FRIEDRICH EBERT STIFTUNG

Crisis in West Africa: Challenges and Opportunities on the Road to a New Model for Democracy and Regional Cooperation

29 - 30 November 2023
Dakar, Senegal

NEW APPROACHES TO
COLLECTIVE SECURITY

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Introduction

The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Peace and Security Centre of Competence Sub-Saharan Africa Office organized a regional workshop in Dakar on 29 and 30 November 2023, focussing on the topic of: **Crisis in West Africa: Challenges and Opportunities on the Road to a New Model for Democracy and Regional Cooperation.** The workshop was attended by fifteen participants from Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali, Niger, and Senegal.

In his welcome address, Regional Director Philipp Goldberg expressed the interest of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in supporting such initiatives, which are fully in line with its mandate to promote democracy and the rule of law. The regional workshop provided an opportunity for experts to discuss the issues and challenges facing West Africa in terms of democracy and governance against a backdrop of recurring asymmetric threats, democratic and institutional setbacks, and global geopolitics placing the African continent in the midst of a struggle for power and influence between the superpowers.

The event also explored the current opportunities for rebuilding a strong and effective regional model for democracy, with a view to reversing these major trends. The workshop proceedings allowed participants to formulate appropriate and feasible strategic recommendations with a view to strengthening regional integration, based on lessons learned.

I. Background

West Africa is riven by a multitude of crises that are adversely affecting its political and security stability as well as the regional integration process. These crises also have a negative impact on democracy building and the rule of law in the countries of the sub-region.

For several years, the security situation has been deteriorating at an unprecedented rate due to a combination of factors including heightened social, economic, and climatic vulnerability, community conflicts, the rise of jihadist movements, the structural fragility of West African states and a resurgence in crime. The deterioration in security is also taking place in a geopolitical context marked by changes in strategic alliances and a migratory crisis.

The security responses developed by national governments, the United Nations and external players have shown their limitations. Terrorist groups have extended their geographical scope and developed new modes of operating. Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and northern Nigeria, particularly the areas surrounding the Lake Chad Basin and the 'three-borders' region, are the epicentre for the deployment of jihadist groups in the Sahel and West Africa, which are attempting to infiltrate and destabilize several countries in the Gulf of Guinea area.

The region is also experiencing serious democratic setbacks, with constitutional changes being made to push through three consecutive presidential terms and manipulate the electoral process. These practices have considerably weakened the rule of law and democratic process in the region. The resurgence of coups d'état in some countries in the region can be largely explained by the persistence of such practices alongside the continuing security crisis, which has significantly undermined the ability of the defence and security forces (DSFs) to provide security for the population and ensure that governments are able to exercise their sovereign powers throughout their national territory.

The combination and persistence of these multifaceted crises have exposed the limitations of our post-colonial states, which, after 60 years of independence, have failed to transform West African societies, build strong, inclusive institutions and place their citizens at the heart of governance. In most cases, the post-colonial states in West Africa are governed by repressive, violent, patrimonial regimes with limited legitimacy. To a certain extent, they are an extension of the colonial state, with the same persistent defects. Attempts to build democracy and the rule of law are thwarted by these deep-seated trends, which persist in the overwhelming majority of countries in the region.

These crises have also had a negative impact on the regional integration process and weakened the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which is finding it difficult to enforce its political and legal mechanisms when the constitutional order breaks down in one of its Member States, or to assume full responsibility for collective security in the sub-region.

II. Workshop Proceedings

The workshop was held face-to-face with two remote presentations. It began with an introductory presentation followed by four panels and a concluding session (general summary of the workshop).

Introductory Presentation

The introductory presentation addressed the following topic: **'What is the Current State of Democracy and Governance in West Africa?'**. To answer that question, the general facilitator attempted to analyse the dynamics affecting the democracy and governance environment in the sub-region. Emphasis was placed on the existence of a number of crises (see above), as well as their overlap and geographical spread. These crises affect the social fabric, institutions, and the ability of governments to regulate and provide basic social services to the population.

Since the end of the Cold War, the development of democracy in the sub-region has shown contrasting trends. Peaceful changes of government have taken place in countries such as Cabo Verde, Senegal, Ghana, Nigeria, and Liberia. Elections are held regularly in most of the countries of the sub-region.

Political and trade union pluralism is recognized in most countries and the private media sector is developing. Civil society organizations are being organized and developed within a legal framework that guarantees their rights and recognizes their usefulness in building democracy and the rule of law. Civil society is contributing to the democratic debate and is attempting to create an autonomous space in which it can act as a counter-power, with more or less mixed results, depending on the country.

However, the progress achieved has been accompanied by setbacks and weaknesses, as can be seen in the numerous political crises in countries such as Guinea Bissau, Guinea, Mali, and Burkina Faso. Political systems in West Africa are not always stable. They give rise to crises that are symptomatic of the precarious state of democracy. When crises break out, it is difficult to find a lasting solution, which is why they keep recurring. As a result, recurring political crises can be seen in almost every country in the region, particularly around the issues of constitutional change, elections, term limits for the President of the Republic, the redistribution of wealth, and social discrimination. Worse still, we are witnessing the militarization of politics and society in countries faced with violent extremism. This considerably restricts individual and collective freedoms, in addition to impeding the proper running of government institutions, since most of these countries have experienced coups. Authoritarianism is taking hold and the prospects of a return to constitutional order are receding by the day. This is a source of tension between the countries concerned and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which, despite the sanctions it has imposed on those countries to ensure a return to constitutional order, is unable to enforce the legal and political framework it has laid down to promote democracy, good governance and the rule of law in West Africa and ensure collective security in the sub-region.

Four Panel Discussions

Four panels were organized. For each theme, experts, practitioners, and researchers explored topics relating to governance, democracy, the rule of law, and regional integration. The themes of the panels were as follows:

- **Panel 1:** The Decline of Democracy in West Africa and Political and Security Instability: A Causal Diagnosis?
- **Panel 2:** Electoral and Institutional Crisis and Third Presidential Terms in West Africa: Obstacles to the Development of Democracy
- **Panel 3:** Limitations of Regional Responses in Strengthening and Safeguarding Democracy and the Rule of Law in West Africa
- **Panel 4:** The Role of International Organizations in Strengthening Democracy and Stability in West Africa.

Each panel pursued a specific objective through guidance questions that focussed debate and reflection on specific points.

The ideas developed during the panels can be boiled down to the following three points: tools for understanding and analyzing the current state of democracy and governance in West Africa, key ideas that emerged from this analysis and, finally, recommendations put forward for overcoming the current crisis.

III. Tools for Analyzing and Understanding the Crisis of Democracy and Governance in West Africa

The panellists submitted several analytical and comparative tools to deepen our understanding of the crises of democracy and governance in West Africa. The suggested methodological approach was designed to avoid generalizations on the one hand, and to provide guidelines for heuristic interpretation and analysis on the other. The analytical tools include the following:

Comparative Approaches

This approach highlighted the contrasts between the implementation of democracy and good governance in West Africa by comparing different countries, particularly in terms of institution building, citizen protection, political change following free and transparent elections, respect for the rule of law, and so on. Countries such as Cabo Verde and Ghana are strengthening their democracies, while countries where coups d'état and military government are making a comeback are experiencing serious setbacks and reversals in the establishment of the rule of law and the safeguarding of individual and collective freedoms. In the same vein, the panellists highlighted the wide range of political and legal regimes in West Africa. The Nigerian model, with a presidential system that grants broad powers to the Senate and Congress and a high degree of decentralization at the level of the states, is different from the Senegalese model, which is marked by hyper-presidentialism.

The comparative approach has shown that democracy has a historical dimension. Every democracy is rooted in a specific historical and social context, which is why there is no universal model for democracy. Democracy is the product of the history of a people, its culture, its social struggles, and more.

Indicators of Decline

A suggestion was made to use indicators of decline to assess the state of democracy and governance in West Africa. Each indicator provides a qualitative or quantitative measurement of the degree of deterioration of the situation it describes. This approach has been used mainly to analyse the current situation in the Sahel countries. The proposed indicators of decline include the following:

- The security situation: this indicator measures the percentage of the national territory affected by violence from extremist groups. In Mali, for example, almost 60% of the country is affected by the security crisis.
- Social inequalities: this indicator measures the degree of poverty in the country. In most countries in the sub-region, poverty affects over a third of the population.
- Interference by foreign powers: the presence of foreign troops in the country and their involvement in fighting armed groups.
- The presence of separatist movements: the existence of separatist groups that use violence to challenge the unitary state.
- Malfunctioning of the justice system: In recent years, several countries in the sub-region have seen the collapse of their justice system due to heavy interference by the executive in its activities, undermining its credibility.

- The republican nature of the army: recurring coups d'état over a given period. In Niger, there have been 7 coups or attempted coups over the past two decades. In Mali there have been 3 coups since 2011, and in Burkina Faso there have been 4 coups since 2014. There have been no coups in Cabo Verde or Senegal.
- Competition for power is valued over educating the population and party members with a view to building a political and democratic culture and responsible citizenship.
- The low level of education in the population: this is a reflection of the level of illiteracy in the country, especially in rural areas. Analyses show that the literacy rate in the Sahel countries is below the continental average. With the closure of several schools in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, the literacy rate in these countries is dropping. Armed groups recruit their members mainly from rural areas where education levels are low.

Corruption

Corruption is endemic in West Africa. All sectors of national life are affected by this scourge, as is regularly shown by UNODC and Transparency International reports on the scope of the phenomenon. Corruption is a real problem that can no longer be ignored. It is a massive trend that can destroy societies and states. The more it grows, the more it threatens democracy, because it distorts and undermines the cornerstones of democracy: transparency, accountability, equality among citizens, and the neutrality of the administration. It should be noted that the most unstable countries in the sub-region are also among the most corrupt on the continent.

Militarization of Politics and Society

For nearly a decade now, the fight against terrorism and violent extremism in the Sahel has been accompanied by an ongoing process of militarization. We are increasingly seeing massive deployments of troops and weapons in the Sahel.

For the moment, this trend has produced mixed results on the ground, as it has not succeeded in destroying the operational capabilities of the terrorist groups, and the DSFs are struggling to contain them. The focus on security alone appears to have shown its limits, and many are now arguing that the emphasis should be placed on preventing violent extremism and, above all, on providing basic services to the population, such as water, health, and education, opening up access to isolated regions, and ensuring greater social justice. A security approach based on an overzealous fight against terrorism to the detriment of these issues is doomed to failure and will ultimately compromise the government of the countries concerned.

Ultra-liberalism

The countries of the sub-region are increasingly adopting policies inspired by ultra-liberalism, with limited investments in basic social services, privatizations that favour multinationals, and government withdrawal from several key sectors vital to the well-being of the population, such as water, electricity, and telecommunications. Such policies tend to accentuate social inequalities and create distance between the government and vulnerable segments of society, which serve as breeding grounds for armed groups in the Sahel and the other countries in the sub-region.

Recurrent Electoral Crises

Elections play an important role in a democratic system because they allow power to be delegated to elected representatives and institutions. However, in most countries in the sub-region, the electoral process, the organization of elections and the announcement of their results are the focus of recurrent disputes. A number of countries in the sub-region are engaged in permanent

electoral campaigns, with disputes increasingly emerging both upstream and downstream of the electoral process. This is symptomatic of the vulnerability of their political systems. It is important to break away from this trend by placing the organization of elections in the hands of bodies that are independent from the executive and adopting consensual rules to manage the electoral process, while strengthening the independence of the judiciary, abiding by ECOWAS provisions on the subject, and refraining from changing the rules of the electoral game on the eve of the polls. This situation clearly illustrates the weaknesses of the region's countries in stabilizing electoral issues and, ultimately, breaking out of the 'electoral ghetto' and avoiding 'political apathy' (Finley 2003)[1] at a time when the needs of youth and women in terms of education and employment are massive.

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[1] Finley, M (2003): Démocratie antique et démocratie moderne, Paris, Petite bibliothèque Payot

IV. Key Messages from the Workshop

The presentations and debates highlighted a number of key ideas, including the following:

Limitations of the Post-Colonial State

States lie at the heart of democracy building and the promotion of good governance. They need to be strategically oriented, endogenous, efficient, legitimate, and firmly rooted in the culture and history of their people. The post-colonial regimes that govern the countries of the sub-region fail to embody these qualities and, in practice, are moving further away from them by the day. In most cases, they are distinguished by their hyper-presidentialism, extroversion, patrimonial management of power, use of violence to repress opponents, manipulation of the justice system, and more. These states are also highly vulnerable to exogenous shocks such as COVID 19 and the war in Ukraine. The debates highlighted the fact that such states are unable to consolidate their democracies or meet the basic needs of their populations and communities. State reform in West Africa has become a categorical imperative.

Democratic Values and the Promotion of Consensus

Values are a fundamental dimension of democracy. While democracy is a means of securing and safeguarding power, it must be based on compliance with the ground rules and fundamental values. The commitment to standards and political ethics is not always effective in most countries in the sub-region. Democracy is manipulated by a political class bent on holding on to power come what may. The bottom line is that there are more democrats motivated by convenience than by conviction (Bourmaud: 1997).[2] This is one of the main weaknesses of democracy in West Africa

and the Sahel, which face multiple political and geopolitical challenges.

The conquest of power is founded on the confrontation of ideas and programmes and on electoral competition. This is an essential dimension of democracy. However, the quest for power does not represent the full scope of democracy, which constantly calls for a strong commitment to its ideals on the part of its citizens. This quest transcends party allegiances and requires a measure of consensus between the political players and the population.

Consensus needs to be promoted in our countries. Consensus is important because it allows us to build the foundations of a peaceful democracy over time, and to see what makes sense across the spectrum. It allows us to identify the points on which collective efforts are required to firmly anchor democracy in society, especially when society is experiencing crises and tensions, as is currently the case in most of the countries of West Africa and the Sahel.

Stepping Up Decentralization and Regional Planning

Decentralization needs to be taken further, because democracy is also embodied by the government, which operates at both central and local levels. Decentralization is a tool for transferring powers to local authorities, which are managed by bodies elected by universal suffrage. By devolving power to local authorities, governments can become closer to their citizens. Local authorities enjoy a high degree of management

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2   Bourmaud, D (1997) : La Politique en Afrique, Paris, Montchrestien

autonomy, enabling them to carry out development initiatives in keeping with local realities. This trend is growing in many West African countries such as Ghana and Senegal. However, it is more advanced in federal states such as Nigeria. Nigeria's states and local authorities have numerous prerogatives in the area of local taxes, which is not the case in unitary states such as Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, or Senegal. Without their own internal resources and significant financial transfers from the centre to the periphery, it will be very difficult for local authorities to manage the powers transferred to them by the central government.

The time has also come to reflect on a better way of articulating decentralization with regional planning. Because land-use planning is the basis for determining a local authority's needs in terms of human and economic resources and infrastructure to be planned in the short and medium term, a decentralization policy goes hand in hand with a land-use planning policy. Land-use planning data can also be used to rationally envisage the creation of development hubs within a country.

Finally, the more decentralized a country is, the more local governance develops, because the conditions for effective citizen participation exist at grassroots level, unlike in most Sahelian and West African countries where everything is concentrated in the capital.

Emergence of a New Leadership

The crises besetting the political and democratic processes in West Africa throw the quality of leadership into sharp relief. Given the scale of the economic, political, environmental, social, and security challenges at hand, the responses proposed by governments in most cases fall short of people's expectations or fail to take their interests into account. In specific cases, such as the issue of a third presidential term, some countries in the sub-region have experienced dissonance

between the incumbent president's desire to retain power and the imperative need to uphold the constitution and preserve the social peace.

Strengthening Gains in Regional Integration

ECOWAS has been engaged in a process of regional integration for several decades. Despite its limitations, this process has produced significant results that should be consolidated, particularly in terms of free movement of people and goods, harmonization of public policies, collective security and so on. The constitutional breakdowns that have taken place in certain countries in the sub-region have created sharp tensions between these countries and the sub-regional body, which is incapable of enforcing its mechanisms with regard to governance and democracy. Today, the unity and cohesion of ECOWAS are threatened by the emergence within it of a bloc of states that refuse to implement its decisions, particularly on the return to constitutional order following coups d'état. What is more, ECOWAS is unable to reach unanimous agreement on the enforcement of its own decisions. The sanctions taken against Niger after the coup d'état against President Bazoum, especially the decision to resort to military intervention, did not meet with unanimous approval within ECOWAS itself. This precarious situation should serve as an opportunity for the organization to reinvent itself and adapt its mechanisms and its legal and political framework to an ever-changing environment. (See recommendations below.)

A Return to Authoritarianism is not the Solution

The crisis of democracy and governance in West Africa has taken a new turn in the last five years, with the resurgence of coups d'état. There have been 6 coups in this part of the continent over the period. The military regimes that are currently being put in place promise to enhance gover-

nance, democracy, and security and to restore national sovereignty. The support of part of the population for these military regimes is due, to a large extent, to their rejection of the ruling political class, which uses the state for its own ends and has turned democracy into a 'multi-partite system within a democracy', but which had remained 'a dish whose aroma people could only savour without ever being able to taste it'.[3] However, a return to military authoritarianism is no guarantee of the restoration of democracy or good governance. The use of force and arbitrary action against the people and their political opponents show that these regimes are far from being consistent with democratic principles, and that the militarization of politics and society leads to authoritarianism and excessive violence. To get back to the fundamentals of democracy and good governance, citizens must be placed at the heart of all political endeavours and political power must be transferred through universal suffrage.

Advancement of Youth and Women

In West Africa, youth makes up the largest segment of society. 70% of the population is under 35. The West African population, estimated at more than 350 million in 2023, is set to double by 2050. This unprecedented demographic growth will pose tremendous political, economic, social, and environmental challenges, among others. It will require radical changes in governance, as well as in the design and implementation of public policies to improve access to basic public services, literacy, job creation, and the structural transformation of national and local economies. Youth must be at the heart of development policies and national politics.

Women, for their part, are increasingly gaining a foothold in political life in terms of representation in institutions such as government and parliament, not to mention at local authority level. To strengthen their representation, several countries have passed gender parity legislation. These are significant steps forward, but they have not produced all the expected results, particularly in terms of leadership. However, there is a political will in several countries in the region to promote the role of women in democracy. This process is likely to take time because of certain social and political constraints linked to the place of women in contemporary African societies.

The workshop also highlighted the importance of traditional legitimacies in social regulation in several countries in the sub-region, and the need to involve them more closely in the construction of pluralist and democratic societies that take account of their peoples' history and traditions.

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3 Rahmane Idrissa : Stagnations trentenaires : https://rahmane. substack.com/p/les-stagnations-trentenaires.

V. Recommendations

The workshop adopted a number of recommendations, including the following:

Recommendations to the national authorities of the sub-region:

- Ban the third presidential term, which is a source of political and social destabilization. 'Made-to-measure' constitutional amendments should be banned in Africa because they undermine democracy and governance.

- Strengthen the culture of democracy by promoting civic education for the citizens who will be at the heart of the social and political transformations needed for democracy and good governance to flourish.

- Redesign public policies to enhance social inclusion and combat vulnerability, corruption, and poor governance.

- Promote and strengthen political dialogue with a view to building a broad consensus on the fundamental issues shaping the life of the nation and avoid solo initiatives that can divide and fracture the government and civil society.

- Apply a strict separation of powers, in particular between the Executive and the Judiciary, with a view to eliminating the use of the justice system to gag the opposition and political opponents.

- Strengthen the independence of the justice system.

- Promote a free and independent press.

Recommendations to ECOWAS:

- Review the legal framework governing conflicts, governance, elections, and the rule of law within the ECOWAS region with a view to adapting it to the current context.

- Raise awareness of the instruments and mechanisms for the promotion of democracy and good governance with a view to increasing their ownership by the people.

- Produce an annual progress report on the implementation of community policy – particularly with regard to democracy and the promotion of the rule of law – and disseminate it widely among the general public and decision-makers.

- Harmonize legislation throughout the ECOWAS region on the fight against transnational crime and organized crime.

- Promote the creation of regional training schools with a view to enhancing regional integration through universities and strengthening the sense of belonging to a space of sharing and solidarity.

- Strengthen leadership in the implementation of programmes and projects to bolster the implementation of public policies aimed at strengthening good governance in the member countries.

- Build a sense of ownership and commitment in the population through concrete actions on the ground; the dividends of integration must be tangible.

- Accept the rulings of the ECOWAS Court of Justice and sanction states that withdraw from the jurisdiction.

- Improve intergenerational relations by informing youth about political developments in the sub-region and organizing forums for exchanges between youth and the elders who have helped to consolidate democracy and the rule of law in the sub-region.

- Increase civil society involvement, particularly in the revision of ECOWAS Protocol A/SP1/12/01 on Democracy and Good Governance, Supplementary to the Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeep-

ing, and Security.

- Closely involve civil society organizations, including women's and youth organizations, in the process of revising and consolidating conflict prevention, management, and resolution mechanisms, taking into account their concerns and vision for the promotion of peace and democracy within ECOWAS.
- Promote greater ownership of ECOWAS objectives and achievements by the people, which would help to dispel the image of an ECOWAS of Heads of State disconnected from the realities of the people, while enhancing the legitimacy of its peace and security initiatives in the sub-region.
- Strengthen the protection of civilians throughout the ECOWAS territory, especially in countries where coups are taking place.
- Reform ECOWAS with a view to adapting it to the political and social upheavals underway in the sub-region and follow up on the initiatives undertaken since 2013 to update the various legal and political instruments.
- Boost regional solidarity to maintain cohesion and unity within the organization.

- Foster 'preventive diplomacy' by supporting upstream crisis prevention.

Recommendations to the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung:
- Continue to support political and civic education initiatives for civil society and researchers on the promotion of good governance and the rule of law.

Recommendations for Technical and Financial Partners (TFPs):
- Align development aid with the needs of stakeholders in the sub-region (governments, civil society, ECOWAS, etc.) in keeping with the Paris Declaration on development aid.
- Ensure the coordination and alignment of the various support strategies for the Sahel and West Africa by giving ECOWAS a leading role in coordination.
- Avoid conflicts of interest between the TFPs and ECOWAS on the one hand, and between the TFPs and ECOWAS Member States on the other, particularly in terms of politics and conflict resolution.

Conclusion

The workshop provided a forum for high-level discussions between actors from a variety of backgrounds. It brought together researchers and practitioners to discuss the issues of democracy, the rule of law, and regional integration in West Africa. This symbiosis provided an opportunity to examine and compare current experiences, the multifaceted crises that are sweeping the sub-region, and the challenges that need to be met in order to stabilize the sub-region and overcome its fragility, with a view to building long-term democratic models that reflect the needs of the people, their history and the geo-political issues of the day, as well as the issue of regional integration.

Significant strides could be made towards the achievement of those goals by implementing the foregoing recommendations and taking into account the lessons learned over the past two decades with regard to the consolidation of democracy and good governance in West Africa.