



Centre for Democracy & Development
Centre pour la démocratie et le développement

RESEARCH REPORT



WEST AFRICA IN 2023:

Votes and volatility

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2022 was a turbulent year in West Africa, especially its Sahel region, with coups d'état, jihadists uprising and the departure of the Barkhane force from Mali. Non-state violent armed groups have grown and expanded to become a regional threat. Security challenges, along with economic and social stresses, contributed to an erosion of public confidence in state institutions and even regional organisations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The democratic recession observed in Guinea, Mali, and Burkina Faso has propelling the regional body into complex political crises that it has struggled to manage effectively.

In 2023, West Africa faces a multidimensional set of challenges: high risk elections, economic inflation, prevailing insecurity led by jihadi groups, shrinking civic space and democratic recession. Across the region, hard-won progress in press freedom and civil liberties are in decline with journalists arbitrarily detained and disinformation is on the rise. Addressing these challenges in the context of economic stagnation will be a significant challenge.

DEMOCRATIC DECISIONS

In 2023, six African countries including three in West Africa—Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Liberia—will go to the polls to elect presidents. The Nigerian general elections are being held against the backdrop of major security challenges in the country, with concerns also raised about how politics may exacerbate these risks. The election is important for a region which has seen democratic reversals in Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso where constitutions were suspended following military coups. Nigeria's ability to hold credible elections will also be a litmus test of its capability to provide regional leadership on major projects such as a common currency, economic integration and the fight against terrorism.

In Sierra Leone, general elections will take place in June. This will be its fifth general election since the end of civil conflict in 2002



and the economy is likely to be a central issue as incumbent President Julius Maada Bio seeks a second, and final, term in office. In neighbouring Liberia, the ability of the election management body to oversee free and fair general elections in October is already in question. Civil society groups have expressed concerns that the November 2022 digital census, which will be used to carve out new electoral constituencies ahead of general election, did not meet basic international standards.¹

Credible elections in Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Liberia could set the tone for a renewed commitment to electoral democracy in West Africa where military coups and unconstitutional term extensions have stained the democratic gains of the past decade. Already, Benin started the year by successfully holding peaceful legislative elections on 8 January. Despite low voter turnout of 36% the election saw effective participation by political opposition, which had boycotted the previous elections in 2019.² While the main opposition party, the Democrats, won just 25% of the seats and raised concerns about the integrity of the ballot, its return to parliament represents an opportunity for democratic renewal.

Legislative polls are also scheduled to take place in Guinea Bissau, Togo, and Mali in 2023. The Malian military transitional government is set to hold legislative elections in March even though the persistent security problem does not offer a conducive environment. However, this election, if it is held, will represent a major milestone in the path toward a possible 2024 presidential election during which Colonel Assimi Goita has promised to hand over power to an elected civilian government. In Guinea Bissau, President Umaro Sissoco Embalo dissolved parliament citing corruption and “persistent and insurmountable differences” between parliament and the executive in May 2022.³ Having repelled a coup d’état in February 2022, the election of a new legislature in June, is an important juncture as the country seeks to move toward institutional stability. Whilst in Togo regional elections may allow incumbent President Faure Gnassingbé to further consolidate power. Following a revision of the constitution he will be eligible to stand again in 2025. Having boycotted the 2018 legislative

1. All Africa, All Africa. “Liberia: National Civil Society Council Requests Full Participation in Remaining Census Activities amid Chaotic Recruitment Exercise.” *AllAfrica.com*, October 26, 2022. <https://allafrica.com/stories/202210260099.html>.
2. Abatan, Jeannine Ella. “Will Legislative Elections Put Benin’s Democracy Back on Track?” *ISS Africa*, January 25, 2023. https://issafrica.org/iss-today/will-legislative-elections-put-benins-democracy-back-on-track?utm_source=pocket_reader
3. Reuters. “Guinea-Bissau’s President Embalo Dissolves Parliament, Citing Corruption.” *Reuters*. Thomson Reuters, May 16, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/guinea-bissau-president-embalo-dissolves-parliament-citing-corruption-2022-05-16/>.



polls, the main opposition coalition is largely absent from day-to-day politics, but the December polls can offer an opportunity to build political capital at the local level.

Incumbent leaders' propensity to manipulate constitutions to extend their stay in power remains a threat in West Africa. By revising specific clauses of the constitution during their tenure leaders in countries such as Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea have been able to run and win a third presidential term in recent years. While none of the presidential elections this year have an incumbent seeking an unconstitutional third term, it is crucial that those in their second and last constitutionally allowed term, make it clear that they will not run again. Senegalese President Macky Sall has remained silent on the matter, and with elections scheduled for 2024, this has led to concerns among political opposition and civil society groups.

ECONOMIC STAGNATION AND UNCERTAINTY

In October 2022, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) reported that “global economic activity is experiencing a broad-based and sharper-than-expected slowdown, with inflation higher than seen in several decades”⁴. For 2023, it forecasted that at least one-third of the global economy is likely to slip into recession. For Africa however, the forecast indicated a 3.7% growth representing a 0.1% increase from 2022.⁵ While these figures are encouraging, the West Africa region faces a volatile economic situation because of the continued security crisis. In Mali and Burkina Faso, GDP growth is projected to decline by 1.2%.⁶

Agriculture is a mainstay of these economies, but this sector has been

4. IMF. “World Economic Outlook, October 2022: Countering the Cost-of-Living Crisis.” IMF. Accessed January 13, 2023. <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2022/10/11/world-economic-outlook-october-2022>.

5. Development Reimagined (2023, January 4). The IMF World Economic Outlook: Will African countries see growth in 2023? Development Reimagined. Retrieved January 13, 2023, from <https://developmentreimagined.com/2023/01/04/the-imf-world-economic-outlook-will-african-countries-see-growth-in-2023>

6. Invest Africa “West Africa Outlook.” Invest Africa. Accessed January 13, 2023. <https://www.investafrica.com/invest-africaevents-calendar/west-africa-outlook>.



significantly affected by the prevailing insecurity. In conflict affected rural zones areas many farmers and herders are displaced. This has a direct impact on agriculture and food security. According to UNICEF, in Nigeria alone, nearly 25 million are at risk of facing hunger in 2023, driven in part by insecurity, but also by climate change and rising inflation.⁷

West Africa remains impacted by external shocks such as the fall out of the war in Ukraine and the continued effects of Covid-19 pandemic. Although, globally, inflation is projected to decline from 8.8% in 2022 to 6.5 % in 2023, this is still significantly higher than the 4.7% figure for 2021.⁸ And it is much worse in places like Nigeria, which closed 2022 with inflation at 21.3%, and Ghana which was over 50%.⁹ In such a climate consumer and worker unions, and even ordinary citizens, are likely to stage demonstrations to protest economic hardship. This may cause social unrest or force governments to introduce palliative measures. Already in Togo the government increased the minimum wage in January by nearly 50% to help fight the high cost of living.¹⁰

More positive economic growth trajectories are expected in Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal with the former expected to record GDP growth of 6.5% and latter 8.1% in 2023. Both countries have both enjoyed relative political stability for the last decade. Niger is also projected to see strong growth of 7.3%.¹¹ A rise in the global price for raw materials and a more receptive market for these goods is part of the reason for this projected growth. However, the risk of local currencies continuing to depreciate against the US dollar has impacts on imports that could limit gains made in commodity exports. More than ever there is a strong need for ECOWAS member states to enhance intra-regional trade in line with African Continental Free Trade Area agreement.

7. UNICEF. "25 Million Nigerians at High Risk of Food Insecurity in 2023." UNICEF, January 2023. <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/25-million-nigerians-high-risk-food-insecurity-2023>.

8. IMF. "World Economic Outlook." IMF, January 18, 2023. <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO>.

9. Trading Economics. "Nigeria Inflation Rate December 2022 Data - 1996-2021 Historical - January Forecast." Nigeria Inflation Rate - December 2022 Data - 1996-2021 Historical - January Forecast. Accessed January 30, 2023. <https://tradingeconomics.com/nigeria/inflation-cpi>.

10. Traore, Valerie. "Togo : Le Salaire Minimum (SMIG) Passe DE 35 000 à 52 500 f Soit Une Revalorisation De 50% ." Libre Info, January 4, 2023. <https://libreinfo.net/togo-le-salaire-minimum-smig-passe-de-35-000-a-52-500-f-soit-une-revalorisation-de-50/>.

11. Development Reimagined (2023, January 4). The IMF World Economic Outlook: Will African countries see growth in 2023? Development Reimagined. Retrieved January 13, 2023, from <https://developmentreimagined.com/2023/01/04/the-imf-world-economic-outlook-will-african-countries-see-growth-in-2023>



GEOPOLITICAL DYNAMICS

African leaders will continue to tread carefully in their engagements with global superpowers. The African Union and its Chairperson, Senegalese President Macky Sall, visited both Russia and Ukraine in June 2022 in an attempt to defend its interest of accessing imported goods such as wheat and fertilisers. Sixteen Africa nations, including Mali, Togo, and have abstained from voting for or against United Nations proclamations on the Ukraine–Russia conflict. This abstention is not out of loyalty to one or the other but is primarily driven by *realpolitik* considerations.

The United States (US) will re-engage strongly in the region as it seeks to counter Russia and China influence, and as a follow up to the US–Africa Leaders’ Summit held in December 2022. In 2021, China’s trade with Africa reached a record \$261 billion compared to that of the US which was \$64 billion.¹² Whilst Russia’s engagement in the sub-region largely centres around the provision of security, and with both Mali and now Burkina Faso having told French troops and officials to leave, they could come to play a more integral role in the months ahead. In 2022 France withdrew their Barkhane forces from Mali and cut development aid to the country. In response, Mali banned all civil society groups funded by France and kicked out the French ambassador in Bamako. While there is no evidence of the presence of the Russian mercenaries in Burkina Faso, bilateral relations between Moscow and Ouagadougou are warming up.

REGIONAL TENSIONS

The question of national sovereignty will continue to nurture tensions within and between West African nations in 2023 following on from spats between authorities in Mali and Côte d’Ivoire, and Burkina Faso and Ghana. On 10 July, 49 Ivorian soldiers were arrested at the

¹² Fleck, Anna, and Felix Richter. “Infographic: China - Africa Trade Hits Record Highs in 2021.” Statista Infographics, August 1, 2022. <https://www.statista.com/chart/27880/trade-between-china-and-africa/>.



airport in Bamako with Malian forces alleging that they were on a secret mission to destabilise the country. All of them—bar three female soldiers who were released—were found guilty by a military court, before President Assimi Goita granted them a pardon and repatriated them in January 2023. Mali had previously accused Côte d’Ivoire of being behind ECOWAS’s harsh sanctions following the two coups d’état in August 2020 in May 2021. Tensions between Burkina Faso and Ghana followed a claim made by Ghanaian President Nana Akufo-Addo in December 2022 that Burkina Faso struck a deal with the Russian mercenary group Wagner, a claim the authorities in Ouagadougou vigorously denied. While this diplomatic quarrel was quickly resolved by a strong Ghanaian diplomatic delegation, it is likely to impact trust between the two countries moving forward.

But there is an urgent need for the West African community to strengthen its collaboration and resilience, particularly against violent extremist groups who are expanding their operations from the Sahel to the coast. The Accra Initiative, which was created “to prevent spillover of terrorism from the Sahel and to address transnational organised crime and violent extremism in member countries’ border areas” is a positive development in this regard, but it may face setbacks if it continues to remain reliant on external financing and bilateral disputes between member states continue. Furthermore, the security arrangement of the initiative is still not recognised by the African Union and the initial communication that 2,000 soldiers were to be deployed in Burkina Faso was quickly denied by the Burkinabe authorities. Mali, which has been an observing country since the inception of the initiative in 2017, was absent at the final meetings in November 2022. A failure to effectively involve Mali, which is directly involved in the fight against terrorism, and the lack of engagement with those with experience fending off against terrorism, such as Mauritania and Algeria, risks a stillborn initiative.

ECOWAS has a key role to play, but it will face the difficult task of building back trust between its members to achieve more regional political coherence for a collective action against the pervasive non-state violent extremist groups. Countries who collaborate with Russia will not share security intelligence with those who are still in partnership with France. Meaning that the military leaders in the Sahel, who still largely enjoy popular support domestically, will likely continue to strengthen the relations amongst each other and may drift away from ECOWAS and their traditional western partners as a result. The distrust between West African countries will impact regional efforts to bring back political stability and adherence to democratic principles, a *sine qua non* condition for the much needed economic and social development of the region.



SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE

Concerns for a shrinking civic space across West Africa have grown over the past few years despite the resilience of civil society organisations. There is fear that in 2023, little space will be allowed for grievance driven civil society actions and protest may be met with repression. In Burkina Faso, military leaders have issued an injunction to suspended political parties and civil society organisation from carrying on rallies across the country till further notice. Free speech is also under threat.

In 2022, major foreign media houses such as RFI and France 24 were restricted or banned in Mali and Burkina Faso following a continued degradation of the relationship between France and the military regimes in the two West African nations. Local media and key journalists critical of incumbent leaders are subject to harassment in Senegal. Whilst the internet and social media can offer an alternative space for dissenting voices in the past two years, governments in Burkina Faso, Togo, Nigeria, Mali, and Guinea-Bissau have directed partial or total shutdowns. Niger, Mali, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Togo, and Ghana have all seen the enacting of laws to fight cybercrime and regulate the use of social media in recent years. Concerns that these laws will only be applied to political opponents of the government remain pronounced and although disinformation, in and of itself, can pose a threat to stability in the region, restrictive responses do not offer a long-term solution to the problem, which is likely to grow more prominent in 2023.

CONCLUSION

The 2023 outlook presented in this paper forecasts a challenging year for West Africa. On the economic, political and security fronts the sub-region is enmeshed in a complex quagmire, which requires more collaboration and trust to address; but both are in short supply. Tensions between and within West African nations will reflect divided



loyalties in the increasingly multipolar world, with Russia likely to remain a key player in the insecurity crises in Burkina Faso and Mali. Challenges to democracy as the best system of government are likely to remain but the holding of credible elections, respected by all participants, in Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Liberia – three recent democratic success stories—can help start a democratic rebound. One that civil society groups and other key partners must be willing to get behind.



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