to realize Vision 2050 and the transformation of ECOWAS from a union of states to a union of peoples. This should align with the African Union's Agenda 2063 to create a prosperous, inclusive, and just continent.
- j) Designate the day for the formation of WADEMOS as "WADEMOS Day" to serve as a unifying force, guiding members towards enhancing democracies across the region.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

After the end of the Cold War, significant political transformations occurred in many African countries in the 1990s. The transformation occasioned a political system of governance, commonly referred to as the third wave of democracy in Africa. The democratization began with Benin's National Conference in 1990. Other countries in the sub-region followed suit, establishing rule-of-law-based governance defined by constitutionalism and 'multipartyism' and opening up the operational space (i.e., the civic sphere) for governance.

In the ensuing decades, a combination of constitutional reforms, democratic elections, and adherence to presidential term limits produced peaceful political party turnover in governance and leadership succession in Benin, Ghana, Nigeria, Liberia, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and The Gambia, among others, reversing the region's long and inglorious tradition of authoritarian regimes, military juntas and civil wars.

At the regional level, ECOWAS became the first among the regional blocs in Africa to set regionwide normative standards in support of democracy, adopting the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance in 2001 and ratifying it in 2005. Again, in 2015, ECOWAS came close to institutionalizing a two-term limit for presidents as a regional norm. Additionally, in January 2017, ECOWAS moved resolutely, backed by the threat of military force, to enforce an election outcome against defeated incumbent Yahya Jammeh of The Gambia, who was reluctant to leave office. "Operation Restore Democracy," as the ECOWAS action was called, invoked Article 45 of the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance.

However, in more recent years, there has been an alarming democratic lapse characterized by rising authoritarianism, manipulation of constitutions and elections for term-limit extension, coup d'états, suppression of the civic space, corruption, insecurity, and other forms of misgovernance. These democratic reversals have been corroborated by the 2020 Freedom House Report. The report noted that of the 12 countries with the largest and most significant year-on-year score declines around the world in 2019, no fewer than five were in West Africa. Again, between 2021 and 2022, constitutionally elected governments were overthrown by the military in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Guinea.

The sliding back in democracy has also been marked by weak political will and commitment by political leaders to defend and pursue democratic norms and values in the region. In countries such as Cote d'Ivoire and Togo, presidents attempted to extend their stay in power beyond constitutional mandates with varying degrees of success. Besides, the regional body, ECOWAS, has ostensibly not been effective in recent years in checking and stopping Presidents of Member States who run for a third term on dubious constitutional grounds and fraudulent elections. In 2020, for instance, despite protests and the deaths of 50 people as a result of post-election violence, large-scale clashes, and fighting across the country in the

weeks following the controversial presidential re-election in Cote d'Ivoire, the 15-member bloc sent congratulatory message on President Alassane Ouattara's 'victory.' The ECOWAS' commitment and capacity to effectively prevent and sanction unconstitutional changes of government and electoral flaws remain a concern for West African citizens.

Moreover, reports on the curtailment of individual freedom and human rights violations increased from 2020 onward, including the internet blackout that happened at the height of violent protests and arbitrary arrests. There were also suspected flawed elections in countries like Niger and Senegal.

Furthermore, in many parts of the region, there were serious concerns about the stability of communities as citizens grappled with economic hardship, food insecurity, unemployment, and a lack of access to decent work. The region was also noted for refugee crises and internally displaced persons spurred by internal conflicts by rebels, jihadists, violent extremists, terrorists, security forces, farmers, pastoralists, and pirates, largely over territorial and natural resource occupation. The Africa Centre for Strategic Studies highlighted a 70% increase in attacks in the Sahel region by militant Islamist organizations, rising from 1,180 to 2,005, with spillover risks to neighboring countries between 2020 and 2021. Several civic movements and coalitions have reacted to rising authoritarianism, in some cases, in a successful way. For instance, in Burkina Faso, Balai Citoyen successfully protested against then-President Blaise Compaore's bid for a third term in 2014.

In Nigeria, #EndSARS began in 2020 and was spurred on by a coalition of organizations and non-traditional civic formations that raised money, coordinated lines of communication, and offered legal aid to protesters. Several national and regional actors are contributing to addressing some of the threats to democratic governance in West Africa. For example, the West African Network for Peace (WANEP) is one of the most influential and well-established CSOs in the region, leading collaborative approaches to conflict

KEY POINTS

West Africa witnessed a wave of democratization in the 1990s which was characterized by rule-of-law-based governance, constitutionalism civic liberties and freedoms and political party turn-overs.

Regionally, ECOWAS was the first on the continent to adopt normative frameworks in support of democracy. These included the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance.

In recent years, however, there has been a worrying decline in democracy and its dividends.

Between 2021 and 2022, constitutionally elected governments were overthrown by the military in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Guinea, with several other democracies in West Africa under threat largely due to rising authoritarianism, manipulation of constitutions and elections for term elongations, corruption, insecurity and suppression of the civic space.

ECOWAS has been unable to adequately address the democratic decline due to a lack of capacity, and inadequate and outdated normative frameworks to deal with the issues, among others.

It is in light of the existing challenges and gaps that WADEMOS was set up to leverage the collective resources and capacities of CSOs in support of democracy in the sub-region.

prevention and peacebuilding. The work of WANEP in establishing an early warning system has been instrumental in helping to resolve multiple conflicts in the early stages.

Besides WANEP, West Africa already boasts numerous democracy-oriented CSOs, such as WACSI and MFWA, that can be mobilized to form the nucleus of an effective regional network and coordinate efforts, harness resources, and seize opportunities to respond to democratic backsliding in the region. There are, however, existing gaps and challenges that must be overcome. Notably, the region's CSOs are mostly territorially insular in their objectives and activities, each focusing their limited resources and advocacy on their respective countries.

It is in the spirit of overcoming these challenges and gaps that WADEMOS was established. The Network is funded by the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA). With an initial three-year mandate starting in 2022, the primary purpose of the Network is to mobilize, coordinate, and leverage the collective power of pro-democracy actors, resources and opportunities within the region, including engagements with regional bodies and instruments, to push back democratic erosion and advance, defend, and reinvigorate democratic norms and reforms.

2.0 OPENING SESSION



Figure Prof. Kwasi Prempeh, WADEMOS Project Director

2.1 Welcome Remarks

Prof. H. Kwasi Prempeh, Executive Director, CDD-Ghana, and Project Director, WADEMOS, shared the following perspectives:

WADEMOS is a transnational civil society

The Executive Director reiterated the vision of the WADEMOS Network as a voluntary association of non-governmental, non-partisan civil society actors in the ECOWAS Region. The primary purpose is to build, strengthen and sustain solidarity and collective actions among members to promote, support and strengthen democratic governance and development in the region.

Through such solidarity and collective actions, Prof. Prempeh intimated, WADEMOS aims to advance and support national and regional efforts to consolidate democracy in West Africa. WADEMOS, he added, also acts in unison and proactively against threats to democratic and constitutional governance.

The Network stands against authoritarian rule in West Africa

The recognized stance of WADEMOS in support of democratic norms has its roots in the troubled history and devastating experience of authoritarian rule in West Africa, Prof. Prempeh told the gathering, adding that before democratic transitions in the 1990s, West Africa was home to a succession of autocratic and coup-installed regimes. Not only were these regimes disastrous for the West African economies, but they were also notorious for human rights abuses, kleptocracy, and divisive politics. He continued that as a characteristic of autocracies, the refusal of these regimes to share or yield power through democratic avenues and procedures bred political instability and a crisis of governability, which led to armed conflict and state collapse, with resultant cross-border refugee and humanitarian

crises, notably in Sierra Leone and Liberia. Women, families and the youth were predictably the most vulnerable and hardest-hit victims of these conflicts. Referencing the impact of democracy to reversing this trend, the WADEMOS Project Director emphasized that, democratization represented an opportunity to reconstitute state legitimacy, end conflict, restore peace and rebuild states, societies, and economies. Affirming the strong nexus between democratic norms and regional peace and security, he noted that the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance was adopted and intended explicitly as supplementary to the Protocol relating to the mechanisms for conflict prevention, management, resolution, peacekeeping, and security.

An abrupt decline of democratic gains

In recent years, Prof. Prempeh underscored, the image of West Africa as a steady democratic project has begun to change negatively, with West Africa, which was once the leader in democratization on the African continent, beginning to lose its polish as it experiences some of the most dramatic cases of democratic reversal and collapse. For example, five countries in West Africa—Benin, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali, and Nigeria—out of the 12 worst performers recorded the largest year-on-year score declines in the 2019 Freedom House World Report, he divulged, adding that in Freedom House's taxonomy of "free," "partly free," and "not free" countries, Senegal and Benin fell from "free" to "partly free" status, leaving Ghana and the island nation of Cabo Verde as the only "free" countries in the region. He expressed concern that these losses reflect the sharp closing of spaces for political party pluralism, free media, and active civic participation that have taken place recently in these countries, including Benin, which was the vanguard of Africa's popular democracy movement at the start of the 1990s.

The emergence of new undemocratic actors

In the short period from 2020 to 2022, according to Prof. Prempeh, democracy has suffered even more setbacks in Mali, which has experienced a complete democratic breakdown, with the return of the coup d'état in 2020 and repeated in 2021. Guinea and Burkina Faso followed suit with coups d'états in 2021 and 2022, respectively, leading to concern about the possible domino effect of rising undemocratic actors in the region.

Manipulation of the constitution and elections for term elongation

Reversing earlier commitments to term limits, the Presidents of Guinea, Alpha Conde, and Cote d'Ivoire, Alassane Ouattara, successfully engineered changes to their respective national constitutions to allow themselves a third term, defying strong democratic opposition, the WADEMOS Project Director asserted, noting that in the case of Guinea, that development was used as justification for the coup d'état.

Authoritarianism and Suppression of Civic Space

He pointed out that even in those West African countries that have not witnessed democratic collapse, the quality of democracy and governance leaves much to be desired, with winner-take-all politics, imperial presidencies and feeble countervailing institutions still very much the norm. These sickly situations undermine political pluralism, fuel political polarization and tension, and often create a hostile environment for civil society and the practice of independent journalism, he added.

Unyielding and growing security crisis

Contending that democratic backsliding represents a major setback for the region's security and cohesion against the activities of jihadists, terrorists, and violent extremists, notably in Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Nigeria, the WADEMOS Project Director in his remarks postulated that continuing insecurity, intertwined with the risk of democratic breakdown in a few more countries, would spell disaster for the region, and the future of West Africa's nearly 400 million people with an over 70% youthful population would be at stake.

Stemming the democratic backsliding through collective and collaborative actions:

In Prof. Prempeh's view, curtailing democratic backsliding and reviving the region's leadership in advancing democratic norms will require determined and sustained efforts and commitments, not only by national and regional authorities but, more importantly, by civil society actors. Many opportunities exist for civil society to assume this role, he stated detailing that first, civil society in the region will have the people on their side to stem the tide of democratic backsliding. Afrobarometer surveys show a consistently strong preference among Africans for democratic rule over all other forms of government. By strong majorities, West Africans support democracy (75%), and reject military rule (48%), one-party rule (81%), and one-man rule (70%). Again, eight out of 10 West Africans support a two-term limit on presidential tenure, including countries like Cote d'Ivoire (78%) and Guinea (76%) where incumbents have recently pushed through term-limit extensions.

Secondly, he added, many governments' attempts to weaken democratic safeguards in the region have been met with widespread popular opposition and protest. This, again, confirms the Afrobarometer's significant finding that while Africans overwhelmingly support democracy as a form of government, they disapprove of the performance of their democratically elected governments.

Thirdly, Prof. Prempeh posited that the internet and social media have significantly reduced the cost of mobilizing civil society for collective action and solidarity across national borders. Fourthly, he averred that there are both continent-wide and region-specific normative and legal instruments in support of democracy and good governance, notably the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance. The Protocol sets out standards and benchmarks to promote regional convergence towards democratic constitutional government. These African legal instruments, he believed strongly, provide a useful rallying point and framework for civic mobilization to counter processes and institutions within the region.

Call to action

The WADEMOS Project Director admonished CSOs and stakeholders gathered to think regionally about problems and opportunities and act locally, as well as think locally and act regionally about these problems and opportunities within the ECOWAS States. Essentially, the idea is to build solidarity, forge a common agenda among civil societies, and advance the ECOWAS project of moving from ECOWAS of the state to ECOWAS of the people.

2.2 GOODWILL MESSAGES



2.2.1 Ambassador Bankole Adeoye, AU Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security

Delivering the speech on behalf of Ambassador Bankole Adeoye, AU Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace, and Security, William Awinador-Kanyirige, Senior Advisor at the African Union, congratulated CDD-Ghana and its partners for the strategic initiative of launching WADEMOS as a transnational pro-democracy actor to contribute to addressing the democratic decline in the region. The ambassador highlighted the following issues:

The need to prioritize knowledge communities for smart policy-making

In the speech read on his behalf, H. E. Bankole indicated that WADEMOS finds resonance with the African Union's (AU) initiative to anchor knowledge approaches for smart policy-making in Africa. He explained that AU is collaborating with some CSOs, think tanks, and research centers for policy influence on a myriad of issues that are confronting Africa. He further stated that through the pathway of communities of knowledge, governments will be able to bridge the know-how gaps and the lingering disconnect between knowledge and policy-making. The initiative, the AU Political Affairs Commissioner insisted, also seeks to promote sincere peer reviews, share common standards of accountability, and maintain the consistency and impact of after-action reviews of flagship projects across Africa.

NETT4PEACE as a knowledge community for governance, peace, and security

To create synergies in the fight against terrorism and insecurity across the continent, Ambassador Bankole divulged that the AU Commission is consulting with some African think tanks from the five regional blocs to work with the Commission's Department of

Political Affairs, Peace, and Security (DPAPS) to launch NETT4PEACE as a knowledge community for governance, peace, and security. While touting the strides made by similar I-RECKE, an AU PSC-endorsed initiative launched as a continental coordination platform and knowledge tool for early response mechanism, at the Lusaka mid-year Summit, he urged WADEMOS to take advantage of this and become a stakeholder in the NETT4PEACE project.

Potential collaboration between WADEMOS and other regional platforms

The AU Political Affairs Commissioner was optimistic that the launch of WADEMOS points to opportunities for collaboration in a shared vision and strategy among WADEMOS, ECOWAS, Regional Economic Communities (RECs), the AU DPAPS, NETT4PEACE, and I-RECKE. To concretize this collaboration, he noted, the first joint consultation meeting with African CSOs and in collaboration with the AU ECOSOCC was organized on September 14, 2022, by the AU PSC. This will be an annual session.

Policy conference on the peace, security, and development nexus

Reflecting on the nexus for holistic, coordinated, and robust response mechanisms to the security challenges on the continent, Ambassador Bankole asserted that the African Union Commission (AUC), together with AfDB, UNECA, Afriximbank, APRM, AUDA-NEPAD, UNDP, and the Kingdom of Morocco, is convening a policy conference on the Peace, Security, and Development Nexus in October 2022 in Morocco. The conference, he averred, will also discuss support for the transitional countries in West Africa, signaling that the launch of WADEMOS places a premium on this, which will contribute to converting challenges confronting West Africa into huge opportunities for smarter governance, peace, security, inclusive development, and democratic consolidation.



Figure Ulla Andren, Head of Regional Cooperation, Sida

2.2.2 Ulla Andren, Head of Regional Development Cooperation in Africa for the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency

She was very proud to witness the launch of the civil society movement that seeks to support democratic development and consolidation in West Africa. Ms. Andren encouraged the WADEMOS Network to grow bigger to work with and support civil societies within the region to achieve the vision of the Network. She commended ECOWAS for imposing

sanctions on countries that have undergone coups to reaffirm its commitment to democratic governance, peace, and security in the region. She pointed out that despite the democratic gains, the ECOWAS region has gone through a knee-jerk reaction where leaders have undermined the democratic system that is in place.



2.2.3 Ambassador Baba Gana Wakil, ECOWAS Resident Representative to Ghana

The Ambassador highlighted some of the initiatives by ECOWAS to combat democratic backsliding in the region. These include the appointment of high-level mediators by the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State to the Member States facing political crises; the reactivation of the Council of the Wise; the new ECOWAS Forum of National Security Advisors; the ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Network as a critical vehicle for data

collection and advancement of knowledge; the revised Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance; and the Counterterrorism Action Plan 2024.



2.2.4 Shirley Ayorkor Botchway, Hon. Minister for Foreign Affairs and Regional Integration of the Republic of Ghana

The Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister, Thomas Mbomba, spoke on behalf of the Minister. He assured WADEMOS of the commitment of the ministry to the principles of democracy, peace, security, rule of law, and economic sustainable development. These shared values, he noted, are prerequisites for inclusive, good governance and democratic development. The search for peace and security in the

region is therefore a collective effort of all stakeholders and hoped that democracy would be defended, invigorated and enhanced across West Africa.

2.3. KEYNOTE SPEECH



2.1 Welcome Remarks

Kamissa Camara, Former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Mali and Senior Visiting Expert for the Sahel at the U.S. Institute of Peace

She shared the following standpoints:

Reverse democratic erosion and consolidate gains

Kamissa Camara recalled that political momentum in West Africa was on the side of the institutionalization of multiparty democracy, which made the subregion a de facto leader of Africa's transition towards democracy. Regrettably, she opined, these gains have been significantly reversed in recent years through threats of

democratic backsliding and re-autocratization. Therefore, she affirmed, the establishment of WADEMOS is timely for mobilizing, coordinating, and leveraging the collective power of pro-democracy actors to address the erosion of democracy.

Reject undemocratic retention of political power

Kamissa Camara underscored the role of Gambian civil society, together with ECOWAS, in the restoration of democracy and the rule of law in the country in 2016 insisting that it amply demonstrated the continued potency and potential of civil society in promoting and protecting democracy and the rule of law. She indicated that it is thus not surprising that ECOWAS achieves commendable outcomes whenever civil society has created the conditions for ECOWAS to intervene and where the two have worked hand in glove and urged both institutions to build on those best practices.

Citizens are optimistic and prefer democratic governance

Relying on Afrobarometer surveys, the Senior Visiting Scholar on Sahel at the U.S. Institute of Peace submitted that despite the daunting challenges that confront the democratic

journey for West Africa, the data showed that 76% of West Africans still prefer democracy to any form of government. In her view, this suggests that citizens feel they have a better chance of survival in a democracy if they see reasons to protect it. She contended that this is a timely intervention by a democratic solidarity network to coordinate and organize various democratic actors to push back on democratic backsliding.

The need for collective actions

Emphasizing the need for collective action, she argued that efforts to push back the threats 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 CSOs. It is the more reason why the timely intervention of WADEMOS with the collective power of pro-democracy actors and opportunities to actively engage with regional bodies and instruments to push back democratic erosion and reinvigorate democratic norms is imperative, she added. She advised that there is the need to deliberately support the worthy course of democratic development as we build an agency of citizens, amplify and strengthen voices and preferences to protect democratic consolidation and inclusive growth.

2.4 PRESENTATION ON WADEMOS NETWORK

The WADEMOS Network Coordinator, Kop'ep Debugat, outlined the strategic objectives of the Network which seeks to support evidence-driven advocacy and activism around democratization in the region. Mr. Dabugat disclosed that the Network aims to promote awareness and track compliance with the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, as well as engage with ECOWAS to address the threats to democracy and promote and popularize democratic norms and values.

The Coordinator asserted that the region has numerous pro-democracy CSOs who are in strong support of the reclamation of democracy. Although CSOs are working, there are gaps and challenges in their efforts, and WADEMOS aims to fill these gaps. Some of the lined-up activities for the WADEMOS are: embarking on knowledge learning and exchange; regional civil society and intergovernmental bodies engagement on the ECOWAS Protocol; programs on countering democratic backsliding; and other interventions that will entrench the values of sustaining democracy. These interventions are expected to strengthen solidarity, experience sharing, coordination, and institutionalization of civil society mobilization and engagements towards cementing democratic development in the region. The website and social media platforms for WADEMOS were unveiled in a presentation by the Communications and Digital Platforms Officer, Jonah Eledi.

2.5 THE OFFICIAL LAUNCH OF WADEMOS



Ambassador Dr. Abdel Fatau Musah, ECOWAS Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace, and Security, formally launched WADEMOS as an exemplary regional initiative. The WADEMOS secretariat is hosted at CDD-Ghana with generous support from the Government of Sweden. He shared the following perspectives:

WADEMOS as a praiseworthy initiative

The ambassador commended the government and people of Ghana for demonstrating over the last 30 years that democracy and peaceful alternation of power is worth nurturing and safeguarding. He stated that it was only befitting that the WADEMOS initiative

was launched in Accra, Ghana. He underscored the need to reinvigorate civil society voices and networks for democracy and good governance.

Strengthening the relationship between ECOWAS and civil society

Ambassador Abdel-Fatau Musah emphasized that ECOWAS places importance on creating working partnerships at the national and regional levels, hence the creation of the Economic and Social Council, which serves as a platform for civil society and ECOWAS to interact. The partnership between the regional body and civil society marks the golden era that amplifies the impact of civil actors in governance. Furthermore, he disclosed that the drafting of the founding instruments of ECOWAS, in particular the ECOWAS Treaty, was partly based on the role of civil society as an indispensable partner in the regional integration process; hence, the decision to establish ECOSOC as a platform for civil society interactions with the regional body and contributions to the codification of regional norms and practices.

Eroding of democratic practices and institutions

The ECOWAS Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security observed that the

region is increasingly witnessing the eroding of democratic practices, strategic manipulation and retreat from democratic norms, weaponization of the judiciary, and instrumentalization of security agencies and identity to silence and marginalize opposition and dissenting voices, including civil society and the media. Again, through fake and manipulated referenda, some democratically-elected presidents have sought, with various degrees of inglorious success, to maintain power beyond constitutionally mandated term limits. This, he noted, has put the central pillar of ECOWAS' constitutional convergence criteria enshrined in the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, namely, "zero tolerance for power obtained or maintained by unconstitutional means," under sustained assault and stress..

Weakening social contracts

Governance deficits, he opined, including the progressive retreat of the state from the periphery and the abdication of the responsibility of the state to provide basic services, are weakening social contracts between the populations and their rulers. This is rendering member states vulnerable to opportunistic interventions in politics by the military and nefarious actors, particularly in the context of an asymmetric conflict environment.

New variables in the security landscape and governance deficits

The Political Affairs Commissioner averred that the governance deficits and the new variables in the security landscape—terrorism and violent extremism—are proving to be veritable threat multipliers against democracy and good governance and an additional challenge to the efforts of civil society pro-democracy. He pointed out, for example, that, while the military cited unconstitutional maintenance of power and repression by ex-President Alpha Condé as justification for the coup d'état in Guinea in 2021, pervasive insecurity and institutional graft were proffered as the main reasons for the military takeovers in Mali and Burkina Faso.

ECOWAS Vision 2050

Dr. Abdel-Fatau Musah announced that the key strategic goal of ECOWAS Vision 2050 is the transformation of the region from an ECOWAS of States into an ECOWAS of Peoples, where inclusive prosperity, democracy, peace, and security are assured. To transform the region into an ECOWAS of peoples, he insisted, civil society shall remain the main enabler proclaiming that in the new ECOWAS Commission Administration, there is a committed partner and an active enabler of effective civil society contributions to the regional integration agenda.

WADEMOS should serve as a catalyst for building synergies and act as a watchdog

He advised WADEMOS to seize the opportunity to promote accountability, good governance, peace, and stability across the ECOWAS Region. He also directed the Network to position itself as a catalyst for building synergies and networks across the region and act as a watchdog over Member States and ECOWAS in the areas of democracy and good governance, inclusive development, peace, and security.

2.6 Remarks by Steering Committee



Dr. Aliou Barry, a member of the WADEMOS Steering Committee and Executive Director of Stat View International in Guinea, emphasized the key governance and security challenges that confront the region. These include the elongation of presidential term limits, the overthrow of constitutionally elected governments, electoral fraud and violence, weak parliamentary oversight, weak independence of the judiciary, weak public accountability, and low civil society activism, among others.

Despite this gloomy situation, he emphasized that citizens are optimistic about democracy, particularly through CSO advocacy and policy influence to yield significant outcomes. However, most of the CSOs in the region are territorial, national, and locally based. This, he believed, presents a significant gap in regional-level policy influence and response to the emerging threats to democracy, disclosing that it was in response to these governance challenges that the WADEMOS Network was established. WADEMOS, he stated, seeks to coordinate and leverage the power of pro-democracy institutions in the region and amplify ECOWAS' vision. He stressed the importance of the young African population, which is about 70%, and emphasized that an objective of WADEMOS is to mobilize the youth to participate effectively in democracy and development.

3.0 THE CONFERENCE ON COUNTERING THREATS TO DEMOCRACY IN WEST AFRICA

The launch of WADEMOS was followed by a Conference on Countering Threats to Democracy in West Africa. This mainly took the form of panel discussions.

3.1 Panel Discussions

In the early 1990s, with the end of the Cold War, significant institutional changes took place within the political system in West Africa, which became known as the third wave of democracy. Essentially, the era was marked by constitutionalism, a multiparty system of governance, and democratic reforms, which ushered in political and economic progress at the beginning of 2000.

In recent years, however, there has been an alarming democratic backslide. West Africa is at risk of deterioration, including rising authoritarianism and instability in the Sahel region, with a surge in the activities of violent extremists and terrorists attacking basic freedoms and civil liberties of citizens. The region has also seen the return of new actors—the military—in politics through coup d'états in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea. In contributing to addressing these democratic reversals in West Africa, the conference discussed and made proposals to counter the threats to democracy in West Africa. This took the form of presentations and four-panel discussions.

Panel Discussion One: Setting the Scene: The State of Democracy in West Africa

Between 2021 and 2022, constitutionally elected governments were overthrown by the military in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Guinea. In other countries, such as Cote d'Ivoire and Togo, presidents attempted to extend their stay in power beyond constitutional mandates with varying degrees of success. Additionally, from 2020 onwards, reports of curtailment of individual freedom and human rights violations increased. There was also an internet blackout that happened at the height of violent protests and arbitrary arrests of citizens. These were further undermined by the surge in fake news, misinformation, and disinformation. The period also marked flawed elections in Niger and Senegal. The slide in democracy was intensified by insecurity, chiefly through violent extremism and terrorism.

The reversals in democratic governance have raised concerns about the stability of West Africa. This panel provided an opportunity for reflection, analysis, and discussions on the state of democracy in West Africa, drawing on evidence from recent developments and findings from the Afrobarometer, as well as key existing issues, experiences, and challenges.



The main speaker was Dr. Boniface Dulani, Director of Survey, Afrobarometer. The panelists were Dr. Aderemi Ajibewa, Director of Political Affairs, ECOWAS; Barrister Eberelfendu, President of Women in Politics Forum; and Dr. Aliou Barry, Executive Director, Stat-View International. The moderator was Austin Aigbe, Senior Program Officer, CDD West Africa.

3.1.1 Highlights of some governance indicators

Findings from the Afrobarometer surveys indicated that approximately 75% of citizens across West Africa reject military rule. The support for democracy was strongest in Senegal and weakest in Mali. Senegal and The Gambia had the strongest numbers of citizens who rejected military rule. There was also strong support for elections. The lowest numbers were found in Mali, although three-quarters preferred the election of leaders through a democratic process.

Additionally, citizens do not want their leaders to stay after two terms. Again, the support for multiparty democracy varied across the region. About two-thirds of citizens say many political parties are needed as they give people a choice. In Mali and Senegal, only a slight majority say multiparty democracy is important. Citizens preferred governments that are accountable and performing, not just performing. About 52% of citizens demand full democracy.

The overall trend indicates that there is no improvement in democracy. The supply side of democracy is low. Also, democratic norms are weakening. Again, coups and military rule are major threats to democracy. And citizens want a strong, accountable government. The findings help CSOs understand that there are issues and challenges that are not uniform across the region and will require different forms of intervention.

3.1.2 Perspectives from the Panel Discussion and Plenary

- Citizens are tired of military coups. The introduction of illiberal democracy has not benefited the majority of citizens, except political leaders and their cronies. Citizens are disappointed with authoritarian leadership, corruption, shrinking civic space, weak public accountability, and a generally low democratic dividend.
- There is a strong nexus between corruption, bad governance, and insecurity. This has contributed to creating a void that has been exploited by terrorists and violent extremists. Allegedly, the people behind the terrorist groups are the same in government. Terrorists from the past are celebrated as heroes today.
- Across West Africa, there is low participation and underrepresentation of women in governance and politics, missing out on the 30% United Nation's recommended minimum threshold. Several factors, including political, economic, social, and cultural barriers inhibit women's ability to participate in governance and politics. Addressing this challenge requires constitutional and institutional reforms and affirmative action. CSOs should be encouraged to design and implement interventions that will ensure that women are significantly represented in governance and politics.
- ECOWAS has taken several actions towards democratic consolidation in West Africa. This included ECOWAS mediation in Mali but it was not sustained and another military intervention ensued. ECOWAS has also implemented some policies and projects to protect human rights. These include the whistleblower policy, the human rights network, and the truth and reconciliation project. However, the actions and inactions of heads of state impede the progress of ECOWAS.
- ECOWAS should be consistent in applying sanctions against transitional countries. ECOWAS is noted for the application of "carrot and stick diplomacy." However, while it used diplomatic sanctions in Mali, a different approach was used in The Gambia during the era of Jammeh.
- ECOWAS should create a ranking list of countries and classify presidents based on respect for democratic principles and performance.

3.1.3 Key Takeaways

- The euphoria and enthusiasm that accompanied democracy had diminished in West Africa. For example, opposition parties, dissenting voices, civil society activism and media freedom have been restricted by a decrease in the supply of democracy while the demand for democracy increases. The WADEMOS network can contribute to reversing the trend.
- Institutions like ECOWAS are limited in their ability to advocate. Non-state actors are in a position to act and pressure governments to improve governance.
- Conflict prevention needs to be at the heart of the work of WADEMOS because of rising coups in West Africa and insecurity, which are putting communities and citizens in distress.
- The intervention by WADEMOS across the region should be inclusive, with no groups feeling left out. WADEMOS should collectively promote reforms that empower groups and citizens to enable them to benefit from democratic governance.

3.2 Panel Discussion Two: Threats to State and Regional Peace and Security in West Africa

West Africa is facing a growing refugee crisis spurred by internal conflicts, particularly in the Sahel region. A report by the Africa Center for Strategic Studies indicated a 70% increase in attacks in the Sahel Region by militant Islamist organizations, rising from 1,180 to 2,005, with spillover risks to neighboring countries between 2020 and 2021. Other sources of insecurity, such as kidnapping and abductions, have gained notoriety, especially in Nigeria, which is already saddled with the challenge of the extremist activities of the Boko Haram sect. Again, election-related violence has been a major source of conflict in the region.

The panel reflected on the effectiveness of regional and international efforts in addressing insurgency in the region, particularly in the Sahel, and the kind of adaptations required to prevent further deterioration and escalation. The main speaker was Dr. Festus Kofi Aubyn, Regional Coordinator, Research and Capacity Building, WANEP. The panelists were Dr. Fredline M. Cormack Hale, Research and Policy Director of the Institute for Governance Reform, Sierra Leone; William Lifongo, Senior Human Rights Advisor, United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel; and Mariam Diallo Drame, Executive Director, Femme Leadership et Développement Durable (AFLED), Mali. The moderator was Ms. Omolara Balogun, Head of Policy Influencing and Advocacy, WACSI.



3.2.1 Perspectives from the Panel Discussion and Plenary

a. A history of civil war and the resurrection of new actors

For many years, West Africa was noted as Africa's most violent region. The region was dotted with several civil wars, with some of the most devastating wars recorded in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Generally, there was relative peace in West Africa. However, insecurity in the region has heightened, especially in the past three years, which has occasioned the resurgence of military coups toppling constitutionally elected governments between 2021 and 22 in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Guinea. The military takeover in Guinea-Bissau, however, failed.

b. Proliferation and circulation of arms without authority

There is also an increase in the movement of small arms and sophisticated weapons across the region. A recent report by the WANEP estimates a 29% increase in arms

and attacks across the region. Some other reports estimate that there are about a billion small arms in circulation worldwide, out of which about 12 million are said to be circulating in the Sahel region alone. At the fall of President Gaddafi of Libya, there was commentary around movements of small arms and light weapons across the region.

c. Terrorism and violent extremism (VE)

There is an increase in the geographical expansion of terrorists, violent extremists, and terror groups across the region. Particularly, the Sahel region has become the epicenter of terrorism and violent extremism. The 2022 Global Terrorism Index reported that 48% of total global deaths from terrorism in 2021 occurred in sub-Saharan Africa, with 35% in the Sahel. In Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali, there are terrorist groups that are not under the control of the military juntas. In Mali, more than 30% of its geographical location is under the terrorists' rule. And more than 50% of the geographical area of Burkina Faso is controlled by terrorists.

d. Terrorism and violent extremism impacting gender concerns

Women have become natural victims of cruel acts in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. Men who have been recruited as terrorists have invariably enrolled their wives and children in the groups. This strategy of recruiting women and children into terrorism and violent extremism through marriages has gained roots among the Katiba Macina in Mali. Similarly, in Niger, an estimated 90,000 children are not in school, and 50% of these are young girls who will be married early to terrorists and violent extremists.

In Nigeria, there is an increasing involvement of bandits, Boko Haram, and splinter groups in these illegal activities. Boko Haram started on a low-key note with an agenda against Western education. It later turned into the kidnapping of girls for ransom. Increasingly, their operations took on political dimensions, making direct demands on governors and presidents, which manifested in competing and sharing power with the state's security apparatus in different forms and different situations. Presently, there are territories occupied by the terrorists and Boko Haram that are no longer under state control. The expansion of their activities has become a major source of insecurity in Nigeria, despite state efforts.

Nationally and regionally, response mechanisms such as the 2019 Accra Initiative, the G5 Sahel, Operation Barkhane, and the Multinational Joint Task Force, among others, have been initiated and implemented. Despite these national governments and multilateral frameworks and operations, there are increasing attacks and an expansion in terrorism and violent extremism from the Sahel towards the coastal region. The situation in the Sahel presents an opportunity for the coastal countries to learn and initiate different response mechanisms to counter terrorism and violent extremism.

e. Limited voices and inclusion in violent extremism discussions

There is limited access to information by citizens and CSOs on violent extremism and terrorism. Again, there is weak civilian-military cordiality and relationship in addressing violent extremism and terrorism. This affects the extent to which CSOs can access accurate and reliable data and information for community-level

sensitization on violent extremism and terrorism and building community resilience. Generally, intelligence and information about terrorism and violent extremism are wrapped and shared within restricted circles among intergovernmental security organizations. This makes it difficult for citizens to understand governments' response mechanisms for fighting terrorism and violent extremism.

f. **The upsurge of unconstitutional changes in government**

The rebirth of military takeovers in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea, and attempted coups in Guinea-Bissau and Niger between 2020 and 2022 raised security concerns about the nexus between bad governance and security. The return of the gun as a regime-changing tool has placed a significant burden on fragile insecurity and democratic governance within the region.

g. **Election (in) security**

The third wave of democratization was accompanied by competitive elections, candidate selection, and representation, among other features of a multiparty system of governance. Unfortunately, credible, inclusive and peaceful elections have declined in the region. The conduct of elections in many countries in the region has occurred within an environment of divisional politics, oppressive dissenting voices and opposition, voter suppression, vote rigging, amassing votes and adjudication of election victory in the courtroom, instead of polling stations raising doubt and suspicion about the legitimacy of the winning candidate. Unaccepted election results have resulted in protests, demonstrations, and clashes with political opponents and security forces, resulting in violence, injuries, and deaths. Public trust deficits and mistrust between and among competing political parties and towards the Electoral Commission, security agencies, and other Electoral Management Bodies have also affected the integrity of the elections. A week before the 2020 elections in Benin, the first female candidate was imprisoned based on claims of terrorist actions.

h. **Climate insecurity**

The impact of climate change is a significant factor that exacerbates conflict in the region. The insecurity takes the form of farmer-herder conflict and intercommunal conflict. Although the Sahelian countries are the hardest hit, the littoral coastal states such as Ghana and Nigeria have been equally affected. Farmer-herder conflict has been intensified by polarizing narratives such as stigmatization and discrimination against ethnic minorities such as the Fulbe communities. The impact of climate change is drying up livelihood opportunities, yet little attention has been given to this issue.

i. **Maritime insecurity**

This threatens trading within the maritime boundaries of West Africa. Although in recent months there has been a reduction in reported incidents, the hope is that the reduction in cases will be sustained. In 2020 and 2021, the Gulf of Guinea, for example, superseded the Gulf of Aden in East Africa in terms of maritime piracy attacks. The maritime insecurity should be a source of great concern, but it is one of the sectors that most CSOs are least interested in working in.

j. **Poverty and rising cost of living**

The level of poverty and rising cost of living and economic hardships as a result of hikes in the prices of goods and services, including foodstuffs, fuel and transportation, have intensified economic insecurity in the region. A report by WANEP and UNDP in 2022 on Burkina Faso, Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire corroborated the socioeconomic hardships many citizens are facing, which make livelihoods unbearable. Ostensibly, governments have blamed the economic hardships on external factors such as the Russian-Ukrainian war and COVID-19. Citizens are still living with some of the lingering effects of COVID-19. COVID-19 also exposed the weaknesses and lack of resilience of the region's health system and security.

k. **Youth bulge and youth unemployment**

The youth have become vulnerable to several social vices due to poverty and unemployment. For example, the 2021 Ghana Population and Housing Census estimates that 57% of the people of Ghana are under the age of 25. The youth bulge of young people of today, unlike their counterparts 30 years ago, have education, skills, talent and energy but remain unemployed and do not have income opportunities. In a state of hopelessness, they have become natural targets and victims of organized crime, terrorism and violent extremism, with some voluntarily surrendering to take part in these crimes. At least when you belong to a terrorist group, you are sure that your daily upkeep and protection are catered for by the group. Yet, national and/or regional policy to address youth bulge and youth unemployment and the threat they pose to security and governance is either absent or not sufficient.

l. **Online violence, misinformation and disinformation**

The role of the digital revolution, including social media, is important for the growth of democracy, yet their excesses have presented security challenges to building community resilience. The digital revolution presents several threats, such as fake news, misinformation, disinformation, online violence, cybersecurity, cyberbullying, intemperate language, and hate speech, which foster potential violence and intrude on the privacy of citizens. In Sierra Leone, a study by the Institute for Governance Reform in 2022 indicated that 35% of citizens have heard hate speech on political campaign platforms. Also, 57% of the respondents said they have heard hate speech on social media platforms. Of this, 53% were between the ages of 25 and 44. The majority of people who said they had heard hate speech were urban dwellers. Even though most communities do not have access to the Internet, the few who do create online problems.

Another related issue of concern is the influence of international actors such as Russia in the deployment of tech infrastructure, such as trolls, to propagate misinformation and disinformation, particularly in elections, and the implications for peace and security in the region. Reportedly, Russia was seen deploying trolls to destabilize the 2020 elections in Ghana. To address the threats of online violence, CSOs can learn from some global cases such as Syria and the mobilization of social movements for the Arab Springs.

m. Geopolitical and external interest

The strategic and commercial interests in the natural resources endowment of West Africa attract exploitative strategic alliances from the international environment and raise the stakes of insecurity in the region. Such exploitative interests in natural resource locations such as the Sahel region, the Niger Delta belt of Nigeria, and the Gulf of Guinea, among others, have contributed to deepening the fragile insecurity in the region. Often, external strategic alliances and actors have exploited these resources to the detriment of peace and stability in the region. The strategic alliance of countries such as France, Russia, China, and the Americas in the Sahel and transitional countries raises more inquiries.

3.2.3 Key takeaways

- **Design and implement national strategies to build community resilience:** The national government should partner with CSOs, traditional authorities, and other actors to design collective approaches and strategies to address signs of division in the communities. Because once these signs become apparent, the extremists know how to exploit them.
- **Learn from success stories on terrorism and violent extremism:** Some communities are showing some exemplary levels of resilience in the face of terrorists and VE attacks. Such communities can be understudied, and best practices can be implemented in vulnerable communities.
- **Adopt local strategies for ownership:** Both state and non-state actors should recognize terrorism and violent extremism as developmental challenges. In some cases, some staff of the security and defense forces have been killed on the battlefield. There is a need for local ownership of the processes. The national government should define local, community, national, and regional approaches and strategies and encourage ownership at all these levels. Experts in these fields argue that once the solutions are local, they are more adaptable and align with local realities, and become sustainable. Local solutions also help to close ranks at the national and regional levels to address violence extremism and terrorism.
- **Develop a decentralized approach to addressing terrorism and VE:** The national government should develop a more decentralized approach to addressing terrorism and violent extremism. Often, governments formulate approaches and strategies that only end up on paper. Approaches to addressing terrorism and VE should be decentralized to empower local communities to own the processes for implementation. For example, in the Lake Chad Basin, there is a Multinational Joint Task Force, which is a military response but incorporates regional stabilization strategies that include local approaches and solutions. This is followed by the development of territorial action plans that incorporate the concerns of eight affected territories. The implementation and monitoring of these action plans rest with the governors of these regions.
- **Promote national inclusion in addressing violent extremism and terrorism:** The involvement of CSOs in addressing terrorism and violent extremism has become imperative. Even though there is always some difficulty in terms of how much intelligence information can be accessed through a purely security and military lens by civil society, CSOs need to find more innovative ways of engaging with the security sector to access critical information for community sensitization on early warning signs. There is also the need to build and enhance civilian-military relationships.

- **Adopt a human rights-based approach to win the hearts and minds of people:** The central idea of terrorism and VE is to capture and win the hearts and minds of people for recruitment. Terrorists and extremists get into communities and make promises to win the hearts and minds of people. Even though sometimes one does not want to place a premium on these promises, they manifest in several forms. To counter such posturing, it will require that a human rights-based approach be adopted by governments to ensure social justice and deliver adequate social services to communities. Again, national peace institutions should promote peace-building, peaceful co-existence, inter-faith harmony, national cohesion, and cultural tolerance targeting the youth, including tertiary students.
- **Adopt anti-terrorism and violent extremism legislation and frameworks and communicate them effectively to the citizens:** National frameworks for preventing and countering violent extremism have proven to be quite helpful in countries such as Ghana. These include messaging such as “see something, say something.” However, the concern has been that some of these laws and frameworks are used for political ends, which dilute the fight against terrorism and violent extremism.
- **Adopt a whole-of-society approach to countering terrorism & and violent extremism:** A comprehensive, concerted, collective, and holistic approach that combines both kinetic and non-kinetic measures is required to address VE and terrorism. Such approaches dovetail into the UN strategy on the Sahel, which supports Member States to improve governance through the provision of basic services. A military approach is not a panacea for the fight against terrorism, and VE and human security interventions are required as complementary.
- **Institute intergenerational and transgenerational dialogue:** The young people are disconnected from the struggles and values of their forefathers and the current elderly generation. There is a need to create intergenerational platforms that open opportunities for transgenerational and intergenerational dialogue on the values of democracy, to transfer them from the elderly generation to the young.
- **CSOs should play a key role in guaranteeing security in transition countries:** The early data collection, warning, and early response mechanisms by WANEP need to be consolidated both at the national and ECOWAS levels to guarantee security for countries, especially in transition countries. The data should be shared with other COSs for community sensitization on security issues.

3.3 Panel Discussion Three: Review of ECOWAS Responses to the Presidential Term Limit Evasions and Unconstitutional Changes of Government in West Africa

Many reasons account for democratic backsliding in West Africa. One such reason is the general unwillingness of leaders and/or others to intervene and defend democratic norms in the region. In addition, ECOWAS has, in recent times, struggled to check regional leaders running for third terms on shaky constitutional grounds. In 2020, for instance, despite the ongoing protests and the deaths of 50 people in post-election violence, large-scale clashes, and fighting across Cote d'Ivoire, in the weeks following the controversial presidential reelection of Alassane Ouattara, the 15 Member States sent congratulations on the president's victory. Additionally, ECOWAS' capacity to effectively prevent the unconstitutional transfer of government and electoral flaws remains a concern for West African citizens. Again, its mediation efforts aimed at returning civil and political order in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea have witnessed many challenges and constraints.



The discussion assessed the effectiveness of ECOWAS protocols, instruments, and institutions against third-termism and unconstitutional changes in government, drawing on evidence and experiences from the region, particularly countries affected by military coups in recent times and where governments have attempted term elongation through controversial amendments to the constitution. Also significant to the discussion was a review of ECOWAS' response and mediation efforts aimed at restoring constitutional rule in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Guinea.

The main speaker was Dr. Aderemi Ajibewa, ECOWAS Director of Political Affairs. The panelists were Prof. Henry Kwasi Prempeh, Executive Director, CDD-Ghana; Prof. David Dosseh, activist and head of the social movement front Citoyen Togo Debout; and Marcella Samba, Executive Director, National Election Watch. The moderator was Dr. Kojo P. Asante, Director of Advocacy and Policy Engagement, CDD-Ghana.

3.3.1 Perspectives from the Panel Discussion and Plenary

- a. Round 7 of the Afrobarometer survey showed overwhelming support for term limits. Seven out of 10 African adults preferred term limits and democracy, even when they were seen to be supporting military coups.
- b. Those who oppose term limits are often able to stipulate their argument within democracy itself. Essentially, democracy is based on the principle that the people have the right to choose and have opted to maintain a leader. The best response to this argument is a democratic response using empirical evidence, that is, practices from other countries, specifically those that have exhibited a smooth transition of power and respect for presidential term limits.
- c. As a people, we have focused more on the rules of entry and less on the rules of exit and how we make politics competitive. We have not done a good job in our constitutional reform processes on how power is enacted while the person is in office. The root of the problem needs to be identified, or else new presidents will come into power, but the practices will remain the same. We have democratized access to power, but not power itself. Several laws are old and from the authoritarian era; therefore, carrying a constitution with a new administration will cause the problems to persist. Term limits and standard adoption are not enough to see democratic dividends; there must be democratized access to power but not the power itself.
- d. It was simple to introduce democracy to Africa; nevertheless, it has proven difficult to maintain it. When there is a conversation about consultation, it is important to also note who is being consulted. Society has been factionalized to ensure that the interests of the leaders are protected and upheld, and ultimately, they solely benefit from the system. We cannot precipitate democracy in an impoverished society that is mentally impoverished. The region needs massive education on democracy and citizenship.
- e. The review of the Protocol on Good Governance and Democracy is under discussion and is stuck at the top level of ECOWAS. It has not been adopted or passed. Decisions in ECOWAS are based on consensus among heads of state, which makes reaching an agreement difficult since there are countries with large and small economies.
- f. ECOWAS is often impeded by the principles of subsidiarity and sovereignty of member states, which render it an advisory body. The ECOWAS Commission is just a secretariat of the ECOWAS Authority, which comprises heads of state. All decisions depend on the summit and are based on consensus, which makes their outcomes slow and difficult relative to the interests and positions of both large and small economies and countries.
- g. Action must be taken to prevent new actors—the military—from taking over constitutionally elected government. The CSOs should present a strong force to resist the emerging trend. In Senegal, CSOs and artists came together to launch a campaign to set presidential term limits.

- h. CSOs must make effective use of the ECOSOC platform for effective regional engagement with ECOWAS, especially on the issue of term limits and initiate national and regional transformational agenda on the excessive executive powers of the President.
- i. WADEMOS should engage ECOWAS about the actions to be taken to move the ECOWAS of the state to the ECOWAS of the people and institute measures to increase citizen involvement in governance.

3.3.2 Key takeaways

- While CSO advocacy, investment, and capacity building of citizens are important, there is a need to initiate national conversations that seek to change the mindset and orientation of political leaders who govern the people.
- ECOWAS should enact and enforce the principle of ensuring that no president, incumbent party, or anyone related to that can enjoy a constitutional amendment related to his or her tenure during the president's tenure.
- Corruption is rampant, and the judiciary is not helping enough to mitigate this threat to democratic governance.
- CSOs should be more proactive in tracking, monitoring, and reporting red flags and potential red flags of democratic decline to ECOWAS for appropriate response mechanisms to be taken.
- ECOWAS should be more proactive and transform itself as ECOWAS of the people than ECOWAS of the 'Presidential Club'. This also means that the heads of state who constitute the ECOWAS Secretariat and Summit should be prepared to serve the interests of their citizens. In that process, ECOWAS will become ECOWAS for the people.
- ECOWAS should walk the talk, deepen regional integration, and facilitate the removal of unnecessary trade barriers and the movement of people.

3.4 Panel Discussion Four: Civil Society and Citizens' Responses to Democratic Backsliding in West Africa

Several civic movements and coalitions have reacted against rising authoritarianism among West Africans. Some of these movements have been successful, and others have not. Some of the successful protests were Balai Citoyen's protest against President Alassane Ouattara's bid for a third term in Burkina Faso in 2014. Again, in Guinea, the National Front for the Defense of the Constitution (FNDC), the country's leading opposition movement, organized protests against the third term of President Alpha Condé. The FNDC engaged in a tough fight with the transitional government by maintaining its calls to demonstrate. However, Guinea's junta dissolved the FNDC under a decree. Similarly, in 2020, the #EndSARS protest was spurred on by a coalition of organizations and non-traditional civic formations that raised money, coordinated lines of communication, and offered legal aid to protesters.

Additionally, the initiatives of influential and well-established CSOs in the region, such as WANEP, WACSI, CDD-Ghana, CDD-Nigeria, MFWA, and CDG, among others, have led to collaborative approaches to conflict prevention and peacebuilding; protection of media freedom and freedom of expression; rights and civil liberties; constitutionalism and rule of

law; capacity building of civil society; and provided optimism for citizen mobilization, engagement, and participation in governance. For example, the work of WANEP in establishing an early warning system has been instrumental in helping to resolve multiple conflicts in the early stages within the sub-region.

West Africa already boasts numerous democracy-oriented CSOs and activists that can be mobilized to respond to the problem of democratic backsliding. There are, however, existing gaps and challenges that must be overcome. Democratic practices are still in distress. Also there are attacks on the civic space, freedoms, political participation, including elections, and dissenting voices. Again, there are weak safeguards, instruments, and protection from governments and regional bodies to respond to the threats of civic mobilization and shrinking civic space.

The session discussed opportunities, approaches, and mechanisms for promoting solidarity and intensifying collective actions and voices within the sub-region among civil society, civic formations, and activists to stem the wave of authoritarianism and protect pro-democracy values in the region. The main speaker was Ms. Omolara Balogun, Head, of Policy Influencing and Advocacy, WACSI. The panelists were Oumar Mboup, Administrator Civic Movement JammiGox Yi, Senegal; Barrister Salieu Taal, President of The Gambia Bar Association and Activist, The Gambia; and Maurice Thantant, Web-journalist and Blogger, AfricTivistes, Benin. The moderator was Kathleen Ndongmo, a Panafrican Defender of Social Justice.

3.4.1 Perspectives from the Panel Discussion and Plenary

- **Conflict management and prevention**

CSOs facilitate democratic efforts that contribute to preventing conflict from escalating. CSOs such as WANEP facilitate preventive diplomacy to ensure that community issues that will naturally escalate into violence and conflict are abated. The work of WANEP also provides monitoring information on early warning signs to ECOWAS and governments so they can respond to situations before they escalate.

- **Election integrity and inclusiveness**

CSOs such as CDD-Ghana, CDD-West Africa, Nigeria, the Coalition of Domestic Election Observers (CODEO), the Institute for Democratic Governance (IDEG), the Campaign for Good Governance in Sierra Leone, WACSI, and MFWA, among others, have played key roles in ensuring that elections are credible and inclusive. Interventions such as election observation, citizens' voter tabulation of results, Elections Situation Rooms, the Women Election Observation Group (that observes elections from a gender perspective, and the first group co-opted into the ECOWAS election observation mission), media analysis, and fact-checking of results, among others, have contributed to supporting the effort of the Electoral Commission and other Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) to ensure inclusive elections and mitigate the threats of election violence. Additionally, CSOs have become instrumental in electoral reforms and ensuring inter-party dialogue and consensus building among political parties as a measure of strengthening democracy.

- **Policy influencing**

The birth of WACSI in 2005 by the Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA) sought to support democratic actors and institutions in policy influencing. Likewise, several CSOs played an active role in the campaign to return democracy to The Gambia. CSOs have also proven to be influential and supportive in the legislative process.

- **Media and good governance**

The role of the media in addressing democratic decline in West Africa is imperative: The media is a critical part of any functional and thriving democracy. CSOs such as MFWA have been championing media development, media and good governance, media freedom, freedom of expression, digital rights, and media for peace and sustainable development across the sub-region. Again, West Africa Democracy Radio, which is a sister organization to WACSI, supports the protection and defense of ideals of democracy and open society by disseminating information through networks of community radio in The Gambia.

- **Anti-corruption and public accountability**

Organizations such as the Ghana Anti-Corruption Coalition (GACC) are leading and championing the anti-corruption crusade in Ghana, Sierra Leone, and Benin.

- **Protecting the civic space**

The role of CSOs in protecting and expanding the civic space for an open and inclusive society is tremendous. In a sense, citizens have the freedom to express their views, engage in governance processes, and demand accountability. In Nigeria, WACSI has launched a project called the Civic Space Resource Hub, which seeks to provide capacity and support to the CSOs working to expand civic space in Nigeria. This is an addition to the work that CIVICUS does in monitoring incidents of attacks against citizens, governments' retrogressive policies, and amplifying civic engagement and advocacy.

- **Gender empowerment**

Women-led organizations have championed capacity-building programs and advocacy on gender and women's empowerment. These include FIDA, WILDAF, and ABANTU for Development, among others in Ghana. These organizations have collaborated with the government to pursue gender policies and programs.

- **Weakening of democracy**

Despite progress made by the CSOs in contributing to democracy and good governance, there is a general weakening of democracy across the region. Mechanisms for transparency and accountability are fast waning. However, the remnants of democracy, as a result of the determination of CSOs to reverse democratic decline, gives hope to citizens. CSOs have been responding to threats to democracy across the region to strengthen it by continuing to serve as a counterweight to checking government excesses and suggesting alternative policy options. CSOs have also presented different political conversations with the view of

ensuring that the government delivers the dividends of democracy to the citizens. Again, CSOs have played a key role in enhancing the capacities of citizens with appropriate tools and approaches for civic engagement and demanding accountability from duty-bearers.

- **Civic participation and engagement**

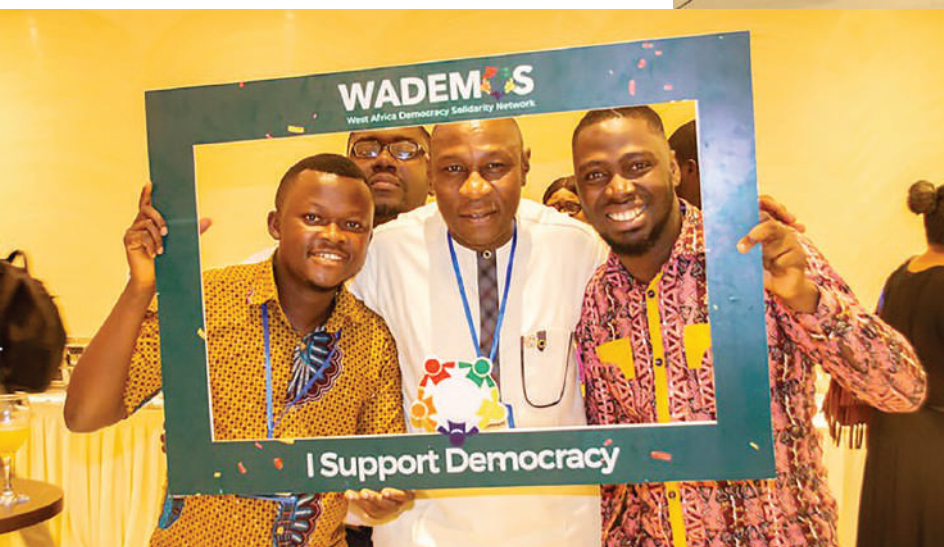
The notion that democracy is foreign to African societies is not entirely factual. CSOs should discuss and implement democracy in the local language of the people. For example, the Senegalese organization JammiGox Yi means peace of mind or tranquility, a lack of suffering, and well-being. The organization has a decentralized focus, and its target is the local communities with their work. Democracy should be made a simple concept to understand. Additionally, the rights, liberties and freedom of all persons must be respected to foster dialogue and free expression.

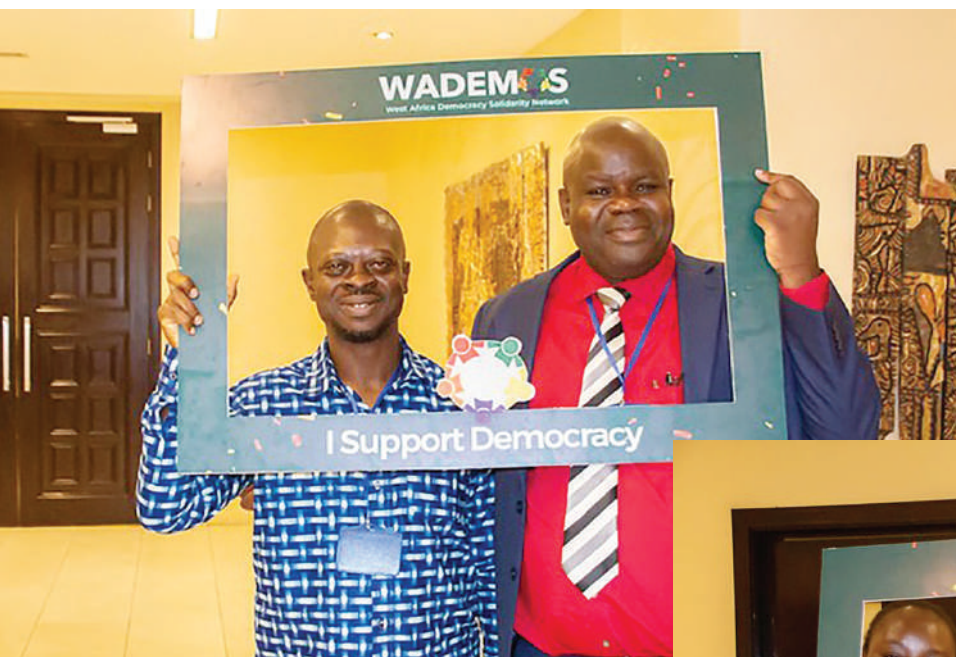
- **The threats and attacks on CSOs**

Every government does not like citizens advocating or protesting, particularly with the growth of traditional and online media, including investigative journalism, which exposes the wrongs of government. Therefore, social media activism and advocacy have been misconstrued as attacks on the government. There is a need to build trust between civil society and the state on the one hand, and on the other hand to insist on media freedoms and reversal of harsh state regulations and repressions.

3.4.2 Key Takeaways

- CSOs should invest in institutional building, and human competence to stay relevant to respond to the needs of the communities they represent while demanding accountability from the government.
- CSOs should avoid the can-do-it-alone spirit of influencing democratic decline in West Africa. CSOs should overcome the ideological, religious, ethnic, and cultural differences, strengthen collaboration and work together to achieve common goals. CSOs should avoid working in silos and re-strategize for national and regional-level policy influencing and engagement with governments, ECOWAS, and other continental bodies to counter the decline in democracy in the region. This will help CSOs become formidable forces in achieving greater results.
- The WADEMOS therefore has a critical role to play in working with civil society, including social movements, and deploying different strategies and tactics to resist democratic decline.
- WADEMOS should pressure governments across the region to strengthen the civic space and keep it open to foster the growth of civil societies and personal liberties. To this end, WADEMOS should promote and defend media freedom, professionalism, and critical reporting on democratic reversals in the sub-region.
- The CSOs should engage the business community to pursue, support and back pro-democratic activities, agenda, campaigns and practices. The development of Africa is the responsibility of the government; CSOs, citizens, communities, and the private sector should own Africa and mobilize local resources for its development.
- CSOs should continue to advocate for strong anti-corruption and accountability institutions in the fight against corruption. There is a strong linkage between corruption, bad governance, term-limit manipulation and insecurity.







4.0 SUMMARY OF THE SHORT - TERM AGENDA TO COUNTER THREATS TO DEMOCRACY IN WEST AFRICA

The conference ended with the following short-term priorities to be undertaken by the WADEMOS:

- a) The need to address the shrinking civic spaces across the sub-region that is hindering the work of CSOs, media, and civic participation governance.
- b) Collaborate to design strategies and approaches to address insecurity, particularly terrorism and violent extremism.
- c) Assist countries transitioning into democracy and heading into elections.
- d) Defend front-line democratic defenders and human rights activists across the region.
- e) Work with the ECOWAS to institute a regional framework to address third-termism.
- f) Build the capacity of CSOs in the transitional countries to participate effectively in the transitional processes.
- g) Work with the business sector to advocate pro-democratic practices across the region.
- h) Work with ECOWAS to strengthen democratic institutions and good governance in the region.
- i) Work with ECOWAS to realize Vision 2050 and the transformation of ECOWAS from a union of states to a union of peoples. This should align with the African Union's Agenda 2063 to create a prosperous, inclusive, and just continent.
- j) Designate the day for the formation of WADEMOS as "WADEMOS Day" to serve as a unifying force, guiding members towards enhancing democracies across the region.

5.0 ATTACHMENT 1: PARTICIPANT LIST

