

# RETHINKING LIBERAL DEMOCRACY IN THE FACE OF CITIZENS' DISCONTENTS AND AN EMERGENT MILITARY WAVE IN WEST AFRICA

## HIGHLIGHTS



## Introduction

The hybrid Expert Convening on Democracy in West Africa was organised by The Electoral Forum with support from the MacArthur Foundation on Wednesday, February 7, 2024, at Exclusive Serene Hotels and Suites, Abuja, and on Zoom. The meeting was held in response to the emergent military wave in West Africa as evident in the spates of coups across the sub-region amidst development crisis which is fueling some level of public support for putschists in the region.

The objectives of the convening were as follows:

- i) Set a public agenda and drive a discourse on West African – Democracy from the margins. A developmental/citizen-centric democracy
- ii) Understanding of the shortcomings of extant democratic practices in West Africa and showing how this allows for and emboldens emergent leanings towards military rule.
- iii) Prescribes how best to evolve a socio-culturally, economically and politically relevant democratic model for West Africa.
- iv) Proffers how best democracy can be practiced to account for the developmental needs of the sub-region.

The convening had participants from across the West African sub-region in attendance. Attendees of the convening included the Chair of the Electoral Forum, Prof. Bayo Olukoshi, and several other experts on democracy and development who provided reflections on a range of topics relating to the convening. Prof. L. Adele Jinadu and Prof. Jibrin Ibrahim offered key addresses. Prof. Okechukwu Ibeanu, Prof. Warisu Alli, Prof. Mohammad Kuna, Prof. Istifanus Zabadi, Prof. Emmanuel Aiyede, Dr. Emmanuel Akwetey, Dr. Julie Sanda, Dr. Sa'eed Husaini, Dr. Lassane Ouedraogo, and Omolara Balogun all offered presentations on specific themes. In addition, other attendees including members of The Electoral Forum provided useful insight during group discussions.

## Observations

Participants at the convening provided general remarks regarding the state of democracy and development in the subregion, as well as the links between them. Gender inclusion and development, military interventions and democracy, youth, technology, and development in the region were all discussed. Observations were also made about the challenges and prospects of democracy in the subregion. Some of these have been provided below.

### **Democracy and Development in West Africa: The Linkage**

- The idea of democracy and its associated freedoms and rights are universal. Whether you are talking about Europe or Africa, certain ideas are cross-cutting. You want some room for self-determination, you want protection from other groups, and you want to be able to contribute to it.
- While democracy may be subjected to ideological debates, there is a fundamental agreement that it should serve the well-being of the majority.
- The concepts of democracy and development are inherently intertwined. There is no distinction between voice and value. The separation many push for is purely ideological.
- It is not that democracy has failed to develop West Africa, but development has not been on the agenda in democracy discourse on the continent. When military regimes were being toppled, there was little debate on the place of development. There were political debates, but no development discourse.
- There is a need to understand the historical background and the complexities inherent in the contexts shaping liberal democracy in West Africa.
- The rise of coups in West Africa is the result of a protracted struggle, with efforts at improving democracy countered by efforts to reverse them. Coups stem largely from the lack of delivery of the so-called dividends of democracy, unmet expectations of the people and of course corruption and other social ills. Importantly, democracy has been abused by politicians, through the exploitation of the Presidential system.
- While it is important to acknowledge the uniqueness of democratic challenges in Africa, we must not succumb to the notion of African exceptionalism and search for exceptional phrases specific to African Democracy.

- There has been a shift in the landscape between 1980s, when certain key actors, such as intellectuals, public institutions, and international organizations, played significant roles in shaping democratic discourse, and the 2000s, characterized by fatigue among these actors, leaving room for the erosion of democratic values and norms.
- The crisis of democracy and governance in West Africa is essentially the result of contradictions in the dynamics of the consolidation of democracy in Africa.
- The neo-liberal paradigm has implications for state involvement in development. Colonialism on market dynamics has had a significant influence on democracy and development in Africa, and there is a need for African states to address socio-economic rights alongside electoral processes.
- The conceptualisations of democracy and development are often context-dependent. There is a need for an approach that moves beyond the limitations of liberal democracy and incorporates factors such as ethnicity, class and global power structures.
- Obstacles facing the trajectory of building a developmental state in Africa are rooted in colonial legacies and globalization.
- Both the developmental state and the developmental market have failed Africa. There is an overemphasis on the "big D" democracy, which focuses on elections rather than everyday decision-making at the community level, stifling the ability of people to make choices about their lives.
- Whether a particular form of democracy is successful or not depends on the availability and strength of guardrails. West Africa is trying to build democracy without democratic values. This is similar to the challenge the Soviets faced when they contemplated building an advanced socialist society/communism, while the people had no such values. Like the Communist Party which decided that to succeed in the construction of Communism, they had to develop a society with socialist/communist values, West African countries need to develop societies with democratic values in West Africa.
- There are internal and external threats to liberal democracy in Africa. Internally, the absence of liberal democratic norms and values poses a challenge, while externally, other models of democracy, such as Soviet and Chinese versions, present options with their economic influence.
- The question arises whether the approach to rebuilding or consolidating democracy should be bottom-up or top-down, considering the need to address power imbalances and engage civil society effectively.

- Democracy and development cannot be separated. Democracy is about expanding zones of freedom. To enjoy the freedoms under democracy, you need certain facilities and opportunities. If you look at countries where you have had famine, they have all been authoritarian regimes. Both democracy and development are supportive and cannot be separated.
- The international environment, imperialism, neo-liberalism and the configuration of powers, are much critical factors in the overall benefits of democracy in the global South.
- There has been a persistence of authoritarian legacies within ECOWAS member states, which continue to undermine efforts towards democratic governance. Despite initial optimism following the adoption of multi-party democracy in the 1990s, the region has grappled with corruption, abuse of the presidential powers and other challenges that have raised questions regarding the efficacy of democratic institutions in improving the lives of ordinary citizens.
- There has been a stark decline in state capacity observed in West African states, especially the Sahel region, exacerbating existing challenges and fueling disillusionment among the populace. The erosion of state capacity by the ruling class has led to a surge in civilian arms procurement, further destabilizing the region and providing fertile ground for authoritarian regimes to flourish.
- The rise of populist movements and associated democratic recessions have complicated efforts to uphold democratic principles, particularly in the face of imperialism, neo-liberalism and neocolonialism
- The main threat is authoritarianism within liberal democracies in Africa. Stolen elections, muscling of the media, and all sorts of harassment or intimidation of citizens by elected governments fueled by the determination of the political class to hold on to power at all cost are public disillusionment with democracy in the region.
- There is a shrinking of the civic space exacerbated by factors such as extreme poverty, insecurity, religious extremism and the COVID-19 pandemic, among others.
- Government suppression of citizens' voices, media bias, and the neutralization of civil society and labour organizations all intersect to hamper public participation in governance in West Africa.

- The civic space has been expanded by the role of technology and the conversion of virtual activism into tangible political action, as exemplified by diaspora movements and social media dynamics' sharpening of ground-level outcomes.
- There is a massive decline in the existential conditions of individuals in West African countries in comparison to the deepening of the lavish lifestyle of a few elites and corruption.
- The current military regimes are not any better than the civilian politicians. The people are disenchanted with the military as they are with other sections of society – youths and politicians. While the revolutionary anti-France orientation espoused by recent military regimes is worth attention, it should be critically evaluated.

### **Gender Inclusion and Democracy**

- There is a critical link between the advancement of democracy and women's participation, highlighted by the escalating challenges faced by women amidst the backdrop of democratic retrogression.
- Women participation in West Africa is hampered by several obstacles, including political violence, institutional biases, gender-insensitive cultural norms, and the lack of political will to enact gender-sensitive reforms.
- There is a need for holistic approaches that transcend tokenism and address the systemic inequities undermining women's participation in democracy. Specific gender-sensitive policies, robust institutional reforms, and collaborative efforts should be adopted to harness the transformative potential of gender equality in advancing democratic governance and sustainable development across West Africa.

### **Youths, Technology, Democracy and Development**

- A prevailing state of uncertainty resulting from an absence of effective youth empowerment programmes intersects with a lack of historical and self-awareness among youths in West Africa to prevent them from effectively contributing to democratic governance.
- The optimism of technology-driven activism has failed to translate to sustained challenges to the status quo. While social media platforms have provided avenues for youth to amplify their voices and garner attention, there remains a gap between online activism and tangible political change for the youth.

- While today's youth may possess advanced technological tools, they often lack the interpersonal skills and collective organizing strategies that characterized earlier movements.

## Challenges

- Lack of accountability in the executive and legislative branches constitutes a major challenge, along with the decline in the effectiveness of civil society in holding politicians accountable.
- The fragmentation within civil society and the need to unify efforts towards common goals are recognized as critical challenges in advancing democracy and accountability.
- There has been a persistence of authoritarian legacies within ECOWAS member states, which continue to undermine efforts towards democratic governance. Despite initial optimism following the adoption of multi-party democracy in the 1990s, the region has grappled with questions regarding the efficacy of democratic institutions in improving the lives of ordinary citizens.
- There has been a stark decline in state capacity observed in West African states, especially the Sahel region, exacerbating existing challenges and fueling disillusionment among the populace. The erosion of state capacity has led to a surge in civilian arms procurement, further destabilizing the region and providing fertile ground for authoritarian regimes to flourish. This decline in state capacity is a result of the abuse of the Presidential system in all West African states.
- The rise of populist movements like the Michael Sata-led Patriotic Front in Zambia,<sup>1</sup> Raila Odinga-led the Orange Democratic Movement in Kenya,<sup>2</sup> Julius Malema-led Economic Freedom Fighters,<sup>3</sup> |Buharism in Nigeria,<sup>4</sup> and in recent times, anti-colonial populist governments emerging through coups across West Africa<sup>5</sup> and associated democratic recessions have complicated efforts to uphold democratic principles, particularly in the face of external interference and disinformation campaigns.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0192512117720809>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.democratic-erosion.com/2018/03/14/populism-in-kenyan-presidential-elections-as-a-threat-to-democracy-by-mackenzi-elias-ucla/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2021/12/23/economic-freedom-fighters-populism-transforming-political-dis-course-in-south-africa-eff-anc/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://jacobin.com/2023/04/muhammadu-buhari-economic-policy-nigeria-all-progressives-congress-neoliberalism-development>

<sup>5</sup> <https://qz.com/africa/2173650/new-wave-of-anti-colonial-populism-sweeps-francophone-africa>

- There is growing apprehension about the liberal democratic model as practiced in West Africa and Africa but the region is not attracted to the Rwandan model because there is seldom one strong man to push things around.
- The new generation of highly educated, tech-savvy youths with global connections hold the potential for taking and determining the course of leadership in West Africa. Youths are not prepared to sacrifice the rights and freedoms that come with democracy.
- Human rights, elections and accountability are important as is the delivery of public goods.



## Key Issues

The following are some key issues deducible from the observations laid out above:

- i) Democracy embodies universal principles such as self-determination, protection from oppression, and the opportunity for meaningful participation in decision-making processes, reflecting the innate human desire for autonomy, security, and participation in governance.
- ii) Democracy and development are inherently intertwined, with no real distinction between voice and value. There is a fundamental agreement that democracy should serve the majority's well-being.
- iii) Development has often been neglected in discussions surrounding democracy in West Africa. It may have been assumed but it was not a part of the conversation during the transition in the 1990s.
- iv) The historical background and complexities are crucial for understanding liberal democracy in West Africa.
- v) The rise of coups reflects a protracted struggle between democratic advancements and reversals. Generally, military coups reflect the failure of democratic governance in West Africa.
- vi) Internal and external threats to democracy including the absence of democratic norms, economic influences, and authoritarian legacies combine to precipitate the failure of democracy in West Africa to propel development.
- vii) Decline in state capacity, growth of populist movements, and shrinking civic space hamper democratic progress.
- viii) Women's participation is hindered by political violence, biases, and lack of political will, necessitating holistic approaches for gender-sensitive reforms.
- ix) Uncertainty resulting from the absence of jobs and lack of social safety nets prevents youths from effectively contributing to democratic governance.
- x) Technology-driven activism faces challenges in translating online engagement into tangible political change.
- xi) Lack of accountability in governance (branches of government) and fragmentation within civil society pose significant challenges.

- xii) Authoritarian legacies within ECOWAS states undermine efforts towards democratic governance.
- xiii) Military efforts, as exemplified by their presence across all states in Nigeria have had limited success, suggesting that military interventions alone are insufficient for fostering development.

The highlighted key issues show the link as well as the disconnect between democracy and development in West Africa. It also lays out key historical and contemporary issues associated with the links between democracy and development in the region. Challenges identified as a part of these issues allude to the importance of collective action to strengthen democracy and ensure that participatory governance seamlessly fosters development.

## Possible Way Forward

Contributions during the convening resulted in a call for democracy and development to be organically linked, as mutually reinforcing aspects of society. Below are some specific recommendations:

- i) To improve the status quo, there is a need to organically connect democracy and development by embracing both developmental democracy and democratic development. An
- ii) approach that prioritizes both the delivery of tangible improvements in people's lives and the democratization of decision-making processes, emphasizing the need for simultaneous progress in both areas.
- iii) There is a need to domesticate codes and standards on the African continent like the African Charter on Democracy Elections and Governance (ACDEG), and ensure the implementation of accountability through mechanisms such as the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM).
- iv) Intellectuals and experts on governance and development in the West African sub-region have a role to play in rethinking democracy and offering recommendations for improvement.
- v) There is a pressing necessity for civil society to shift its attention towards engaging with rural communities instead of solely concentrating on inaccessible political elites.
- vi) Efforts should be directed toward improving electoral integrity. These should take the form of both preventive and reactive measures to prevent electoral malpractices and punish perpetrators.
- vii) There is a need for effective implementation of the African Charter on Democracy Elections and Governance (ACDEG) to prevent authoritarian takeovers and mitigate the dissatisfaction driving some countries to withdraw from regional blocs. AU and ECOWAS have put in place several frameworks for improving democratic governance in Africa. The challenge now is how to implement the protocols. We need to revisit the terms and sanctions as we have seen that some of them are impossible to implement.
- viii) The private sector's contribution to democracy remains notably inadequate; despite espousing public-private partnership (PPP) principles, genuine investment from this sector is lacking.

- ix) There is a need for holistic approaches that transcend tokenism and address the systemic inequities undermining women's participation in democracy. Specific gender-sensitive policies, robust institutional reforms, and collaborative efforts should be adopted to harness the transformative potential of gender equality in advancing democratic governance and sustainable development across West Africa.
  
- x) Improved youth empowerment programmes should be developed. Efforts should be exerted at educating, orienting and reorienting the youths on the importance of democratic values and active civic engagement, especially in families and communities.



...Promoting Electoral Knowledge, Accountability, and Integrity

## **About The Electoral Forum**

The Electoral Forum is an initiative of The Electoral Hub that brings together resource persons from Election Management Bodies (EMBs) together with other electoral stakeholders to conceptualize solutions to the unique problems facing electoral governance in Nigeria by addressing both the supply (EMBs) and demand (CSOs etc.) sides of electoral governance and services. It is chaired by Professor Bayo Olukoshi. Other members of the Forum include Professor Attahiru Jega, former INEC Chairman and Okechukwu Ibeanu, Hajiya Amina Zakari, and Professor Anthonia Simbine, former INEC National Commissioners. The Forum has been supported by the Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA) and MacArthur Foundation.

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