

RETHINKING PEACE AND SECURITY IN WEST AFRICA'S CHANGING GLOBAL ORDER



**ROSA
LUXEMBURG
STIFTUNG**

WEST AFRICA OFFICE

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From 23 to 25 September 2026, the West Africa Office of the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung held a conference in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, titled **“Political Crises in West Africa: Rethinking Strategies for Consolidating Democratic Gains.”** In his keynote address, Professor Jibrin Ibrahim, Senior Fellow at the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD), examined the deepening political and security crises in West Africa, the erosion of democratic governance, and the implications of a changing regional and global order.

This keynote has been abridged for publication.



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INTRODUCTION

West Africa has been in political turmoil for the past decade, signalling a deterioration of a crisis that has affected the region for decades due to structural problems related to widespread poverty, food insecurity, the climate crisis and insurgency generated by violent extremist jihadist groups. The current phase of the crisis is linked mainly to the rapid weakening of the democratic model that evolved in the post-1990 era on the impulse of popular demands and the regional body ECOWAS. The process has been generated by the rise of authoritarian systems imposed by many “democratically” elected presidents who deviated from the constitutional path to democratic governance, creating excuses for the military to return to power with the justification of correcting deviations from democratic principles.

The coups in Chad, Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Niger and Guinea-Bissau posed an existential crisis for ECOWAS as an organisation and for its democratic model. Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger subsequently withdrew from ECOWAS and established the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). At the same time, French neo-colonialism has been singled out as an evil that must be destroyed. The political use of geopolitical arguments against France has created a divide in which West Africans, the youth in particular, have been drawn into strong opposition to France and, increasingly, Western powers in general.

Nonetheless, this is not the first time West Africa has confronted dramatic political transformation. The region has a history of resilience. The people fought for and obtained the return of democracy in the early 1990s in response to the debilitating authoritarianism and conflicts of the 1970s and 1980s. Democracy returned with new constitutions, new political parties and regular elections. The principal question posed in the 1990s was: who would be the beneficiaries of this return to democracy?

The diagnosis was that, for virtually all countries in the region, the social contract established during the nationalist struggle between states and citizens had been broken. The post-independence one-party and military regimes failed to improve the lives and livelihoods of the people. Political frustration developed when it became clear that the new democratic regimes that emerged afterwards also failed to improve people’s lives sufficiently. The legitimacy of democratic rule was weakened by corruption, electoral fraud and the lack of a level playing field. Opposition parties were frustrated by ruling parties that blocked their pathways to winning power democratically. That was the context in which the idea emerged that if democracy

is not producing results for the people, what is the point of resisting coups d'état in principle? This is a critical issue today.

Since at least 2020, the risk analysis of West Africa has become more sombre. Nigeria's capacity to play the regional leadership role it exercised in earlier decades has declined considerably. Nigeria itself developed serious internal security threats, including a jihadist insurgency in the northeast, a Biafran secessionist movement in the southeast, banditry and mass kidnapping in the northwest, and serious farmer-herder violence in much of the country, keeping its armed forces fully occupied internally.

Meanwhile, the democracy crisis of the region is linked to its political sociology. Citizens have repeatedly demonstrated their keen interest and determination to participate in democratic politics. Successive generations of leaders, however, have often demonstrated deep disrespect for a level playing field and worked to dismantle democratic rules and processes. The ongoing battle is between efforts at state capture by the political class and citizens' attempts to entrench an inclusive democratic culture. This is the paradox that has to be resolved to return the agenda of inclusive democratic politics to the region.

I THE RETURN OF MILITARY COUPS IN WEST AFRICA

West Africa has been rocked by military uprisings and coups over the past several years. The result is that the political convergence principles directing ECOWAS states to operate democratic regimes based on regular multiparty elections have been profoundly weakened, and the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance has been breached many times.

Military coups result from a failing or failed system of government. Historically, they happen in countries experiencing turbulence, whether that turbulence results from leaders clinging to power at their country's detriment, widespread corruption or the excesses of those in power. For every country that has experienced a coup, there is a backstory of oppression, corruption, dictatorship, stagnation and the suffering of citizens.

The confluence of constitutional and security crises raises several questions. Why these specific countries? Why at this time and in such short succession? And what does the future hold for their populations under military rule? The majority of the population of West African states is under 40 and has no memory of military rule, its repression and denial of human rights, and above all the arbitrariness of social and political rights. The youth can therefore retain a romantic vision of the military as a professional group that will fix the problems created by the departing political class, leave power and return the countries to an idyllic democracy. They have little experience of the political ruse of the military, their love of power and self-perpetuation, and their corruption.

Political conditions in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Niger and Guinea-Bissau are closely related to each country's turbulent past and present. Across the sparsely populated and poorly governed Sahel, weak local governance creates gaps for jihadist movements to fill, which further weakens governance and lends legitimacy to coup plotters. Security crises are fertile ground for coups, as is the lack of integrity of leaders. At the same time, several of the civilian governments that were overthrown had themselves faced criticism over corruption, disputed elections, restrictions on opposition figures, protests and media freedoms, or attempts to manipulate constitutional term limits.

The core agenda of the return of the military is an anti-democracy project and, in that sense, a real existential threat to ECOWAS, which has worked consistently to promote unity on the basis of a normative system founded on democratic values and practices. Democracy construction has had many pitfalls over the years, but as of 2020 the whole region still retained a significant commitment to it. Before addressing this challenge, it is important to look at the way the geopolitics of great powers is playing out.

GEOPOLITICAL TRANSFORMATION AND THE STRUGGLE FOR AUTONOMY

Global geopolitical transformations are at the centre of current dynamics. The return of the military to power in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger has been accompanied by a campaign against France as an architect of the underdevelopment of the Sahelian countries and a saboteur of the battle against violent extremism. Anti-French sentiment has flourished in the three countries, where the military governments ended longstanding arrangements that allowed French troops to operate.

The historical record provides support for grievances against France. French colonial rule established political systems designed to extract valuable resources while using repressive strategies to retain control. After independence, France persisted in nurturing neo-colonial institutions. The CFA franc, defence agreements and repeated French interventions on behalf of allied leaders became symbols of this continuing influence and created additional challenges for democratic struggles.

At the same time, the entry of Wagner into the Sahel was accompanied by a sustained disinformation campaign. The methodology is based on the idea of “informational dominance”: if actors can capture the channels of information around a person and inject content into them, they can change that person’s perception of what is happening. While the internet was assumed to have broken information monopolies by offering users numerous and diverse sources, it can also lock people into information cocoons that are biased and manipulative.

On Françafrique, the Wagner approach was to bombard Francophone Africa

through Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok, Twitter and other outlets with claims that France was actively providing arms to jihadists to keep terrorism alive. Françafrique is real and has done considerable harm to Francophone countries. Nonetheless, many of the videos purporting to show French helicopters delivering arms to terrorists were fake. Real grievances could therefore be combined with false narratives and weaponised to turn public opinion against France.

Over the past years, a strong association has been created between the idea that France must be thrown out, which many Africans support, and the idea that Russia is the way forward. But Africans must rise to the imperative that the objective of combating neo-colonialism must be autonomy, not the replacement of one neo-colonial power by another. The most insidious aspect of this weaponisation is the presentation of military vanguardism as the pathway to salvation, at a time when the current generation of African youth has little experience or knowledge of military rule and the negative consequences of dictatorship.

I DEMOGRAPHY, THE YOUTH BULGE AND THE PRECARIAT

Political turmoil in West Africa is deeply rooted in the region's demographic crisis. The population is rising fast and the younger generation is not being absorbed in a structured way into the economy, society and polity, creating the basis for widening conflicts. Population is only a strength if people are well educated and healthy, if the economy can provide employment and if households have enough income to buy the goods and services produced by businesses.

The concept of the precariat, developed by Guy Standing, describes people living with unstable work, insecure occupational identities and little predictability. Their lives are marked by anxiety, alienation, anger and a consciousness of relative deprivation. West Africa has developed a massive precariat out of decades of poverty and insufficient economic growth. Climate change and the droughts of the 1970s drove large parts of the rural population into urban centres. Unlike earlier phases of migration, when education and urban employment often signalled social mobility, much of this movement transferred rural poverty into urban squalor and insecurity.

At the same time, inequality has grown. Governing classes fuelled by corruption and the monopolisation of political systems have accumulated significant wealth, while large parts of the population remain poor. This has also been the political strength of West African youth, who have exploded onto the political scene and affected power relations in countries across the region. Such explosions, however, are often episodic and difficult to sustain because of the atomised and precarious lives of the people involved. The youth bulge is therefore simultaneously a source of political agency and a profound challenge for democratic stability.

I WEST AFRICA AND THE CHALLENGE OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Violent extremism rooted in Islamist radicalism has emerged as one of the most important political elements characterising West Africa and the Sahel. It comes from a different ideological perspective that questions the legitimacy of democracy itself. Over the past two decades, violent extremist organisations have demonstrated a high capacity to affect the security and political situation in the region. Their ambitions have grown and their geographical reach has expanded. Terrorism has devastated lives and livelihoods, disrupted local economies and undermined health and education services.

Terrorism has diverse effects. In some countries it has undermined support for democratic governments that failed to protect their citizens. In others, the threat of terrorism has been manipulated to legitimise widespread human rights abuses. In both cases, violent extremism represents a major threat to political stability. One reason terrorism is particularly significant is that it challenges existing understandings of citizenship by reinforcing the argument that democracy produces no dividends for ordinary people.

The relationship between insecurity and democratic legitimacy is therefore central. Governments are judged by their capacity to protect citizens and provide public services, but counter-terrorism cannot become an excuse for dismantling rights and freedoms. The struggle against violent extremism and the struggle for democratic governance must be addressed together.

I DEMOCRACY AND CONFLICT DYNAMICS IN WEST AFRICA

The so-called third wave of democratic transition in West Africa started in the early 1990s with political liberalisation. At the formal level, democratic transition includes constitutional rule and multiparty political systems. At the deeper systemic level, however, it requires a more profound socio-political transformation that allows freely elected leaders and the civil population to impose their supremacy over military or civilian oligarchies. The end goal is the development of a democratic political culture in which large sections of society internalise democratic values and citizens are able to determine who exercises power.

Democracy is often strengthened by strong media and civil society movements. Their vocation is to protect democracy through investigation, transparency, advocacy and mobilisation. A vigorous civil society can create the trust and social cohesion that allow contestation and contention to take place within a democratic framework and can strengthen resilience when democracy comes under pressure.

Consolidating authoritarianism has also become more difficult than in the past. Populists and authoritarian leaders may gain widespread public support initially, but they often struggle to sustain it because they cannot deliver the exaggerated promises they have made. Citizens have come to expect integrity, security and public services from democracies, and they have the same expectations from autocrats when they take over.

ECOWAS AND REGIONAL COMMITMENTS ON DEFENDING DEMOCRACY

ECOWAS was established in 1975 primarily as an economic integration project, but conflict and political instability progressively pushed it to develop a regional peace and security architecture. The organisation established a normative framework around constitutional rule, democratic governance and the rejection of unconstitutional changes of government. The 1999 Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security and the 2001 Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance became important pillars of this framework.

ECOWAS has played a crucial role in the management of political crises, conflict resolution and the consolidation of peace and democracy. It has also made significant progress in regional integration, particularly through the free movement of persons and the development of the common market. The challenge today is to build resilience around these achievements. Terrorism, climate change, poverty, unemployment and political instability are testing the regional system. Yet the democratic principles developed by ECOWAS remain important precisely because they provide citizens with standards against which governments can be judged.

THE WEAK LINK: NON-ADHERENCE TO THE NORMATIVE FRAMEWORK

The core weakness of ECOWAS is the erosion of its normative framework by some presidents who are at the same time its highest-level leadership as members of the Authority of Heads of State. The issue of presidential tenure illustrates the problem. Attempts to establish a regional prohibition on tenure beyond two terms have been blocked by member states. This means that the ECOWAS Commission is not always able to carry its political leadership along because some leaders develop objectives that directly contradict the normative framework established by the organisation.

The institution has a clear understanding of the source and nature of the problem, but the challenge is what to do when it emanates from the summit itself. The way forward is a more active and informed citizenry at country level: citizens who understand ECOWAS protocols as well as their own constitutional rights and duties and who can contest democratic derailment by their executives as it emerges. ECOWAS must develop beyond the stage of being a project of heads of state. The vision of an “ECOWAS of Peoples” must move from a slogan to reality. Citizens must develop the capacity to enforce adherence to regional standards.

The organisation also faces institutional challenges. The ECOWAS Parliament is not directly elected and decisions of the Community Court of Justice are not always

respected. These shortcomings reinforce the need for institutional reform and stronger citizen ownership.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: THE IMPERATIVE OF DEMOCRATIC RENEWAL

The core of the crisis in West Africa is poor governance and the realisation by citizens that they are not seeing the dividends of democracy due to corruption by the political class. The people of West Africa expect their governments to provide for their security and welfare, and that is the key challenge that has to be addressed. State capacity to provide services must improve steadily to meet the expectations of the people. Militarism cannot sustain peace and development in West Africa. Authoritarianism worsens corruption, promotes arbitrary rule, stifles production and innovation and negates development. Democratic renewal remains the pathway to a peaceful and prosperous future.

Democracy did not fail in West Africa; it was sabotaged. Many democratically elected leaders in the region subverted the level playing field for free and fair elections, compromised the judiciary and the rule of law, blocked opposition parties and gave the impression that the problem was democracy rather than their own behaviour.

The impression that military rule could enable the people of West Africa to ensure national control of resources and reverse neo-colonial systems is strong within youth circles but has no empirical basis. Nonetheless, the argument that the people of West Africa must work together to dismantle neo-colonialism is correct. Countries in the region should embrace national debates and develop strategies for the full control of their resources.

At the same time, West Africa should strive to save its regional organisation from collapse. ECOWAS should remain steadfast in maintaining its constitutional convergence principles and zero tolerance for changes of government through unconstitutional means. The organisation should also acknowledge that democratic erosion has emanated from actions by some members of the Authority of Heads of State and take proactive measures to address it. In this regard, the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance should be amended to make it illegal to spend more than two terms in office.

Current trends in West Africa are strongly influenced by global geopolitical transformation. West African countries that have been closely tied to former colonial powers should rethink their strategies as the global order changes and engage emerging powers from the standpoint of autonomy rather than dependency.

The real force behind democratic struggles and successes in West Africa is civil society. Trade unions, student unions, non-governmental organisations, women's

organisations, cultural and religious organisations and the private mass media have all played decisive roles in influencing public opinion, making demands for political liberalisation and the protection of human rights, and sustaining these demands through strikes, demonstrations and protests.

West African countries must also improve the integrity of elections through constitutional and legal reforms that secure operational and financial autonomy for electoral commissions, strengthen political parties and create a more level playing field. Electoral processes must be credible.

Citizens must be active in creating a pathway to a better future for their countries. They must develop their capacity to resist attempts by incumbent presidents to change constitutions to increase their term limits and embrace the principle that governments must be accountable to them. Civic education should respond to the use of religion and ethnicity as tools of political manipulation. Citizens must also defend the culture of opposition politics as a critical element in the defence of democracy and ensure that opposition parties can provide credible alternatives in future elections.