

## The State of Democracy in West Africa: Will its recent past determine the region's future?

### Introduction

2024 has been quite a tumultuous year for West Africa.<sup>1</sup> Following a spate of coup d'états<sup>2</sup> across the continent since 2020 (six of these taking place in four countries from the sub-region), the military governments of Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso announced<sup>3</sup> their 'immediate withdrawal' from the regional economic community, ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States). This move, which was a further escalation of the increasingly antagonistic rhetoric between ECOWAS and these states, caused the bloc leadership to back down from their threat to militarily intervene in Niger in order to reinstall the overthrown civilian government. Nevertheless, the three countries have gone ahead with their plans to establish their Alliance des États du Sahel or Alliance of Sahel States (AES/ASS).

### ECOWAS' International Image

This move was a blow for the member states of ECOWAS, which had heretofore enjoyed the status<sup>4</sup> as the most democratically progressive region in Africa. This perception was due to a number of factors. Firstly, the bloc's normative framework, both in the revised ECOWAS treaty<sup>5</sup> and the 2001 Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance<sup>6</sup> set the bloc

apart by positively prescribing civilian multi-party elections as its official norm - a step beyond the African Union's simple prohibition of military takeover of power. Secondly, among the African regional economic communities, ECOWAS had been the most active in responding to threats to international peace and security, with its 2017 intervention in The Gambia presumably setting a precedent for a more proactive approach in protecting democratic norms.<sup>7</sup> Finally, the region's institutional framework, particularly the ECOWAS Commission and Community Court of Justice had been especially engaged<sup>8</sup> in rights protection - including civil and political rights - across the region.

### The Recent Coups in West Africa

Despite the aforementioned successes, cracks in the normative framework of the organisation accompanied - or indeed, caused - by member states' waning adherence to the principal tenets of democratic governance<sup>9</sup> fostered an environment that created fertile ground for these coups to occur.

Firstly, incumbent heads of states, many of these the same democratic reformers of a couple of decades past, made increasing use of constitutional amendments to extend their terms of office by either allowing for third terms or removing term limits from the constitutions altogether as was, for instance, the case in the Central African Republic. These so-called constitutional coups<sup>10</sup> were often rubber stamped by the countries' highest courts at the behest of the presidents. Despite the apparent unconstitutionality of these amendments,

1 Unless otherwise indicated, the term 'West Africa' as used here refers to the erstwhile 15 member states of the regional bloc, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), that is: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo.

2 A. Vines 'Understanding Africa's Coups', Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, 13 April 2024.

3 T. Obiezu, 'Analysts Examine Implications of African States' Exit from ECOWAS', VoA, 29 January 2024.

4 See, for example, International IDEA's 'The State of Democracy in Africa', available here. Last accessed, 4 November 2024.

5 Revised Treaty of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), July 1993.

6 Protocol A/SP1/12/01/ on Democracy and Good Governance Supplementary to the Protocol relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security, December 2001.

7 ECOWAS also previously deployed military forces to intervene in the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone.

8 For an exploration of the role of ECOWAS institutions, see: M. Roncery et al., 'The ECOWAS Democracy Agenda: Channels, Lessons and Digital Technologies for Civil Society Engagement', ECDPM, July 2023.

9 Including: accountability, rule of law, citizen participation, human rights and public services, including citizen security.

10 N. Okechukwu, 'The Fragility of the African Governance Agenda: A Crisis of Legitimacy', ECDPM, October 2023.

*The discourse around the recent coup d'états does not tell the full story of democracy in West Africa. In 2024, nine of the 28 elections scheduled to take place on the African continent took place in West Africa.*

they were often only met with muted criticism, if any at all, from the regional leadership.

A second factor that created an enabling environment for coups was the growing

insecurity across the Sahel brought about by the combined activities of jihadist and separatist groups. In fact, the military juntas in all four coup-affected West-African countries justified<sup>11</sup> their takeovers on the basis of the increased insecurity in these countries - particularly insurgencies - which, they claimed, the civilian governments were unable to address.

Finally, and most importantly, there is an undeniable link<sup>12</sup> between the decline of democracy in the region and rising economic inequality amongst its people. In particular, the period of economic growth that followed the end of the Cold War created wealth that did not benefit the populace in these countries. This fact combined with the increased spotlight on corruption due to widespread use of social media and a better educated youth fostered a growing public dissatisfaction with governments, a sentiment that was capitalised upon by the coupists.

**The Positive**

The discourse around the recent coup d'états does not, however, tell the full story of democracy in West Africa. In 2024, a year that was dubbed a 'super year' for elections worldwide, nine of the 28 elections<sup>13</sup> that were scheduled to take place on the African continent took place in West Africa specifically. An election that

took the spotlight was Senegal's, where the former president's attempt to usurp the democratic process by postponing the scheduled elections plunged the country into months of political turmoil. This attempt led to campaigns led by civic groups and peaceful protests, which helped steel the Constitutional Court to declare his actions unconstitutional, and as such the elections took place in March 2024. Often overlooked, however, are the less headline-catching positive examples of democratic resilience, such as Liberia's second consecutive peaceful transfer of presidential power, the vote in Ghana and candidates' recourse in Nigeria to electoral dispute mechanisms in court rather than violence (although the elections still experienced incidences of violence).

What does this picture of democracy in West Africa Africa in 2024 suggest for what is to come? In the final part of this paper, I outline three projections for what to expect in the coming year.

**Democracy in West Africa in 2025 and Beyond**

Firstly, West Africa - and in particular, the Sahel - again finds itself in the middle of geopolitical tensions that extend beyond its borders. The leadership of the states of the AES/ASS have taken an increasingly anti-French, and by extension anti-Western, posture.<sup>14</sup> This has sparked a debate between neo-decolonialists and those who point to Russia's hand in sowing and fostering this discontent. However, both arguments can be held to be of equal relevance - the long arm of France in the region beyond its historical colonial role was bound to be met with forceful reactions at some point. Nevertheless, West Africa and its rulers run the risk of being instrumentalised by Russia in its widening 'global chaos machine'.<sup>15</sup> The Wagner Group has moved into most of the coup-affected countries to fight jihadists, suppress insurrections and even sometimes providing

11 O. Ajala, Understanding the Crisis of Democracy in West Africa and the Sahel, GCSP, October 2023.

12 Josephine Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny and Maakwe Cumanzala, 'Africans' Bleak Views of Economic Conditions Match their Escalating Experience of Poverty', Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 807.

13 UNDP, A 'Super Year for Elections: 3.7 billion voters, 72 countries: Strengthening Democracy and Good Governance in 2024'.

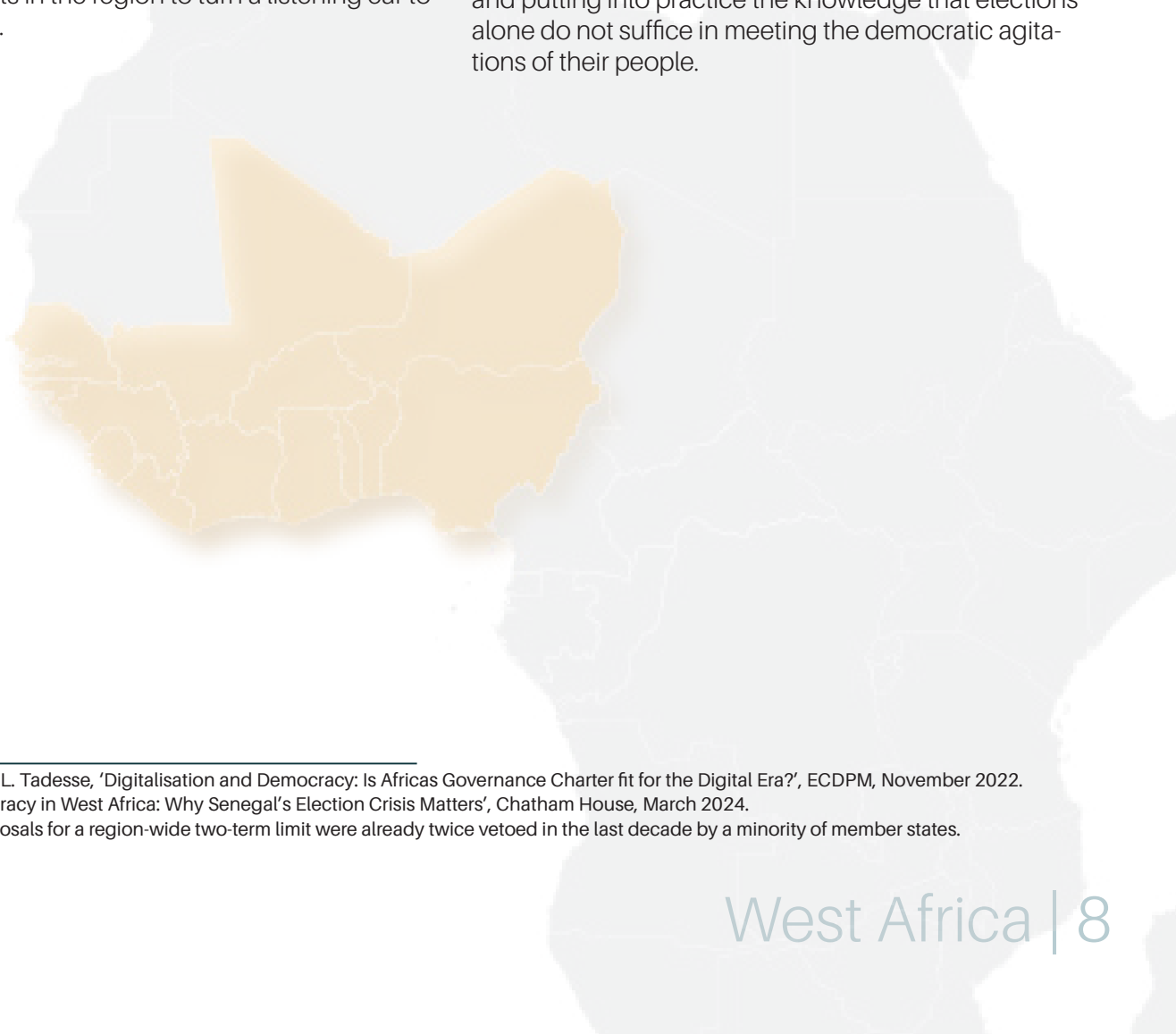
14 C. Châtelot and C. Bensimon, 'How West African Public Opinion Turned Against France', Le Monde, November 2023.

15 The Economist, 'Valdimir Putin's Spies are Plotting Global Chaos', 13 October 2024.

bodyguard protection to heads of state. With the eyes of the world focused on the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, 2025 could see military regimes becoming institutionalised with the aid of outside forces.

A second angle to watch in the coming year is the shifting focus away from the state to the people. A lot has been said in recent years of how democracy and its supporting pillars need to become more people-focused. After all, democracy should be more than the conduct of regular 'free and fair' elections. The large numbers of citizens who came out in support of the putschists in the days following the coups is irrefutable evidence of the growing discontent (West) African people have with the current semblance of democracy being practised in their countries today. With the current links between digital transformation, political activism and governance likely to increase,<sup>16</sup> it behoves state governments in the region to turn a listening ear to their populations.

Finally, we should remain wary of the silent creep of unconstitutional change of government in all its forms across West Africa, and indeed the continent at large. In the immediate aftermath of the coups in the region, after the dust from the hasty exits of a good number of international development partners had settled, a good degree of effort was spent in examining how these partners can remain engaged in the fragile countries - a welcome change from the prior discourse on if engagement should be maintained. However, the coups were only a symptom of democratic decline in the region. There is some recognition among African leaders of this sentiment, with ECOWAS already in the process<sup>17</sup> of reviewing its normative framework on unconstitutional changes of government.<sup>18</sup> While this move is welcome, such a change will not happen overnight and in the interim ECOWAS and in particular its member states will need to shore up democratic governance by accepting and putting into practice the knowledge that elections alone do not suffice in meeting the democratic agitations of their people.



16 E. Domingo and L. Tadesse, 'Digitalisation and Democracy: Is Africa's Governance Charter fit for the Digital Era?', ECDPM, November 2022.

17 P. Melly, 'Democracy in West Africa: Why Senegal's Election Crisis Matters', Chatham House, March 2024.

18 This is after proposals for a region-wide two-term limit were already twice vetoed in the last decade by a minority of member states.