

THE STATE OF DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA



2024

THE
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Abbreviations

ACDEG	African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance
ANR	National Intelligence Agency (Democratic Republic of Congo)
AES/ASS	Alliance des États du Sahel / Alliance of Sahel States
AU	African Union
BTI	Bertelsmann Transformation Index
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EIU	Economist Intelligence Unit
GGA	Good Governance Africa
GNU	Government of National Unity
LPDF	Libyan Political Dialogue Forum
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OAU	Organisation of African Unity
PSF	Socialist Party without Borders (Chad)
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SOMAGEC	Moroccan company involved in infrastructure projects in Equatorial Guinea
UN	United Nations

Introduction

Since the wave of independence movements swept across Africa in the 1960s, the legitimacy of individual States on the continent has been measured in large part by their relative success at establishing and maintaining functional democracies. As has been the case for much of modern history, democratic systems of government continue to be the prevailing standard for organization and administration of the state. Particularly important for developing nations, the levers of global economic and geopolitical prosperity tend to favor countries that show themselves to be reliable adherents to established orthodoxies of free and fair elections, civil rights, and equal justice for all citizens.

Due in part to the complicated nature of many of these post-colonial independence movements – and the somewhat semi-autonomous nature of the newly-formed states that emerged – African countries have often appeared to perform democracy (in the form of political parties, regular elections, etc.) without investing adequately in strengthening the underlying institutions required to legitimize this system. Over the past few years, a number of forceful government overthrows has called into question the stability and long-term viability of democratic institutions on the continent.

A succession of coups in Niger, Gabon, Burkina Faso, Mali, Chad and Guinea, as well as legally contested election results in Kenya and Nigeria have been significant blemishes on the assumed preeminence of democratic systems of government in Africa, and have come at a critically important juncture for the continent. As a new generation of Africans begin to form their understanding of and relationship to systems of authority, it seems a useful time to check in on the current state of these institutions and try to understand how they can be improved and maintained under the

creeping threat of more illiberal and authoritarian forms of government. For better understanding, we have turned to a range of multi-disciplinary policy professionals with broad understanding of the governance landscape across the continent, as well as specific regional and subject-matter expertise on pertinent issues.

This report represents a comprehensive assessment of the state of democratic institutions in Africa, as well as a look forward to the coming year at how these institutions might continue to fare. The author of each chapter will provide perspectives from their respective region, with a particular emphasis on their specific area of expertise. Broadly, authors are asked to answer the following two questions:

- ◇ What is the state of democracy in your region of Africa?
- ◇ What single issue do you believe will be most consequential to the state of its democracy in the coming year?

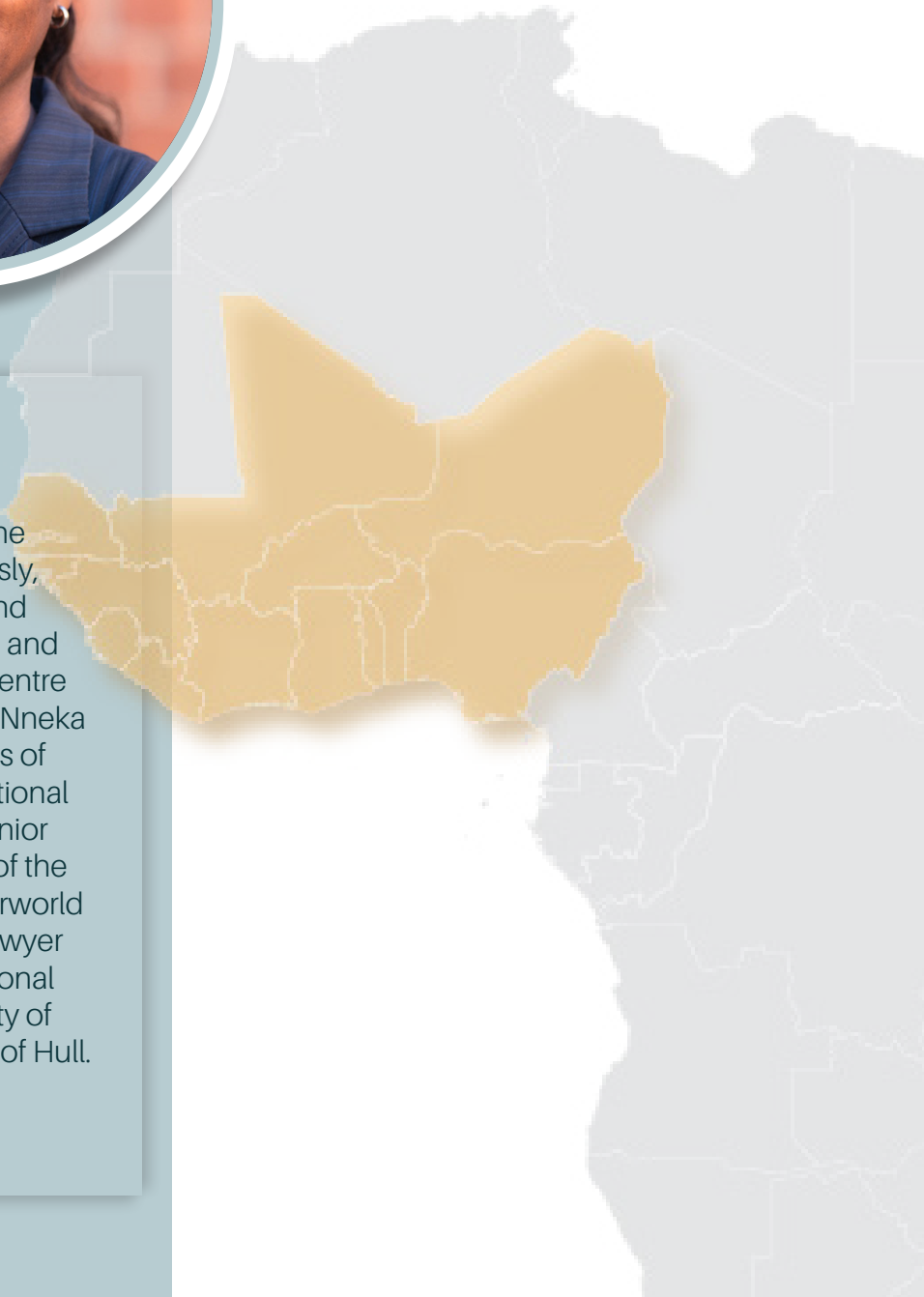
We begin in West Africa, the epicenter of the recent wave of coups, before moving on to Central Africa where the discussion turns to the shrinking of civic spaces and highlighting the destructive effects of dynastic successions and disinformation which continue to plague the region. East Africa touches on the decline of civil liberties in countries such as Rwanda and Ethiopia, both of which have had cases that were extensively covered in Western media. Our North Africa expert then provides a breakdown of recent events in each state, thematically split into discussions of governance and fundamental rights. Finally, we end in Southern Africa where our author leaves us on a more positive note, discussing the pathway forward through the interconnectedness of development and democracy.

WEST AFRICA



**Nneka
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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.¹ Following a spate of coup d'états² 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 announced³ 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 status⁴ 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 treaty⁵ and the 2001 Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance⁶ 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.⁷ Finally, the region's institutional framework, particularly the ECOWAS Commission and Community Court of Justice had been especially engaged⁸ 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 governance⁹ 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 coups¹⁰ 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 justified¹¹ 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 link¹² 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 elections¹³ 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

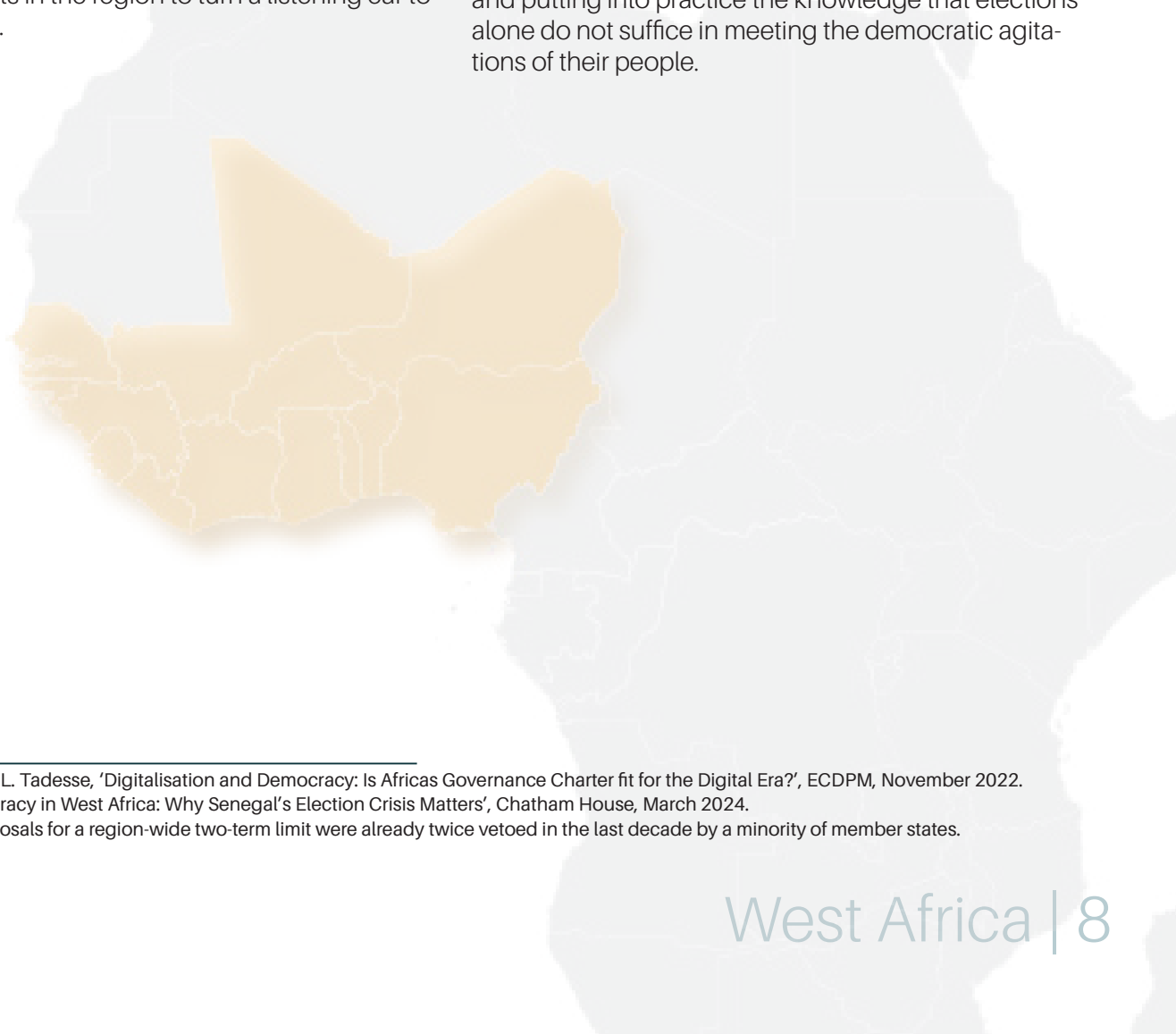
Firstly, West Africa - and in particular, the Sahel - again finds itself in the middle of geopolitical tensions that extend beyond its borders. The leadership of the states of the AES/ASS have taken an increasingly anti-French, and by extension anti-Western, posture.¹⁴ This has sparked a debate between 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'.¹⁵ 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,¹⁶ 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 process¹⁷ of reviewing its normative framework on unconstitutional changes of government.¹⁸ 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.

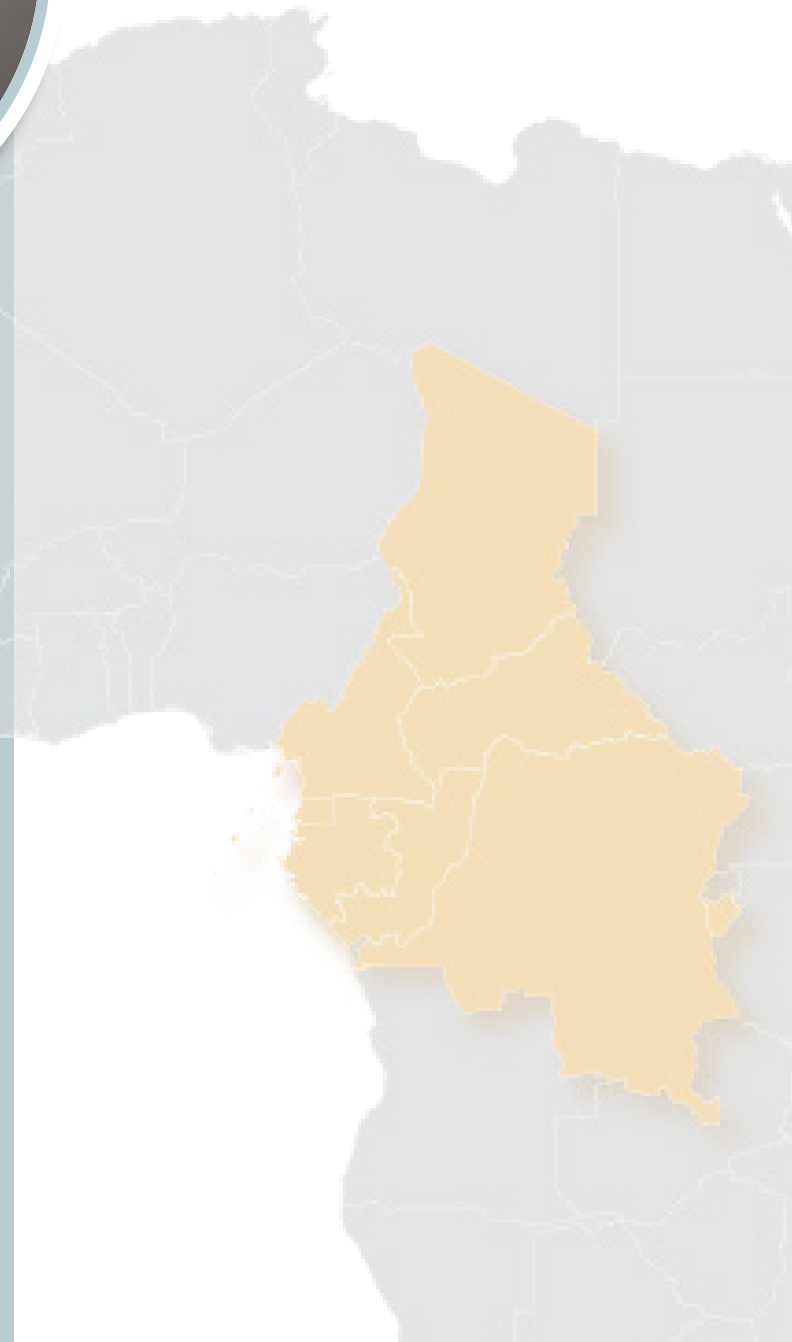
18 This is after proposals for a region-wide two-term limit were already twice vetoed in the last decade by a minority of member states.

CENTRAL AFRICA



**Rudy Howard
Massamba**

Rudy Howard Massamba is a democracy assistance expert with an extensive track record in empowering grassroots civil society organizations and movements. He worked for close to a decade at the National Endowment for Democracy, where he spearheaded grantmaking strategy and managed grants programs for nine countries spread across West, Central, and Southern Africa. Rudy launched his international development career at the National Democratic Institute (NDI). He holds a B.A. in Political Science from Binghamton University and a M.S. in International Affairs from Florida State University. A proponent of South-South and Triangular Cooperation, Rudy speaks English, French, and Portuguese.



Relentless Democratic Backsliding in Central Africa

Overview

The resource-rich region of Central Africa has historically been home to some of the most enduring authoritarian regimes on the African continent. For example, Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo of Equatorial Guinea, Paul Biya of Cameroon and Denis Sassou Nguesso of the Republic of Congo (Congo-Brazzaville) are currently the three longest-serving African heads of state, with 45, 42 and 38 years in power respectively. Unsurprisingly, there were no hints of a democratic opening in any of these countries in 2024.

Civic space is shrinking in the Central African Republic (CAR), where a constitutional referendum abolished presidential term limits and strengthened Faustin-Archange Touadéra's grip on power.¹ Chad's transition to civilian rule has raised skepticism. The military junta staged a referendum in December 2023,² paving the way for its leader General Mahamat Idriss Déby Itno to run in the presidential [election](#) he won decisively this year in May.³ Meanwhile, in Gabon, more than a year since the end of the five-decade-long Bongo dynasty, citizens are growing impatient with the slow pace of reforms⁴ promised by the transitional president, who hastily ordered the payment of several months of overdue salary arrears⁵ for civil servants ahead of the 16 November constitutional [referendum](#) that cleared the path for a return to civilian rule in 2025.⁶ Cameroonians are preparing for the 2025 presidential election in a tense climate, with President Paul Biya expected to seek an eighth term.⁷ In neighboring Equatorial Guinea,

restrictions on freedom of assembly, coupled with the [intimidation](#) of civil society leaders, particularly human rights activists, continued in 2024.⁸ The start of the new year in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) coincided with the second inauguration of President Félix Tshisekedi, reelected in December 2023 with more than 70% of the vote in another contentious election.⁹ Unlike his first term, he kicked off his new mandate with a comfortable parliamentary majority. However, his consolidation of power has not been without blemishes, with the regime targeting journalists, civil society activists and political opponents throughout the year.¹⁰ All these examples highlight a pattern of weakening democratic norms in Central Africa.

Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo of Equatorial Guinea, Paul Biya of Cameroon and Denis Sassou Nguesso of the Republic of Congo are the three longest-serving African heads of state, with 45, 42 and 38 years in power respectively.

Social Upheaval and Curtailment of Civic Space

Protests and social unrest are on the rise all over the region. In February 2024, tensions escalated in Chad when government forces clashed with supporters of the opposition Socialist Party without Borders (PSF) in the capital, N'Djamena. The violence left several dead, including that of PSF leader Yaya Dillo Djérou, considered the main rival of transitional president Mahamat Déby in the lead-up to the presidential election. This episode of political instability came just a month after

1 Freedom House. (2024). Freedom in the World 2024: Central African Republic

2 Ibid.

3 Njie, P., & Armstrong, K. (2024, May 10). Chad's military ruler wins poll. BBC.

4 Obangome, G.W. (2024, August 31). Gabon marks year since 'coup of liberation' with celebrations, reform pledges. Reuters.

5 Payment of overdue salary arrears: How to bribe the Gabonese with their own money, while increasing the deficit. (2024, November 14). Gabon 2025 Blog.

6 Goma, Y.L. (2024, November 16). Gabon votes yes on new constitution a year after the military seized power. The Associated Press.

7 Questioning Biya's health now illegal as speculation grows on absent President. (2024, October 15). Africa Confidential.

8 Colomer, M. (2024, November 4). Suspension: the price to pay in Equatorial Guinea for being a human rights lawyer. El País.

9 Sematumba, O., & Moncrieff, R. (2024, January 26). DR Congo: A Full Plate of Challenges after a Turbulent Vote. International Crisis Group.

10 Senga, J.M. (2024, September 26). DRC President Felix Tshisekedi must be held accountable for human rights violations. Daily Maverick.

the appointment of Succès Masra, an opposition leader who returned from exile in the United States in 2023, as prime minister.¹¹ Masra ran in the presidential election but only received 18.53% of the vote. The opposition alleged electoral irregularities and called for protests, prompting security forces to deploy across N'Djamena to maintain order.¹²

In mid-July 2024, residents of Annobón, the smallest province in Equatorial Guinea, organized peaceful demonstrations to voice their anger over environmental damage caused by explosions linked to the local infrastructure projects of Moroccan company SOMAGEC. In response to the protests, the government ordered the internet and mobile telecommunications to be cut off on 20 July. The blackout, which lasted several weeks, is a blatant manifestation of restrictions on freedoms of information and of assembly in the small oil-rich nation.¹³

Throughout the year, the CAR government's handle of dissent has been harsh. In March 2024, Crépin Mboli Goumba, a prominent political opponent, was arrested and detained in a facility notorious for human rights abuses.¹⁴ This incident was perceived as a warning to other activists and opposition members. In April, security forces [cracked down](#) on citizens protesting the high cost of living.¹⁵ These developments illustrate the CAR's ongoing challenges in balancing governance, economic stability and respect for civil liberties

The quality of democratic governance in the DRC has been worrisome in 2024, with an alarming increase in

the [targeting](#) of human rights defenders¹⁶ and political opponents. The most significant case of political persecution in DRC this year is perhaps Seth Kikuni, who is being accused of inciting civil disobedience and spreading false information.¹⁷ Considered an ally of Moïse Katumbi, President Tshisekedi's biggest rival and the runner-up in the last presidential election, Kikuni was arrested on 2 September by the infamous National Intelligence Agency (ANR) and detained in a secret location for several weeks before being transferred to the notorious Makala prison where his trial began on 23 October.¹⁸ The DRC is therefore ending 2024 in a dire political climate exacerbated by the president's determination to [change](#) the constitution.¹⁹ Given the size and influence of the DRC, its democratic decline bodes ill for the rest of the region.

Impending Dynastic Successions in the Region

For the past few years, the heads of state of Congo-Brazzaville and Equatorial Guinea have been [grooming](#) their sons for a greater leadership role.²⁰ There were clear signs of dynastic succession in both countries in 2024. In the case of Congo-Brazzaville, the influence of Denis Christel Sassou Nguesso, the president's son, has grown considerably since he joined the cabinet in 2021 as Minister of International Cooperation and Public-Private Partnerships. The appointment of General King Obami Itou, one of his closest allies, as the new chief of the national police is an indication that the security apparatus is being reshuffled in anticipation of a dynastic presidential succession.

11 Lawal, S. (2024, February 24). Why is Chad boiling over ahead of long-awaited elections — and what's next?. Al Jazeera.

12 Kindezka, M. E. (2024, May 16). Chad deploys combat-ready troops as post-election violence spikes. VOA.

13 KeepItOn: Equatorial Guinea authorities must end internet shutdown and other human rights abuses in Annobón. (2024, August 13). Access Now.

14 Nantulya, C.K. (2024, March 18). Opposition Leader in Court in Central African Republic Detention in Police Premises Notorious for Abuse Sends Chilling Message to Critics. Human Rights Watch.

15 Domia-Leu, R.S. (2024, Avril 13). Central African Republic: Protests in Bangui against high cost of living, taxes and power cuts. Radio France International.

16 Jackson, S. (2024, February 16). Tshisekedi 2.0 era opens with wave of repression in DRC. The Africa Report.

17 Kamale, J.Y. (2024, September 25). Protesters in Congo call for the release of political prisoners, including 3 top opposition figures. The Associated Press.

18 Trial of opponent Seth Kikuni begins before the Kinshasa-Gombe peace court. (2024, October 23). Radio Okapi.

19 Banchereau, M. (2024, October 24). Congo's president announces plans for a new constitution. Opposition worried about term limit change. The Associated Press

20 Melly, P. (2021, May 29). Africa's political dynasties: How presidents groom their sons for power. BBC News.

In Equatorial Guinea, the president has conferred considerable power upon his eldest son, Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mangué, commonly known as “Teodorín,” who has been serving as vice president for more than a decade. Teodorín is increasingly taking on more prominent roles, including representing the country in international forums and overseeing significant government initiatives.

For instance, in November, his influence over domestic affairs was evident when he ordered the installation of surveillance cameras²¹ in government offices in the wake of a highly publicized sex [scandal](#) involving a senior finance ministry official.²² These developments underscore a trend of dynastic succession in the region and give citizens reason to be concerned considering that there are precedents for such scenarios in Gabon, Chad and Togo.

The Corrosive Effect of Disinformation

Russian and Chinese disinformation campaigns have significantly impacted the state of democracy in Central Africa in 2024. These efforts are typically designed to undermine democratic institutions and shore up authoritarian regimes. In relation to disinformation in the region, Russia is the dominant force, with the CAR being the epicenter of its campaigns. Russia has been actively involved in CAR through the Wagner Group, which has deployed close to 2,000 mercenaries to fight rebels and protect the regime in exchange for privileged access to raw minerals.²³ It also undertaken a succession of disinformation campaigns, training

government spokespersons, local journalists and bloggers in techniques designed to enhance local support for the regime and stir animosity towards the West and the UN peacekeeping mission. These efforts were therefore vital in boosting President Faustin-Archange Touadéra’s popularity, while ensuring his 2020 reelection and removal of term limits in 2023.²⁴

Russia has been actively involved in CAR through the Wagner Group, undertaking disinformation campaigns to enhance local support for the regime and stir animosity towards the West and the UN peacekeeping mission.

In Chad, disinformation campaigns have also been utilized to disseminate anti-West narratives and manipulate public opinion.²⁵ Three Russian men were [detained](#) in Chad in September and one of them was identified as Maxim Shugaley, an EU and US-sanctioned political operator with close ties to the Wagner Group and its late founder Yevgeny Prigozhin. Shugaley has a well-documented track record in

disinformation and election interference in Africa.²⁶ In a nutshell, the strategic deployment of disinformation by external actors like Russia²⁷ and China²⁸ in Central Africa poses significant challenges to the development and sustainability of democratic governance in the region because this practice clouds the judgment of local populations for the benefit of the ruling elite and its foreign accomplices. In other words, as the exposure to anti-West rhetoric intensifies and permeates every section of society, it is expected that a large number of citizens in the affected countries will start questioning the merits of democracy.

Conclusion

In 2024, Central Africa’s intensifying democratic backsliding is driven by a blend of entrenched klep-

21 Equatorial Guinea orders crackdown on sex in government offices after videos leaked. (2024, November 5). Reuters.

22 Zane, D. & Silva, I. (2024, November 9). Massive sex tape leak could be a ploy for power in central Africa. BBC News.

23 Thoms, S. (2023, June 25). Russia’s Wagner Group: Where is it active? DW News.

24 Mapping a Surge of Disinformation in Africa. (2024, March 13). The Africa Center for Strategic Studies.

25 Tracking Russian Interference to Derail Democracy in Africa. (2024, May 8). The Africa Center for Strategic Studies.

26 3 Russian Men Arrested in Chad, Foreign Ministry Says. (2024, September 24). The Moscow Times.

27 The Kremlin’s Efforts to Spread Deadly Disinformation in Africa. (2024, February 12). US Department of State.

28 Eisenmann, J. (2023, March 16). China’s Media Propaganda in Africa: A Strategic Assessment. United States Institute of Peace.

ocracy, rising dynastic succession, suppression of civic freedoms and foreign-sponsored disinformation campaigns. The region's authoritarian leaders continue to manipulate political systems and limit reforms, using security apparatuses and constitutional changes to prolong their rule. Without adequate support for local civil society and substantial international engagement to hold leaders accountable, the hope for genuine democratic transformation in Central Africa will remain fragile, threatening the stability and aspirations of its people. The presidential elections in Cameroon, Gabon and the Central African Republic in 2025 are not only an opportunity to restore citizens' confidence in democratic processes, but also to reverse the region's current trajectory.

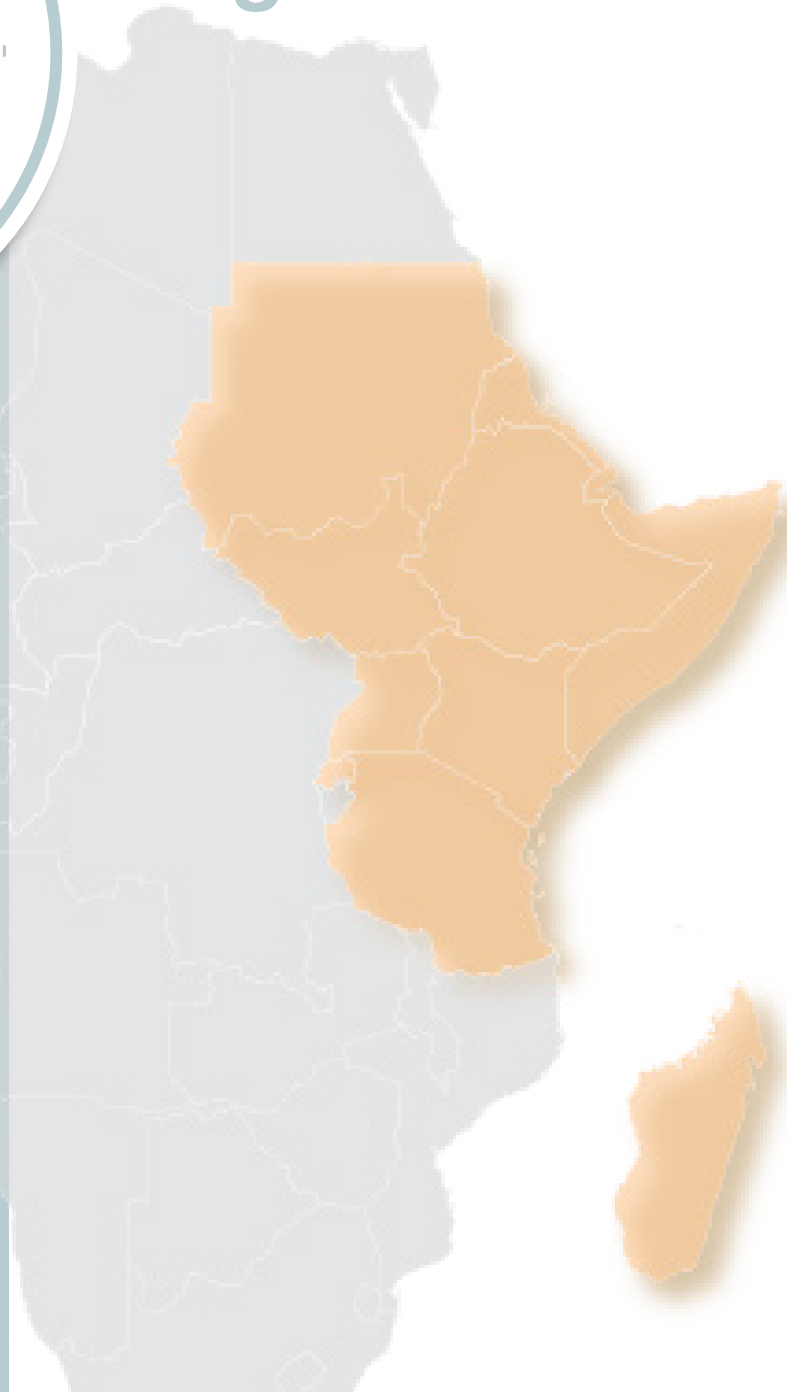


EAST AFRICA



**Dr. Tigere
Chagutah**

Dr. Tigere Chagutah is the Regional Director for Amnesty International's East and Southern Africa Regional Office. Dr Chagutah has over 20 years experience in the international development and human rights sectors, leading programs, advocacy and campaigns across several themes at recognised international non-governmental organisations, including Amnesty International, Oxfam International, the Heinrich Boell Foundation, and Mercy Corps.



Democracy in Retreat in East Africa

Democracy is on the decline in East Africa. Despite [opinion polls](#) showing that democracy remains the preferred system of governance in the region,¹ the last few years have seen supply side deficits marked by failure of leaders to deliver and further entrenched by a steady decline in key indicators of democratic norms and practices.

For the most part, authoritarian rule [continues to thrive](#) in East African countries with multiple systemic flaws in the structure and practice of democracy, and severe limitations to civil liberties, electoral processes and pluralism, government functions, and political participation.² The BTI Transformation Index, for instance, characterizes nine (Burundi, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Somalia, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda) of the ten East Africa countries it surveys for political transformation within its 2024 Regional Report for Southern and Eastern Africa, as autocracies, with the tenth, Kenya, characterized as a 'highly defective democracy' which "still faces many challenges, such as ethnic polarization within the party system and entrenched patronage structures."³

Decline in Civil Liberties

The past few years have seen a worrying rise in repression with wanton disregard for human rights and severe curtailment of civil liberties. The fundamental freedoms of expression, association and assembly are routinely violated. [Reports](#) show that in Burundi, Rwanda, Somalia, South Sudan, among others, critics and journalists speaking out against government policies,

actions or inaction, or publicly sharing information deemed damaging to the government often do so at the risk of arrest, arbitrary imprisonment or even being killed.⁴

Dissent continues to be repressed across the region. In Kenya and [Uganda](#), security forces crushed protests – with well documented use of lethal force in Kenya, where police used live rounds and other less lethal weapons against peaceful protesters, killing more than a hundred people and injuring hundreds more between 2023 and 2024.⁵ Anti-protest laws, cyber-crimes laws, surveillance laws and more general legal provisions from, for example, the penal code or security laws that have been routinely used and weaponized

The BTI Transformation Index characterizes nine out of ten East African countries as autocracies.

to repress civic participation. In Burundi, the Penal Code provisions have been used to convict those who express criticism of the government of "threatening internal state security" and "rebellion". In July, South Sudan's National Legislative Assembly

voted in [amendments](#) to the law governing the National Security Service which will further undermine human rights and entrench the agency's longstanding abuses, according to human rights watchdogs.⁶ The [use of surveillance technology](#) is another critical issue, with the use of mass surveillance technology and spyware by governments⁷ such as [Rwanda](#) representing massive invasion of privacy and responsible for a chilling effect on fundamental freedoms. The Tanzanian and Ugandan governments have been accused of full or partial internet shutdowns during major national moments, such as election periods or major demonstrations, while many governments across the region also restrict access to critical websites such as independent media outlets.

1 Flagship Report, Afrobarometer, 2024.

2 COVID-19 and Democracy in East Africa: Conference Report – Executive Summary, Kofi Annan Foundation, 2021.

3 BTI 2024 Regional Report: Southeast Asia, Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024.

4 Africa 2023 Report, Amnesty International, 2023.

5 "Uganda: Authorities Must Unconditionally Release Protestors Still Unlawfully Detained," Amnesty International, July 2024.

6 "South Sudan: Damaging Security Law Revisions Adopted," Human Rights Watch, 4 July 2024.

7 "Digital Surveillance: Should Rwandans Be Worried?" Paradigm Initiative.

The countervailing power of civil society, which includes the ability to demand, expand and occupy the space for diverse voices in democratic dialogue and decision-making processes is in peril.

society through suspension of activities or closure of operations for “non-compliance.” Domestic and international NGOs continue to struggle to operate in many countries in the face of governmental restrictions, harassment and repression. In Burundi, the law requires NGOs to register with the Ministry of the Interior, a complex process that includes approval of an organization’s activities and which must be done every two years, with no recourse for organizations denied registration or renewal. By [law](#) an organization may be suspended permanently for ill-defined and overly broad offenses of “disturbing public order or harming state security.”⁸ Numerous NGOs, especially those that focused on human rights, have been banned or suspended, while several others have closed their operations in the country as the environment became untenable. In Rwanda civil society has [expressed concern](#) that a new NGO law will limit civic space in a country where the government has routinely throttled civil society stifled dissent and press freedoms.⁹ The draft law would allow the authorities unfettered access to the day-to-day operations of NGOs, including requiring them to submit their operating plans and budgets for approval and providing regulators the power to interfere so far into the operations of NGOs that they would have the power to fire NGO staff.

The countervailing power of civil society, which includes the ability to demand, expand and occupy the space for diverse voices in democratic dialogue and decision-making processes is in peril. In Uganda, the NGO Act 2016 is used by the state to legally harass and intimidate NGOs and civil

Armed Conflict’s Contribution

Contexts of armed conflict have contributed to further erosion of democratic institutions, with independent media often being the first among casualties of war. Harassment, arbitrary arrest, detention and government censorship are commonplace in [Somalia](#).¹⁰ In Ethiopia, the government has [cracked down on journalists](#) documenting war crimes and human rights violations as civil wars and communal conflicts have ravaged the country. Most have been arbitrarily arrested and kept in lengthy illegal detention. In 2022, a TV station in Ethiopia’s Tigray region was [struck by a drone](#) in a suspected government attack. The environment has become even more precarious for media in Sudan, where fighting between rival factions of Sudan’s junta which began in the capital Khartoum has raged on for over 18 months, engulfing the whole country, and eroding the gains of its democratic transition after the deposition of long-serving autocratic leader President Omar al-Bashir in April 2019.

Prospects for democratic governance continue to recede in most parts of the Horn of Africa due to conflict. As the fighting in Sudan rages, conditions remain precarious in Ethiopia where the government imposed a 6-month state of emergency in Amhara in August 2023, further extended in February 2024, amidst continued fighting between government security forces, militias and non-state armed groups in several regions. At the same time the conflict between the government and Al-Shabaab continues in neighboring Somalia, where much of Somali territory is controlled by al-Shabaab and other militias and operates on a clan-based electoral system. Under the clan-based system, only 27% of the 14 million Somalis in the country were able to participate in the 2022 elections.¹¹ Elsewhere, South Sudan remains fragile, and Eritrea remains under the throttling grip of authoritarian rule, with weak state institutions and no real prospects of democratic change on the horizon.

8 “2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Burundi,” U.S. Department of State, 2022.

9 “Civic Freedom Monitor: Rwanda,” International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL).

10 “Somalia: Harassment of Journalist Continues Amid Deteriorating Press Freedom Situation,” International Press Institute (IPI).

11 BTI 2024 Regional Report: Southeast Asia, Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024.

Notwithstanding, many hopes across the region hinge on the promise of regular elections to deliver democracy. This is despite rampant manipulation of constitutional provisions that guide the conduct of elections in several countries, and the dismal record and flawed nature of some elections in the region which are designed to circumvent popular will and deliver little challenge to victory for the incumbent. Recent elections in Djibouti, Rwanda and Uganda unsurprisingly [confirmed](#) their respective rulers' grip on power. In July 2024, for instance, Paul Kagame was declared winner in Rwanda's presidential elections with over 99% of the vote.¹²

Nevertheless, the vote is one of the ways in which citizens exercise the right to political participation, and many people across the region have regularly sought to exercise this right and in so doing placed themselves in direct confrontation with despotic rulers. According

Only 27% of the 14 million Somalis in the country were able to participate in the 2022 elections.

to Afrobarometer's 2024 [report](#), whereas their research shows a drop in support for elections, the vast majority (three out of four) of Africans see elections as the best way to choose leaders.¹³

Elections and the conduct of governments in the lead up to elections

will therefore remain consequential to the state of democracy in East Africa in the coming year. Parliamentary elections in Burundi and general elections in Tanzania will be key to watch in 2025, as will be the environment in Uganda ahead of its 2026 Presidential elections, and in South Sudan where the country's long-delayed first elections since independence in 2011, first scheduled to be held in 2015, are now expected to be held in December 2026.

Already, in Tanzania, opposition party members have been [targeted](#) and arbitrarily arrested and detained for planning or participating in political rallies in the run

up to the 2025 general elections despite the lifting of the ban on political rallies by President Samia Suluhu Hassan in January 2023. Authorities have continued to prevent opposition members from holding meetings and other political gatherings, subjecting them to mass arrests, arbitrary detention and other acts of violence. In Uganda the state has intensified its crackdown on opposition politicians and dissent. As South Sudan, approaches the 2026 presidential election, preparations are taking place amidst [shrinking civic and political space](#), characterised by arbitrary detentions of political opponents, absence of basic freedoms of movement and association, censorship of independent media, harassment of civil society actors and an upsurge of ethnic conflicts.¹⁴ The UN has [warned](#) of systematic curtailment of the democratic and civic space in the country, emphasising that media freedoms and a robust civil society will be key indicators to prospects for accountable governance and a democratic society post the elections. And as the 2025 elections draw closer in [Burundi](#), watchdogs have raised concern on continued crackdown on independent civil society and media, and called for the protection of the rights of freedom of expression and access to information for all ahead of the elections.

While current conditions suggest that upcoming elections across the region may fall short of delivering the dream of democracy, what is certain is that the people of East Africa will once again rally around the electoral moment to demand a clean break from the status quo - even if the dream must be achieved at great personal cost.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Flagship Report, Afrobarometer, 2024.

¹⁴ Human Rights in Africa 2024: A Call for Action, Amnesty International, March 2024.

NORTH AFRICA



**Dr. Mireille
Rebeiz**

Dr. Mireille Rebeiz is Chair of Middle East Studies and Associate Professor of Francophone Studies, Women's, Gender & Sexuality Studies at Dickinson College. She received her first Doctorate (PhD) in Francophone Studies from Florida State University and her second doctorate (SJD) in International Law from Penn State Dickinson Law. She also holds a Master's degree in International Law and Human Rights from Université de Rouen in France, and a Bachelor's degree in Law from Université Saint-Joseph in Lebanon. Her teaching and research are interdisciplinary and focus on the intersectionality of law, gender, sexuality, oral history, and trauma in the context of armed conflicts with a focus on the Middle East and North Africa. Dr. Rebeiz is a well-established scholar, educator, and activist. Her first book, *Gendering Civil War. Francophone Women's Writing in Lebanon*, for which she earned the AAUW American Fellowship, appeared with Edinburgh University Press in 2022 and was nominated for the John Leonard Prize. Her second book *Hezbollah in International Law* is forthcoming with Edinburgh University Press in March 2025.

The State of Democracy in North Africa (English)

Beginning 2010 and 2011, pro-democracy protests engulfed North Africa, starting in Tunisia and spreading into Libya and Egypt. The demonstrators – mostly composed of youth and women – challenged authoritarian regimes in the region demanding the recognition of their basic human rights and the implementation of democratic values. This “Arab Spring” brought some changes with the ousting of dictators like Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and Muammar Gaddafi in Libya. However, overall, it did not lead to significant changes to the regimes in place as it was met with police brutality and violence from pro-government militias and military.

Today, the demand for democracy remains high. Human rights defenders continue to push for clean and fair elections, free speech, civil liberties and equal rights, independence of the judiciary and an impartial administration free of corruption. Despite these honorable efforts and since the Arab Spring, the state of democracy in North Africa continues to swing between weak democracies and authoritarian regimes. The [erosion](#) of democracy across the region was particularly noted during the pandemic with the implementation of drastic measures such as curfews used to crush critics of public officials.¹ Corruption is pervasive at all levels of government, and anticorruption laws are often ineffective or hard to implement. Government and military are known to pressure the judiciary in its decision-making.

I - Democracy & Government

Egypt

The 2013 coup brought [President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi](#) to power, and he has been governing with an iron fist.²

The [2020 parliamentary elections](#) were marked by widespread detention and harassment of individuals who criticized the system.³ In 2021, al-Sisi called for [National Dialogue](#) with various human rights groups, activists and parties. The forum lasted for weeks, but it was not productive.⁴

In July 2022, al-Sisi appointed a [military general to the Supreme Constitutional Court](#), effectively stifling the judiciary’s independence and impartiality.⁵ In December 2023, he was re-elected for a third six-year mandate. There was no real competition as political opposition was almost non-existent. Al-Sisi managed to crush his opponents through intimidation or by imposing a series of obstructing measures that prevented candidates from running.

Libya

Internal divisions, the proliferation of weapons and militias, the rise of extremist groups all led to the deterioration of security in the country.

In 2020, the United Nations [organized](#) a dialogue hosting different political parties and civil society (the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum or LPDF).⁶ In February 2021, Abdelhamid Dbeibah the LPDF was elected as Prime Minister to the new Government of National Unity (GNU), which was approved by the House of Representatives in March. Despite the allegations of corruption, including vote buying, the international community recognized the GNU mandate, and it was tasked with the mission to organize popular elections. However, elections were postponed due to disagreement on electoral law. As a result, the House of Representatives announced it no longer recognizes the GNU’s legality.

The country, then, descended into further chaos. Between August and October 2023, violence broke out

1 International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), The State of Democracy in Africa and the Middle East 2021.

2 “Autocrat in Training? The Sisi Regime at 10,” Journal of Democracy

3 “Report: Egypt’s Parliamentary Election Corrupt and Rigged,” Middle East Monitor.

4 “Egypt’s National Dialogue: A Lost Opportunity for National Salvation,” Arab Center Washington DC.

5 “Sisi’s Military Incursion,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 2022.

6 “Libyan Political Dialogue Forum,” United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL).

in Tripoli and the eastern city of Benghazi, which led to several casualties.⁷ Without a permanent Constitution, the judiciary, in all its staff, became ineffective.

In September 2023, two dams collapsed in east Derna. An estimated number of 4,000 to 20,000 were killed. The Libyan Arab Armed Forces, which controls the city, was accused of preventing aid and reporters' access to the port.

Till today, Libya lacks a functioning electoral framework. There is no real roadmap toward transparent elections. Lack of security and the presence of armed militias significantly reduce the different parties' abilities to operate freely.

Tunisia

Since 2011, Tunisians have enjoyed a significant increase in their political and civil liberties, especially after the promulgation of the new Constitution in 2014.

In 2014, President Kais Saïed [won](#) the elections and worked to consolidate some of the powers.⁸ In July 2021, he [invoked](#) emergency status; he replaced the prime minister with a new one without parliamentary approval and dissolved the parliament.⁹

With Saïed in power, many repressive measures were adopted to intimidate political activists and journalists. In [February 2023](#), some were illegally detained for defaming the President or the military on social media.¹⁰

Elections were held in January 2023, and the new parliament was inaugurated in March. There was a low turnout with most political parties opposing the elections. In theory, voters are free to vote for whoever they choose. However, economic restrictions, foreign interference, and opaque rules on external fundings make the elections less transparent.

In October 2024, Saïed secured a second five-year term. His victory followed a low-turnout and the imprisonment of many opposing candidates.

Algeria

Since its independence from colonial France, Algeria has been dominated by the National Liberation Front.

Although opposing parties exist in Algeria, many have witnessed oppression, and the electoral process has been opaque. In 2019, the [Hirak](#) protest movement presented some hope and forced the regime

to present some reforms such as the establishment of The Independent National Authority for Elections, which monitored the 2021 elections.¹¹ However, the elections were rigged and the Hirak supporters boycotted the polls.

Unfortunately, the Hirak was crushed by the police, and the authorities intensified their suppression of opposing political groups. In February 2023, the Council of State closed all offices belonging to the left-leaning Democratic and Social Movement.

In September 2024, elections were held and President Abdelmajid Tebboune won 95% of the vote. Many criticized the elections as fraudulent. Surprisingly, President Tebboune recognized the inaccuracies in the elections thus giving legitimacy to the people's concerns.

In September 2024 President Abdelmajid Tebboune won 95% of the vote. Many criticized the elections as fraudulent. Surprisingly, President Tebboune recognized the inaccuracies in the elections, giving legitimacy to the people's concerns.

7 "Civil War in Libya," Council on Foreign Relations (CFR).

8 "Kais Saïed," Encyclopaedia Britannica.

9 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/07/27/tunisia-presidents-seizure-powers-threatens-rights>

10 "Tunisia: Wave of Arrests Targets Critics and Opposition Figures," Human Rights Watch, 24 February 2023.

11 "From Protesta to Hirak: To Algeria's New Revolutionary Moment," Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP), December 2019.

Morocco

In 2011, the [monarchy saw some reforms](#) that increased the role of the national legislature. However, King Mohammed VI maintained substantial powers such as disbanding the parliament, ruling by decree and dismissing the government.¹² In fact, the Constitution requires the king to appoint the prime minister from the party that claims most parliamentary seats. In [September 2021](#), the two political parties that were victorious were close to the palace. This allowed the king to nominate a prime minister and new cabinet members who are loyal to him.¹³

The Constitution allows for competitive elections. However, freedom of political assembly is nearly non-existent with police brutality often reported against protesters.

Since 2016, the Hirak Rif movement has been suppressed with its leader [Nasser Zefzafi](#) imprisoned since 2018.¹⁴ The election process is opaque and overseen by the Interior Ministry and the Justice Ministry instead of an independent electoral body. Transparency is lacking, especially when it comes to the king's wealth, health and other interests.

For nearly 30 years, Sudan has not held elections. In 2019, protesters ousted longtime president Omar al-Bashir and installed a transitional government composed of military and civilian leaders

The Western Sahara is source of tension between Algeria and Morocco. A former Spanish colony, the Western Sahara was annexed by Morocco in 1975 despite the fierce opposition of its indigenous people, the [Sahrawis](#).¹⁵ Algeria opposed this annexation claiming to support the Sahrawis' right to self-determination, and for the past five decades, the two countries have maintained a [strained relationship](#).¹⁶

Sudan

For nearly 30 years, Sudan has not held elections. In 2019, protesters ousted longtime president Omar al-Bashir and his party and installed a transitional government composed of military and civilian leaders who agreed to share power until national elections. In [September 2021](#), the Ministry of Justice presented a draft for electoral law. However, the draft was not enacted.¹⁷ In [October 2021](#), Lieutenant General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan staged a military coup, declared a state of emergency by which he expanded his powers, and dissolved the transitional government. Violence erupted between the Sudanese Armed Forces, civilians, and paramilitary groups. After a new technocratic government was formed, protests erupted across the country opposing the coup and the alienation of civil society.¹⁸ Today, Sudan is facing a serious humanitarian crisis including displacement and rampant sexual violence. There have been numerous attempts to declare a ceasefire, but they have all failed.

II - Fundamental Rights

The severe decline in fundamental rights is noticeable in the entire region. Journalists, human rights defenders, and civil society leaders continuously face harassment and intimidation. Sometimes, they are subject to arbitrary detention and physical abuse.

12 "The New Moroccan Constitution: Real Change or More of the Same?" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 2011.

13 "The Local Notables Unseat Islamists in Moroccan Elections," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 2021.

14 "On World's Indigenous Peoples Day, NGOs Renew Call for Release of Nasser Zefzafi from Detention," Human Rights Watch, 9 August 2023.

15 "The Polisario Front, Morocco, and the Western Sahara Conflict," Arab Center Washington DC.

16 "Algeria-Morocco Reconciliation and the Western Sahara, Sahrawi, and Polisario Front," Atlantic Council.

17 "Security Council Press Statement on Libya," United Nations Security Council, 21 December 2021.

18 "The Military Has Taken Power in Sudan and Dissolved Its Transitional Government," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 2021.

Religious freedom is almost non-existent and blasphemy is often penalized

In Egypt, in August 2023, [journalist Karim Asaad](#) was arrested at his home. In September 2023, [activist Hesham Kassem](#), who is well-known for his opposition to the authorities, was sentenced to six months in prison for defamation.

quickly descended into chaos. Ethnic cleansing has been reported in Darfur, and mass killings, displacement, famine, and rape as a weapon of war are wide spread.

Islam is the dominant religion in the region, and numerous abuses have been reported against religious minorities such as Christians, Shiite Muslims or Jews. Religious freedom is almost non-existent and blasphemy is often penalized.²¹ In Libya last March, six men and women were arrested and might face the death penalty for converting to Christianity and for proselytizing.²²

Discrimination against non-Arab ethnic minorities is rampant. The Amazigh, Tuared, and Tebu remain largely underrepresented in the Libyan political scene.²³ In Tunisia, the authorities violently repressed [black and African migrants](#) and forcibly expelled more than 1,000 migrants in the desert between Tunisia and Libya. In Morocco, 40% of the citizens are Amazigh or of Amazigh roots. While they are represented in parliament, they continue to be discriminated against with low access to socio-economic opportunities. In Sudan, the non-Arab ethnic groups are suffering from a real humanitarian crisis along with ethnic cleansing especially in Darfur and southern states of south Kordofan and Blue Nile.

As to women's rights, overall, these societies remain predominately patriarchal with little to no legal protection against [gender-based violence](#).²⁴ While sexual harassment is legally banned in many countries, it remains a reality women face especially in public spaces. Family laws tend to be conservative especially when it comes to matters of divorce, custody, and inheritance, and [women's participation in political life](#) is very low.²⁵

In Algeria, while some newspapers are privately owned, thus allowing their journalists some freedom, most papers rely on government funds. Therefore, they self-censor. In April 2023, Parliament approved a law that authorizes the judiciary to force journalists to reveal their sources. Furthermore, many journalists are harassed. For instance, [Farid Herbi](#) was sentenced to three years in prison for allegedly spreading false information that could potentially undermine national security. The authorities control social media users especially when it comes to political and religious content.

In Morocco, journalists are free to report on general social issues and international affairs. However, several independent journalists, who criticized the government, faced imprisonment such as [Soulaïmane Raïssouni](#), [Hanane Bakour](#) and [Rida Benotmane](#). In September 2022, it was reported that Moroccan authorities used [Pegasus](#) spyware to surveil journalists. State surveillance is widespread, which promotes self-censorship among journalists and activists.¹⁹ In November 2022, former human rights minister and lawyer [Mohammed Ziane](#) was arrested for insulting the judiciary, adultery, and sexual harassment. Human Rights groups criticized this decision asserting its political nature as Ziane is a well-known government critic.²⁰

In Sudan, many civilian leaders, journalists, and activists were detained; others were killed, and the country

19 "Pegasus Scandal: Morocco Has to Accept That Anything Can Be Said," Collaborative Journalism, 15 November 2024.

20 "Morocco: Authorities Must End Repression of Activists and Dissidents," Amnesty International, 2023.

21 "2023 Report on International Religious Freedom," U.S. Department of State, 2023.

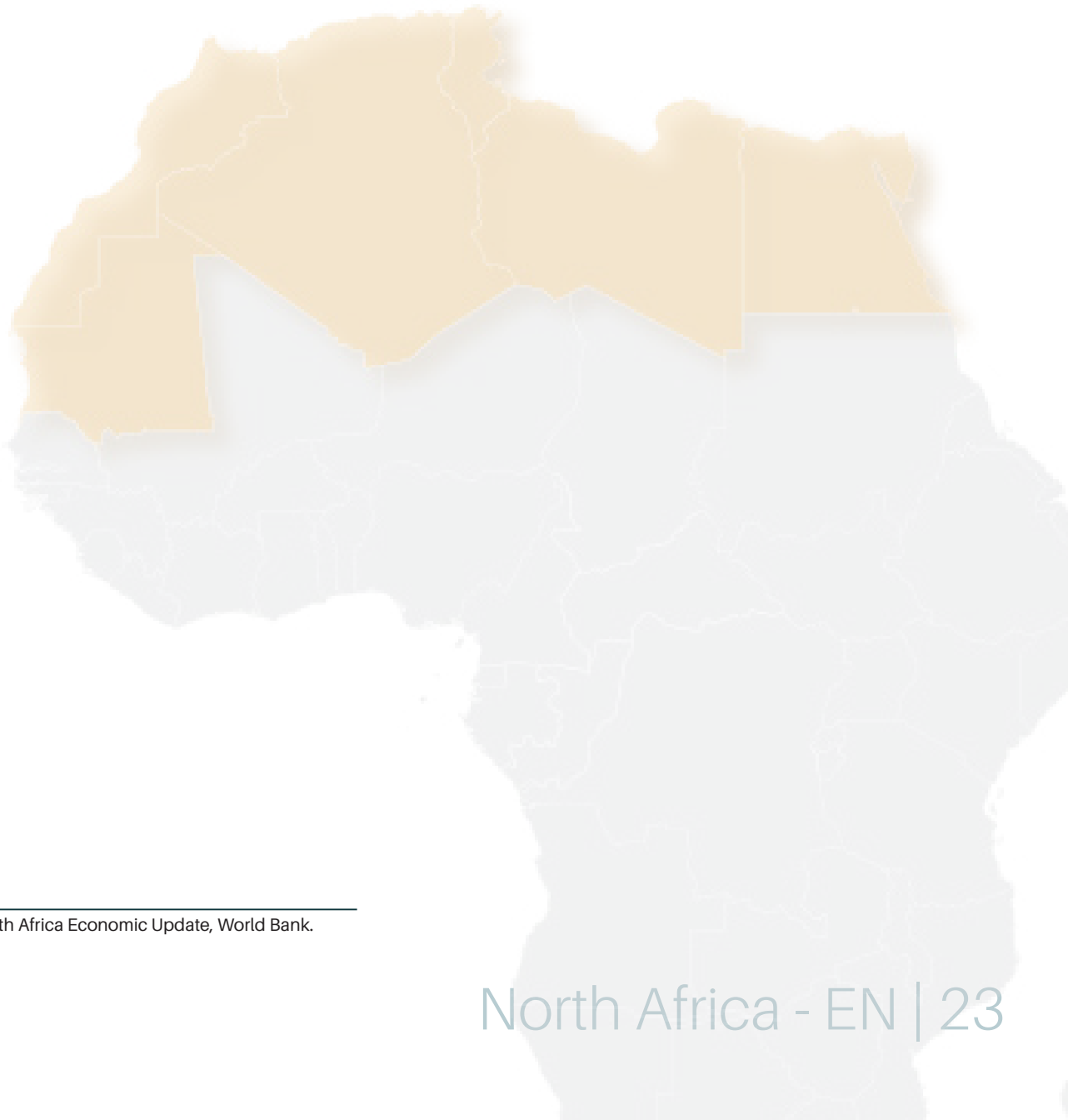
22 "Libya: American and Libyan Citizens Arrested and Detained for Conducting Missionary Work and Apostasy," Global Legal Monitor, Library of Congress, 25 May 2023.

23 "Middle East and North Africa 2023 Report," Amnesty International, 2023.

24 "Gender-Based Violence," UNHCR Global Appeal 2024, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

25 "MENA Politics Newsletter 72 - Fall 2024," Arab Political Science Association (APSA), Fall 2024.

To conclude, the state of democracy in North Africa varies from country to country and is complex. However, there is no doubt that the region is witnessing a serious thinning of its already weak democracies. The one single issue that will be most consequential in the coming year is the ongoing economic crisis.²⁶ It will impact North African communities, but its magnitude will echo into the African continent with the rise of hardship, discontent, xenophobia, racism, and extremism, and these threats are bound to tip the balance towards authoritarian regimes.



26 Middle East and North Africa Economic Update, World Bank.

AFRIQUE DU NORD



**Dr. Mireille
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Mireille Rebeiz est titulaire de la chaire d'études sur le Moyen-Orient et professeur associé d'études francophones et d'études sur Les Femmes, Le Genre et La Sexualité au Dickinson College. Elle a obtenu son premier doctorat (PhD) en études francophones à l'université d'État de Floride et son second doctorat (SJD) en droit international à la faculté de droit de Penn State Dickinson. Elle est également titulaire d'une maîtrise en droit international et droits de l'homme de l'Université de Rouen (France) et d'une licence en droit de l'Université Saint-Joseph (Liban). Son enseignement et ses recherches sont interdisciplinaires et se concentrent sur l'intersection du droit, du genre, de la sexualité, de l'histoire orale et des traumatismes dans le contexte des conflits armés, en particulier au Moyen-Orient et en Afrique du Nord. Dr. Rebeiz est une chercheuse, une éducatrice et une activiste reconnue. Son premier livre, *Gendering Civil War. Francophone Women's Writing in Lebanon*, pour lequel elle a reçu la bourse américaine de l'AAUW, est paru chez Edinburgh University Press en 2022 et a été nommé pour le prix John Leonard. Son deuxième livre, *Hezbollah in International Law*, sera publié par Edinburgh University Press en mars 2025.

La Démocratie en Afrique du Nord: Un État des Lieux (Français)

Dès le début des années 2010 et 2011, des manifestations en faveur de la démocratie ont submergé l'Afrique du Nord, débutant en Tunisie avant de se propager en Libye, et en Égypte. Ces mouvements, portés principalement par des femmes et de jeunes civils, dénoncent les régimes autoritaires en place et réclamaient l'instauration de valeurs démocratiques, ainsi que la reconnaissance de leurs droits fondamentaux. Ce « Printemps arabe » a entraîné certains bouleversements, notamment la chute de dictateurs tels que Zine El Abidine Ben Ali en Tunisie, Hosni Moubarak en Égypte et Mouammar Kadhafi en Libye. Cependant, dans l'ensemble, cela n'a pas engendré de changements significatifs au sein des régimes en place. Les manifestants ont, au contraire, été confrontés à une répression implacable orchestrée par les forces de police, les milices et les armées loyales aux gouvernements.

Aujourd'hui le rêve démocratique demeure intact. Les défenseurs des droits de l'homme continuent de militer pour des élections libres et équitables, les libertés civiles et d'expression, l'égalité des droits, l'indépendance du pouvoir judiciaire et une gouvernance impartiale, exempte de corruption. Malgré ces efforts louables, l'état de la démocratie en Afrique du Nord demeure instable, depuis le Printemps arabe, pris entre démocraties fragiles et régimes autoritaires. [L'érosion démocratique dans la région](#) s'est particulièrement accentuée durant la pandémie, avec la mise en place de mesures drastiques, telles que les couvre-feux, souvent utilisés pour réprimer toute opposition au gouvernement.¹ La corruption reste omniprésente à tous les niveaux de l'État, et les lois anti-corruption se révèlent souvent inefficaces ou difficiles à appliquer. Par ailleurs, le pouvoir judiciaire subit fréquemment des

pressions de la part du gouvernement et de l'armée, compromettant ainsi son indépendance.

I - Démocratie et Gouvernement

L'Égypte

Le coup d'État de 2013 a conduit [le président Abdel Fattah al-Sisi](#) au pouvoir, où il gouverne d'une main de fer.² Les [élections législatives de 2020](#) ont été marquées par des arrestations et des intimidations visant les opposants au régime.³ En 2021, al-Sisi a appelé à un dialogue national impliquant divers groupes, militants et partis de défense des droits de l'Homme. Cependant, ce forum, bien que prometteur en apparence, n'a duré que quelques semaines et s'est révélé peu concluant.⁴

En juillet 2022, al-Sisi a nommé un [militaire à la Cour suprême constitutionnelle](#), compromettant ainsi l'indépendance et l'impartialité du pouvoir judiciaire.⁵ En décembre 2023, al-Sisi a été réélu pour un troisième mandat de six ans. Sans réelle concurrence, l'opposition politique étant quasiment inexistante, al-Sisi a réussi à neutraliser ses opposants par l'intimidation et l'imposition de mesures ayant empêché certains candidats de se présenter aux élections.

La Libye

Les divisions internes, la prolifération des armes et la montée des groupes extrémistes ont conduit à la détérioration de la sécurité dans le pays.

En 2020, les Nations Unies ont organisé [un dialogue](#) réunissant plusieurs partis politiques ainsi que des représentants de la société civile connu sous le nom de Forum du dialogue politique libyen (FDPL).⁶ En février 2021, Abdelhamid Dbeibah, issu du FDPL, a été élu Premier ministre du nouveau Gouvernement d'Unité Nationale (GUN), qui a été approuvé par la

1 Institut international pour la démocratie et l'assistance électorale (IDEA). L'état de la démocratie en Afrique et au Moyen-Orient 2021.

2 "Autocrate en formation? The Sisi Regime at 10", Journal of Democracy.

3 "Rapport : Egypt's Parliamentary Election Corrupt and Rigged", Middle East Monitor.

4 "Le Dialogue National Égyptien : A Lost Opportunity for National Salvage", Arab Center Washington DC.

5 "Sisi's Military Incursion," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Juillet 2022.

6 "Forum du dialogue politique libyen", Mission d'appui des Nations Unies en Libye (UNSMIL).

Chambre des représentants en mars. Malgré des allégations de corruption, notamment l'achat de votes, la communauté internationale a reconnu le mandat du GUN, chargé d'organiser des élections populaires. Cependant, ces élections ont été reportées en raison de désaccords sur la loi électorale. En conséquence, la Chambre des représentants a annoncé qu'elle ne reconnaissait plus la légitimité du GUN.

Le pays s'est alors enfoncé dans le chaos. Entre août et octobre 2023, des violences éclatèrent à Tripoli et dans la ville orientale de Benghazi, faisant plusieurs victimes.⁷ En l'absence d'une constitution permanente, l'ensemble du système judiciaire est devenu inefficace, son fonctionnement étant gravement compromis.

En septembre 2023, deux barrages se sont effondrés dans l'est de Derna, causant un nombre de victimes estimé entre 4 000 et 20 000 morts. Les forces armées arabes libyennes contrôlant la ville, ont été accusées d'entraver l'accès humanitaire et de bloquer l'accès des journalistes au port.

À ce jour, la Libye ne dispose d'aucun cadre électoral opérationnel. Il n'existe aucune véritable feuille de route pour des élections transparentes. Le manque de sécurité, combiné à la présence de milices armées, réduit considérablement la capacité des différents partis à mener leurs activités en toute liberté.

La Tunisie

Depuis 2011, les Tunisiens ont noté une progression dans leurs libertés politiques et civiles notamment après la promulgation de la nouvelle Constitution en 2014.

En 2014, le président Kaïs Saïed a remporté les élections et a consolidé certains de ses pouvoirs.⁸ En juillet 2021, il a décrété [l'état d'urgence](#) et remplacé le Premier ministre sans l'accord du Parlement, lequel a été dissous par la suite.⁹

7 "Civil War in Libya," Council on Foreign Relations (CFR).

8 "Kaïs Saïed," Encyclopaedia Britannica.

9 Human Rights Watch. Tunisie : La prise de pouvoir du président menace les droits, 27 Juillet 2021. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/07/27/tunisia-presidents-seizure-powers-threatens-rights>

10 "Tunisia: Wave of Arrests Targets Critics and Opposition Figures," Human Rights Watch, 24 Février 2023.

Sous la présidence de Saïed, plusieurs mesures répressives ont été mises en place afin d'intimider les militants politiques et les journalistes. En février 2023, certains d'entre eux ont été illégalement détenus pour avoir diffamé le président ou l'armée sur les réseaux sociaux.¹⁰

En janvier 2023, les élections se sont tenues et le nouveau Parlement a été inauguré en mars. Le taux de participation a été faible et la plupart des partis politiques se sont opposés à ce scrutin. Les électeurs étaient en théorie libres de choisir leurs représentants. Cependant, les restrictions économiques, l'ingérence étrangère et les règles opaques concernant les financements extérieurs ont considérablement réduit la transparence du processus électoral.

En octobre 2024, Saïed a remporté un second mandat de cinq ans. Sa victoire, marquée par un faible taux de participation, a été obtenue dans un contexte de répression, avec l'emprisonnement de nombreux candidats de l'opposition.

L'Algérie

Depuis son indépendance vis-à-vis de la France coloniale, le Front de libération nationale (FLN) domine la scène politique Algérienne.

Malgré l'existence de partis d'oppositions, l'oppression du gouvernement demeure palpable, avec un processus électoral loin d'être transparent.

En septembre 2024, le président Abdelmajid Tebboune a obtenu 95 % des voix. De nombreuses personnes ont critiqué ces élections qu'elles considéraient comme frauduleuses. De manière surprenante, le président Tebboune a reconnu les inexactitudes des élections, donnant ainsi une légitimité aux préoccupations de la population.

En 2019, le mouvement de protestation du [Hirak](#) a suscité un certain espoir et a contraint le régime à proposer quelques réformes, telles que la création de l'Autorité nationale indépendante pour les élections, qui a supervisé les élections de 2021.¹¹ Cependant, ces élections ont été largement entachées de fraudes, et les partisans du Hirak ont boycotté le scrutin.

Malheureusement, le Hirak a été réprimé par la police et les autorités ont intensifié leur répression des

Depuis près de 30 ans, le Soudan n'a pas organisé d'élections. En 2019, des manifestations ont conduit à la destitution du président de longue date, Omar al-Bashir, et de son parti, donnant naissance à un gouvernement de transition composé de dirigeants militaires et civils.

opposants politiques. En février 2023, le Conseil d'État a fermé tous les bureaux appartenant au Mouvement démocratique et social, un parti de gauche.

En septembre 2024, des élections ont été organisées et le président Abdelmajid Tebboune a obtenu 95 % des voix. De nombreuses personnes ont critiqué ces élections qu'elles considéraient comme frauduleuses. De manière surprenante, le président Tebboune a reconnu les inexactitudes des élections, donnant ainsi une légitimité aux préoccupations de la population.

Le Maroc

En 2011, la monarchie a connu [quelques réformes](#) qui ont renforcé le rôle du corps législatif national. Toutefois, le roi Mohammed VI a conservé des

pouvoirs considérables, tels que celui de dissoudre le Parlement, de gouverner par décret et de révoquer le gouvernement.¹² En effet, la Constitution stipule que le roi doit nommer le Premier ministre parmi les membres du parti ayant remporté le plus grand nombre de sièges au Parlement.

En [septembre 2021](#), les partis politiques victorieux étaient proches du palais, ce qui a permis au roi de nommer un Premier ministre et de constituer un cabinet composé de membres qui lui sont fidèles.¹³

Bien que la Constitution autorise la tenue d'élections concurrentielles, la liberté de réunion politique reste quasiment inexistante, et des brutalités policières sont fréquemment signalées à l'encontre des manifestants.

Depuis 2016, le mouvement Hirak Rif est réprimé et son leader, [Nasser Zefzafi](#), emprisonné depuis 2018.¹⁴ Le processus électoral demeure opaque, supervisé par le ministère de l'Intérieur et le ministère de la Justice, plutôt que par une autorité électorale indépendante. La transparence fait cruellement défaut, notamment en ce qui concerne la gestion de la richesse, de la santé et des autres intérêts du roi.

Le Sahara occidental constitue une source de tension majeure entre l'Algérie et le Maroc. Ancienne colonie espagnole, le Sahara occidental a été annexé par le Maroc en 1975, malgré l'opposition ferme de son peuple autochtone, [les Sahraouis](#).¹⁵ L'Algérie a vivement contesté cette annexion, en affirmant son soutien au droit des Sahraouis à l'autodétermination, et depuis plus de cinquante ans, les relations entre les deux pays restent marquées par des [tensions constantes](#).¹⁶

Le Soudan

Depuis près de 30 ans, le Soudan n'a pas organisé

11 "De la Protesta au Hirak : Algeria's New Revolutionary Moment", Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP), Décembre 2019.

12 "La nouvelle constitution Marocaine : Real Change or More of the Same", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Juin 2011.

13 "The Local Notables Unseat Islamists in Moroccan Elections," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Novembre 2021.

14 "Human Rights Watch. A l'occasion de la Journée mondiale des peuples autochtones", les ONG renouvellent leur appel à la libération de Nasser Zefzafi, 9 Août 2023.

15 "Le Front Polisario, le Maroc et le conflit du Sahara occidental", Arab Center Washington DC.

16 "Réconciliation entre l'Algérie et le Maroc et le Sahara occidental, le Front Sahraoui et le Front Polisario", Conseil Atlantique.

d'élections. En 2019, des manifestations ont conduit à la destitution du président de longue date, Omar al-Bashir, et de son parti, donnant naissance à un gouvernement de transition composé de dirigeants militaires et civils. Ces derniers ont accepté de partager le pouvoir en attendant la tenue d'élections nationales. En septembre 2021, le ministère de la Justice a présenté un projet de loi électorale, mais ce dernier n'a pas été promulgué.¹⁷

En octobre 2021, le lieutenant-général Abdel Fattah al-Burhan a orchestré un coup d'État militaire, proclamant l'état d'urgence et étendant ainsi ses pouvoirs, avant de dissoudre le gouvernement de transition. Des violences ont éclaté entre les forces armées soudanaises, les civils et les groupes paramilitaires. Après la formation d'un nouveau gouvernement technocratique, des manifestations ont secoué le pays en signe de protestation contre le coup d'État et l'exclusion de la société civile.¹⁸

Aujourd'hui, le Soudan se trouve plongé dans une grave crise humanitaire, marquée par des déplacements massifs de populations et des violences sexuelles endémiques. De nombreuses tentatives de cessez-le-feu ont été mises en appui, cependant toutes soldées par un échec.

II - Les Droits Fondamentaux

On observe un recul significatif des droits fondamentaux à travers l'ensemble de la région. Les journalistes, les défenseurs des droits de l'homme et les leaders de la société civile sont constamment victimes de harcèlement et d'intimidation et sont parfois soumis à des détentions arbitraires et violences physiques.

En Égypte, en août 2023, le journaliste [Karim Assaad](#) a été arrêté à son domicile. En septembre 2023, le militant [Hesham Kassem](#), largement connu pour son opposition aux autorités, a été condamné à six mois de prison pour diffamation.

En Algérie, certains journaux sont privés, ce qui permet à leurs journalistes de bénéficier d'une certaine liberté. Cependant, la majorité d'entre eux dépendent des financements publics, ce qui les conduit à s'autocensurer. En avril 2023, le Parlement a adopté une loi permettant au pouvoir judiciaire d'obliger les journalistes à dévoiler leurs sources. De plus, de nombreux journalistes font l'objet de harcèlement. Farid Herbi, journaliste renommé, a notamment été condamné à trois ans de prison pour avoir diffusé des informations jugées fausses et susceptibles de porter atteinte à la sécurité nationale. Les autorités exercent également un contrôle sur les réseaux sociaux, notamment en ce qui concerne les contenus politiques et religieux.

Au Maroc, les journalistes jouissent d'une certaine liberté pour rendre compte des questions sociales générales et des affaires internationales. Toutefois, plusieurs journalistes indépendants ayant critiqué le gouvernement, tels que [Soulaimane Raissouni](#), [Hanane Bakour](#) et [Rida Benotmane](#) ont été emprisonnés. En septembre 2022, des révélations ont fait état de l'utilisation par les autorités marocaines du logiciel espion Pegasus pour surveiller certains journalistes. La surveillance étatique est généralisée, ce qui entraîne une autocensure accrue.¹⁹ En novembre 2022, l'ancien ministre des Droits de l'homme et avocat [Mohammed Ziane](#) a été arrêté pour insulte à la magistrature, adultère et harcèlement sexuel. Les groupes de défense des droits de l'homme ont dénoncé cette arrestation, la qualifiant de décision politique, notamment en raison de l'opposition bien connue de Ziane au gouvernement.²⁰

Au Soudan, de nombreux dirigeants civils, journalistes et militants ont été arrêtés, tandis que d'autres ont perdu la vie, entraînant le pays dans un chaos profond. Des rapports font état de cas de nettoyage ethnique au Darfour, accompagnés de massacres, de déplacements massifs de populations, de famine et de viols utilisés comme armes de guerre.

17 "Communiqué de presse du Conseil de sécurité sur la Libye", Conseil de sécurité des Nations unies, 21 Décembre 2021.

18 "The Military Has Taken Power in Sudan and Dissolved Its Transitional Government," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Octobre 2021.

19 "Scandale Pegasus : Le Maroc doit accepter que tout peut être dit", Collaborative Journalism, 15 Novembre 2024.

20 "Amnesty International. Maroc: Les autorités doivent mettre fin à la répression des militants et des dissidents, 2023.

L'islam domine la région, et de nombreux abus ont été signalés à l'encontre de minorités religieuses, telles que les chrétiens, les musulmans chiites et les juifs. La liberté religieuse y est pratiquement inexistante, et les accusations de blasphème sont fréquemment passibles de sanctions.²¹ En mars dernier, en Libye, six individus ont été arrêtés et risquent la peine de mort pour s'être convertis au christianisme et avoir prêché leur foi.²²

La discrimination envers les minorités ethniques non arabes est endémique. Les Amazigh, les Tuaregs et les Tebu restent largement sous-représentés sur la scène politique libyenne.²³ En Tunisie, les [autorités ont violemment réprimé les migrants noirs et africains](#) et ont expulsé de force plus de 1 000 migrants dans le désert entre la Tunisie et la Libye. Au Maroc, 40 % de la population est d'origine amazighe. Bien qu'ils soient représentés au parlement, ces derniers continuent de faire face à des discriminations et n'ont qu'un accès limité aux opportunités socio-économiques. Enfin, au Soudan, les groupes ethniques non arabes sont confrontés à une véritable crise humanitaire et subissent un nettoyage ethnique, notamment au Darfour et dans les régions méridionales du Kordofan du Sud et du Nil Bleu.

En ce qui concerne les droits des femmes, dans l'ensemble, ces sociétés restent essentiellement patriarcales, avec peu ou pas de protection juridique contre [la violence fondée sur le genre](#).²⁴ Bien que le harcèlement sexuel soit légalement interdit dans de nombreux pays, il reste une réalité à laquelle les femmes sont confrontées, en particulier dans les espaces publics. Les lois sur la famille ont tendance à être conservatrices, notamment en matière de divorce, de garde des enfants et d'héritage, et la [participation des femmes à la vie politique est très faible](#).²⁵

La liberté religieuse y est pratiquement inexistante, et les accusations de blasphème sont fréquemment passibles de sanctions

En conclusion, l'état de la démocratie en Afrique du Nord présente des variations notables d'un pays à l'autre, et demeure marqué par une complexité indéniable. Toutefois, la région assiste à un affaiblissement substantiel des démocraties, déjà fragiles. La crise économique actuelle risque d'exacerber cette situation, impactant non seulement les communautés nord-africaines, mais également se répercutant sur l'ensemble du continent africain, par l'intensification des difficultés, du mécontentement, de la xénophobie, du racisme et de l'extrémisme.²⁶ Malheureusement, ces menaces pourraient favoriser l'ascension des régimes autoritaires.

21 Département d'État américain. 2023 "Report on International Religious Freedom, 2023".

22 "Libye: American and Libyan Citizens Arrested and Detained for Conducting Missionary Work and Apostasy", Global Legal Monitor, Library of Congress, 25 Mai 2023.

23 Amnesty International. "Rapport 2023 sur le Moyen-Orient et l'Afrique du Nord, 2023".

24 HCR. "Violence basée sur le genre, Appel global 2024 du HCR", Haut Commissariat des Nations Unies pour Les Réfugiés.

25 MENA Politics Newsletter 72 - Fall 2024, Association arabe de science politique (APSA), automne 2024.

26 Banque mondiale. Mise à jour économique du Moyen-Orient et de l'Afrique du Nord.

SOUTHERN AFRICA



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The State of Democracy in the SADC region

In the early to mid-2000s there was a strong sense of optimism about the deepening of democratic governance in Africa. John Endres, political risk analyst and the founding CEO of Good Governance Africa (GGA), [observed](#) in 2012 “a growing chorus of voices heralding a surge of prosperity and good governance in Africa: The World Bank believes that ‘sub-Saharan Africa’s economic growth is poised for acceleration.’” He highlighted the growth of multiparty democracy, the regularity of elections, the drop in the number of successful coups per decade and the rapid reduction in the number of people experiencing extreme poverty in Africa in the 1980s and into the early 2000s.

Political scholars Jolade Omede et al.¹ [argue that](#) the Southern African sub-region had “the most vibrant economy in sub-Saharan Africa...Democratic ideals also rank higher in the region compared to other regions in the continent. This has made the region, among others in the continent, the preferred choice of many migrants from different parts of the world.” These were times and voices of optimism for democracy in the region.

However, recent research shows that the quality of democracy is declining both globally and in the SADC region. According to [The Economist Intelligence Unit](#) (EIU), democracy in most parts of the world went into reverse.² Similarly, Afrobarometer [notes that](#) Africa is experiencing a serious democratic backsliding.³ This democratic regression and eroded tolerance for political plurality and freedom of expression are also evident in the SADC region, Human Rights Watch said in its [World Report 2024](#).⁴

Omede et al provided the most accurate picture of democracy in the SADC. While countries like Botswana, South Africa, Namibia and Mauritius demonstrate stable liberal democracies, the majority of SADC countries, including Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Tanzania and Zambia – experience significant democratic deficits beyond regular elections. Zimbabwe, for instance, holds regular elections, but they are largely seen as a façade for an authoritarian regime while Swaziland represents the lost group which is indifferent to the multiparty democracy.

[Afrobarometer](#) data⁵ indicates that in countries with one-party dominance, such as Namibia, Angola, Zimbabwe, Botswana, there has been significant democratic regression. In South Africa, 72% of respondents expressed willingness to forego elections if it meant increased security and material wellbeing. This reflects a worrying trend, especially given South Africa’s role as a regional leader.

Challenges to democratic governance

The deterioration of democracy in the SADC region cannot be understood in isolation. Kofi Annan, former Secretary General of the United Nations, emphasised that the will of the people must be the foundation of democracy and good governance.⁶ Elections are supposed to represent this will and serve as the driving force for accountability. However, several challenges undermine the quality of elections and governance in SADC countries.

One significant administrative issue is the lack of identity documentation. The Mo Ibrahim Foundation [reports](#) that nearly 500 million Africans lack proof of identity, which prevents many from voting. Another issue further eroding the legitimacy of elected leaders is declining voter turnout over the last 15 years. Although

1 Omede, J, Akindola R and Ngwube, A. 2016. Institutionalisation of democracy without responsible and accountable governance in African Journal of Politics and Administrative Studies, Vol. 9, 1; March, 2016. Department of Political Science, Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki

2 Economist Intelligence Unit. 2024. Democracy Index 2023: Age of Conflict

3 Afrobarometer. 2023. Africans want more democracy, but their leaders still aren’t listening”

4 Human Rights Watch. 2024. World Report 2024

5 Harvey, R. 2024. The allure of the “Rwanda Model”: why it’s misplaced

6 Kofi Annan Foundation and Nelson Mandela School of Public Governance. 2020. Democracy in Central and Southern Africa

Africa has the youngest population, it also has some of the oldest leaders, limiting new ideas and innovation in governance.

Another challenge is the institutionalisation of democratic rule without corresponding accountability. Omede et al argue that institutions such as electoral management bodies, parliaments, the judiciary, the media and civil society organisations are weakened or abused. The implications are severe, as the ruling elites in these countries are not incentivised to govern in the interests of citizens or to create broad-based development, as any reduction in inequality appears to be seen as a threat to their rule.

In their [paper](#) on the SADC democracy agenda, Katundu, Ronceray and Runji highlight the region's slow adoption of continental governance norms, such as the African Charter of Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG), especially when compared to the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).⁷ For example, out of 16 SADC member states, 13 have signed the ACDEG and 10 have ratified it, while all 15 ECOWAS members have signed and 13 have ratified it.⁸ Civil society in SADC needs to double policy advocacy efforts to improve the speed and levels of ratification of ACDEG and not leave it up to SADC structures and individual countries.

The SADC has also faced criticism for its lack of intervention in key moments of democratic breakdown, such as the 2017 military coup in Zimbabwe. Despite its role as regional leader, South Africa failed to effectively exert its influence in promoting democratic governance across the region.⁹ For instance, it did not hold the Zimbabwean government accountable

for rigging 2023 general elections, suppressing opposition, and using state violence against its citizens, leading to the migration of millions of Zimbabweans. And in the aftermath of the 2024 post-election violence in Mozambique, SADC has been silent thus further compromising its credibility.

The path forward: development and democracy interconnectedness

The Afrobarometer notes that 66% of Africans prefer democracy. The United Nations and International IDEA [assert that](#) "development also matters for democracy."¹⁰ In other words, SADC's greatest democratic need is development which entails poverty reduction, employment and economic growth. In fact, democracy and development are two sides of the same coin. Pippa Norris illustrates the interdependence and interconnectedness between democracy and development by indicating that the functioning of democratic institutions, accountable governance and creating free space for citizens to hold elected politicians to account by raising their voices and the strengthening of the government's capacity to deliver public services and creating opportunities for the private sector to thrive are important preconditions for development.¹¹ This is especially crucial because Southern Africa has some of the world's most unequal countries, with enormous social cleavages.¹²

A major challenge is the institutionalisation of democratic rule without corresponding accountability.

7 Katundu, E; Ronceray, M and Runji, N.2023. The SADC democracy agenda: Channels, lessons and digital technologies for civil society engagement

8 Ibid

9 Mashingaidze, S. 2024. 2024 SADC elections: A call to deepen grassroots democracy

10 United Nations. 2013. Democracy and Development: The Role of the UN

11 Norris, Pippa. 2011. Making Democratic-Governance Work: The Consequences for Prosperity. HKS Faculty Research Working Paper Series RWP11-035, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. <http://web.hks.harvard.edu/publications/workingpapers/citation.aspx?PubId=7967>.

12 Nordiska Afrikainstitutet/ Nordic Africa Institute (NAI).2018. Peace and Security Challenges in Southern Africa: Governance Deficits and Lucklustre Regional Conflict Management: Policy note No 4:2018

This suggests that development thrives in a democratic environment where the voice of the people is heard and the democratic institutions are respected. In his book, *Nigeria: Democracy without Development: How to Fix it*, Omano Edigheji states, “a democracy that is not able to deliver socio-economic benefits will end up in social and political instability...Democracy, simply put, means development. So, a country in which people go hungry is not a democracy.”¹³

Equally crucial is the need to educate the public through the schooling system and civil society awareness raising initiatives, particularly targeting the youth that democratic and accountable governance has a deep history in Africa and is not a colonial imposition. Moses Ochuni, an African history professor at Vanderbilt University, [states that](#).

“Pre-colonial African histories furnish us with political cultures and leadership modalities that were democratic in their own ways. They were variously founded on consensus, inherited authority, or sacred, religious and ancestral ordination. What they all had in common was legitimacy, the basic idea of a leader, group of leaders, or a political configuration being accepted as representing the will and interest of a people at a particular time.”

Not only did these pre-colonial forms of African democratic practice possess the key ingredient of legitimacy, they had in-built mechanisms of accountability, participation and checks and balances. Moreover, there were procedures for addressing post-selection grievances and managing the occasional crisis of succession and leadership failure.”¹⁴

This is what the former Organisation of African Unity (OAU) Secretary General Salim Ahmed Salim called “homegrown” form of democracy. It dispels the myth that accountable democracy is “unAfrican.” Speaking at the OAU summit in 1990, Salim stated, “Africa could not ignore the global consensus on the value of democracy; but democracy must be home-grown.” The ruling elites in Africa have appropriated the dividends of democracy among themselves through corruption, bad governance, abuse of state power and cronyism. Ordinary Africans today hanker after democracy because historically they experienced an accountable, people-centric and homegrown form of governance which benefited the majority. Instead of backsliding, the SADC citizens and upcoming leaders need to rekindle their belief in democratic ideals and strengthen accountable governance and democratic institutions in all the countries in the region to fulfil the aspirations of our forebears. Even though accountable democratic governance is facing headwinds, there is hope. Our hope lies in the development of young ethical leaders who must get involved in governance issues in order to access the power to lead the continent with innovation.

13 Edigheji, O.2020. *Nigeria Democracy without Development: How to Fix it*.

14 Ochonu, M. 2022. How can we develop a uniquely African form of democracy? Published in Mail & Guardian newspaper

Key Insights

Despite some minor victories over the past year (in the form of successfully-run elections in Ghana, Namibia, Chad, and Mauritius; as well as notable challenges to the long-term dominance of incumbent parties in Botswana and South Africa), trends across the continent suggest that the state of democracy in Africa is precarious.

The authors found that critical institutions are being eroded, full and fair participation of all citizens is regularly challenged, and the supremacy of the rule of law is far from absolute. In some ways, this is consistent with the global creep of authoritarianism evident across political contexts from nations in the developing world such as Cambodia, Myanmar, and El Salvador, to middle-income countries like Iran and Mexico, and extending even to higher-income settings such as Poland and China.

Broader macro trends notwithstanding, 2024 was a particularly challenging year for Africa and should serve as a stark warning to all stakeholders invested in upholding democratic ideals in the long term. Developments in West Africa's much-discussed "coup belt" have helped shape current concerns about democratic backsliding in the region, but these events reflect a retreat that has been in progress for much longer. In Freedom House's annual country index on democratic freedoms, the vast majority of notable developments to African democracies since 2006 have been negative—that is, reflective of decline.

Examined together, the chapters of this report paint the picture of a continent that will have to work to confront a number of distinct but equally considerable challenges to democracy if its countries are to continue to build and maintain the societies they've sought to construct since emerging from colonial rule.

2024 was a particularly challenging year for Africa and should serve as a stark warning to all stakeholders invested in upholding democratic ideals in the long term.

Across the continent, countries are faced with a sharp decoupling of democratic systems from economic growth and improvements to general well-being, the increasing allure of forceful transfers of government to unaccountable and overbearing armed

forces, and a preference by many governments to consolidate power through the disenfranchisement of large segments of society deemed sufficiently expendable.

As complex and multifaceted as the challenges are, so also will need to be the approaches to fixing them. The African continent is made up of 54 sovereign states, each with its own unique dynamics and trajectory. As such, specific policy recommendations would need to be crafted with the characteristics of each individual country in mind. But by referencing the trends

Key Insights

uncovered in each of the five regions examined by the authors, we are able to identify broad policy emphases that are likely to contribute to better outcomes. Such as:

- ◇ *Strengthen and empower regional coalitions to be more effective and proactive in counteracting attempts to obtain transfers of governing power through force.*
- ◇ *Emphasize the generation of strong, equitable, and sustainable economic growth both within and among democratic countries in the region.*
- ◇ *Safeguard the right to fair and equal representation for groups to whom democracy has historically not delivered on its promises. This includes women, ethnic, sexual, & religious minorities, and economically-vulnerable segments of the population.*
- ◇ *Protect the existence of a free and robust press, and respect the fundamental right to peaceful protest. It is critical that democracy be accompanied by the fundamental ideals that uniquely characterize it.*

- ◇ *Meet the challenge of rampant disinformation campaigns in online spaces. Thoughtful and comprehensive digital policy must keep pace with the development of digital information technologies to protect against challenges to a cohesive and informed electorate.*

Recent developments make it clear that the state of democracy in Africa requires careful attention but the outcome is by no means a foregone conclusion. A survey released last year by Afrobarometer shows that Africans still retain strong desire for democratic institutions and rather than waver in their support for these freedoms instead bemoan corruption and mismanagement in government that hinder the effective functioning of these institutions. The success of African democracy in the long run will ultimately depend on how it functions in practice, and how faithfully those tasked with upholding its principles are committed to doing so.

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Acknowledgements

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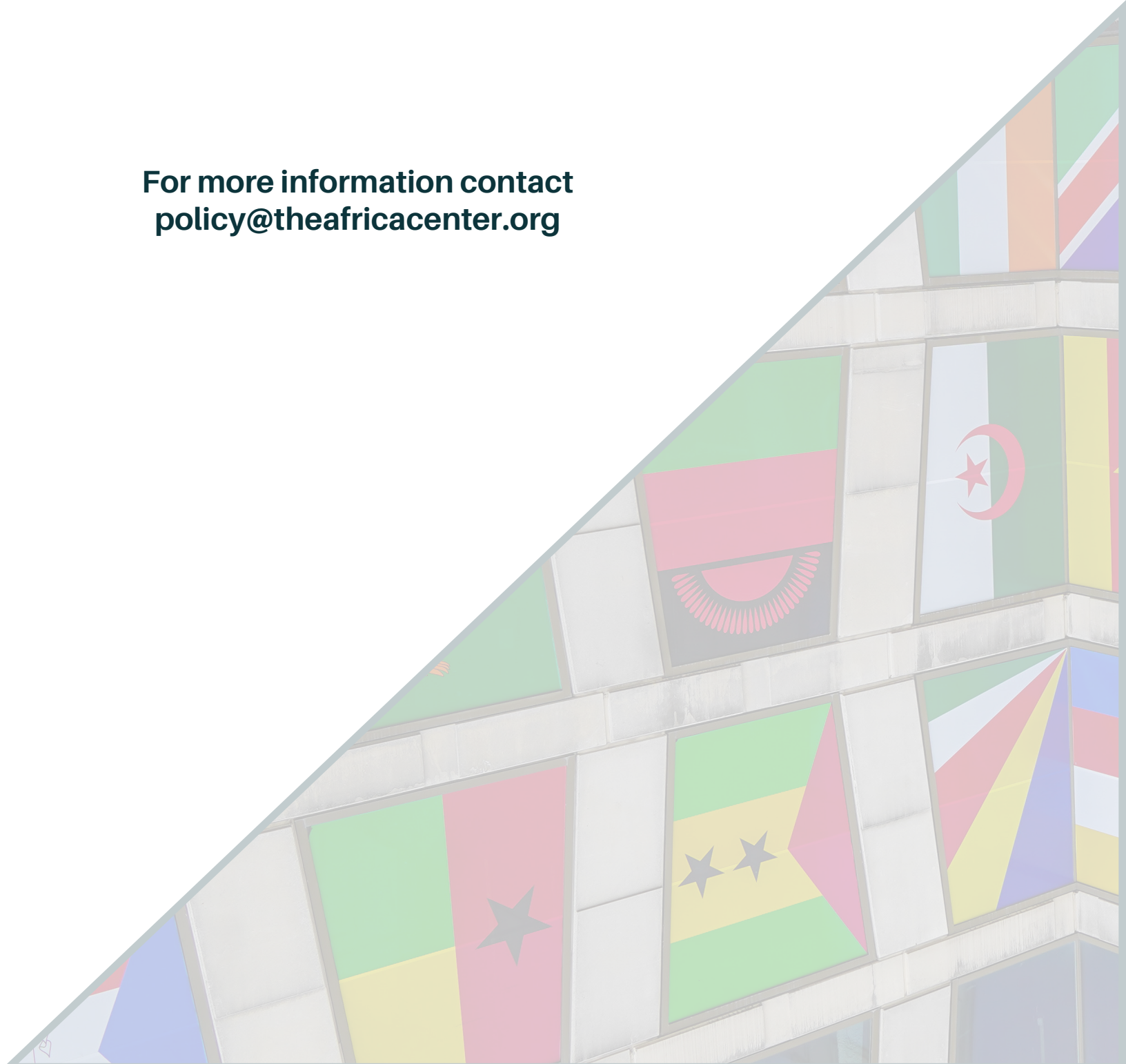
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