



A CoDA High-Level Dialogue

WEST AFRICA: RISING TO THE CHALLENGE OF CONSOLIDATING DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

CONCEPT NOTE

Olusegun Obasanjo Presidential Library (OOPL)
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I Introduction

In the context of Africa's entry in the 1990s into what scholars have described as the global third wave of democratisation, West Africa very quickly emerged as one of the most promising and exciting theatres of electoral pluralism and governance reform on the continent. With single party and military rule discredited, the sub-region experienced an effervescence of electoral pluralism which very quickly transformed its reputation - for a period at least - from being the coup d'état belt of Africa to a flourishing example of democratic transitions underpinned by vibrant multiparty competition. However, recently, the apparent progress registered across West Africa in driving the transition from authoritarian regimes to elected forms of governance has come under severe strain and is, in several cases, even in the process of being reversed. This development has generated concerns about the future of democratic governance in the sub-region, and the concerns have, in turn, broached upon the extent to which the models of democratisation embraced by African countries in general have been adapted to the demands of context and history, and are relevant to the pressing task of delivering a long overdue structural transformation of the continent. These questions are at the heart of a proposed high-level policy dialogue focused on the West African sub-region.

West Africa Returns to Multiparty Politics

As with the other parts of the African continent, West African countries acceded to independent nationhood on the basis of multiparty electoral systems. Not too long after, however, these multiparty systems were faced with a welter of challenges and very quickly gave way to single party regimes and military rule. The authoritarian political order that came to pervade much of the sub-region between 1960 and 1990 may have been justified on grounds, inter alia, of consolidating national unity and stability, and accelerating socio-economic development. However, in reality, with a succession of military coups almost becoming the order of the day, political instability and violence became almost a defining characteristic feature of West Africa. It was out of its dubious reputation for chronic instability and authoritarianism that the sub-region emerged in the period from the early 1990s onward to begin a new era of multiparty political competition. The transition to electoral pluralism was to spread very quickly across the sub-region so that by the end of the 1990s, most of the countries were back under elected government.

In the initial years of the rebirth of political pluralism and competitive elections across West Africa, some significant gains were registered which raised hopes that the sub-region may be turning the corner and beginning to consolidate a system of democratic governance. In addition to the opening up of the political space to accommodate multiple political parties and facilitate participation of the civil society, there was also a revamping of constitutions to enshrine the rule of law and the freedom of movement, association, and speech for citizens. Media reforms adopted resulted in the revitalisation, pluralisation, and expansion of the sector, providing citizens with greater choice in the sourcing of information even as the impact of the global digital age created various social media platforms for engagement. Opposition political parties and figures were able to organise openly and, in several countries, even succeeded in winning elections. The alternation of power between ruling and opposition parties that became routine in several countries also fed into the adoption of constitutional term limits for those elected into high office.

Furthermore, as elections became routine as an integral part of the political culture and calendar of most countries, some of the election management bodies in West Africa also gradually grew in their technical capabilities and professional reputation. Indeed, a few of the election management bodies even became standard bearers of operational autonomy and technological innovation which attracted the respect and interests of others. Voter satisfaction with the overall integrity of elections also seemed to be on the rise in spite of imperfections in the voting system and process. Beyond the efforts at building democratic politics at the country level, member states of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) adopted a 2001 Protocol on Democracy and Governance which took a stand against any and all unconstitutional change of government in West Africa. Additionally, the Protocol made a provision for term limitation, suggesting the gradual emergence of a shared norm among West African countries in favour of democratic governance.

Discontents of Electoral Pluralism

The initial enthusiasm associated with the transitions across West Africa to electoral pluralism was bolstered by some of the early successes registered in carrying out political reforms and organising elections. However, as elections became routine, many people began questioning the capacity of elected governments to move beyond the facilitation of political competition to delivering concrete and significant welfare and development outcomes for the citizenry.

Given that the transition from an era of political monopoly and authoritarianism to a new period of electoral pluralism and constitutional order happened against the backdrop of a prolonged experience of economic crisis, which exacted huge social costs and took a toll on the wellbeing of the populace, expectation was high that the return to democratic politics would also open the pathway to a broad socio-economic rebirth. However, the delivery of sustained economic growth on a consistent and an inclusive basis has proved to be more elusive than may have been imagined. Poverty and inequality have both persisted and even worsened.

The difficult socio-economic conditions under which West African countries have laboured in trying to promote democratic governance reforms has translated into a growing fatigue with an electoralism that seemed incapable of delivering social and economic dividends. Declines in voter turnout have been the result, especially among younger voters exhibiting an alarming degree of apathy. The generalised state of poverty and insecurity that has festered has served as fertile ground for various insurgent and criminal groups to organise and catalyze widespread insecurity. The problem of insecurity which in most countries began as a domestic challenge was to assume a transnational character across Sahelian West Africa, representing a further source of pressure on democratic governance in the sub-region. Indeed, the problems of insecurity, poverty, inequality, and unemployment have combined in a mutually reinforcing manner to become the Achilles heel of elected government in West Africa, eroding legitimacy and breeding various anti-democratic sentiments.

As if the existing challenges of delivering the dividends of democracy and securing their countries and citizens are not enough, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic both exposed the fragile foundations on which governance has been carried out in much of West Africa and the structural vulnerabilities of the socio-economic and political system to shocks. In a bid to maintain their grip on the political system, there has been a resort by governments to a tightening of political and civic spaces in a manner and direction that challenges the tenets of democratic governance.

In what some have described as “civilian coups”, incumbents in a number of countries have gone the extra mile to dismantle, disorganise, demobilise, and even exile the opposition while consolidating power in the executive arm of government to the detriment of meaningful checks and balances. The civic spaces that had hitherto been opened up are being narrowed even as some liberties have been abridged, in a number of cases under the cover of policies for managing the COVID-19 pandemic. A deterioration in the integrity of elections has also been observed.

The Return of Military Rule

The worsening socio-economic, political, and security situation that has been observed in various West African countries has tested the resilience of civilian governance and the resolve of the populace to surmount the problems within the ambit of existing constitutional order. Discontent arising out of a mass alienation has spilled into the streets and resulted in violent confrontations between incumbent governments and sections of the activist population demanding change. As street protests have spread and persisted, elements of the security services have succumbed to the temptation to take matters into their hands and staged coups to mark the return of the military to power. Mali and Guinea experienced such military coups in 2020 and 2021; in January 2022, the Burkinabe military also toppled the fairly newly re-elected President of the country. An attempt was made to overthrow the elected government in Guinea Bissau in January 2022. There is a legitimate worry that West Africa seems to be marching backwards to an old era of military coups.

When the Malian military coup occurred in 2020, ECOWAS took a very strong stand against the action and demanded a calendar for a speedy return to elected government. This was in addition to an initial position that the transitional government that was to be established had to be led by a civilian, and not a serving military officer. However, the hardline taken by the West African regional economic community did not prove to be a sufficient deterrent to would-be coup makers as military officers in Guinea and Burkina Faso were to subsequently stage their own seizure of power from civilian incumbents. Equally remarkable is the fact that in those countries where the coup was successfully carried out, mass resistance to the unconstitutional/extra-constitutional actions of the military did not happen. If anything, at least on the face of things, sections of the population appear to have welcomed the return of the military. Although there were demonstrations against the successful coups that had taken place, it is clear that a new spectre of military rule is haunting West Africa.

Democracy in Question?

The recent developments in the ECOWAS zone have brought out in sharp relief, and with an urgency, several questions about West African, nay African democratisation that have been bubbling some years but never meaningfully engaged openly. These questions have centred around the overarching issue of what might be wrong not with the idea and ideal of democracy but the model that has been embraced and which has proved challenging to operationalise and master in order to deliver the kinds of progressive change for which citizens are yearning. It is this overarching concern that serves as the motivation for the high-level dialogue designed to bring together a group of West Africans to address a challenge which not only threatens a political regression in the sub-region but which might also threaten the viability of ECOWAS as a regional economic community.

2 Focus of the High Level Dialogue

Within the ambit of the overarching concern that motivated the convening of the dialogue, specific questions which will be addressed by participants in plenary sessions include:

- Democracy in West Africa: Crisis of Design and/or Crisis of Practice
- From Form and Ritual to Substance and Delivery in West African Governance
- Challenges of Sequencing and Interfacing Governance in West Africa: Democracy, Development, and Security
- What Key Messages for ECOWAS on Nurturing Democratic Governance in West Africa?

3 Dates, Format, and Expected Participants

The High Level Dialogue will be held on **28 and 29 March 2022** at the Olusegun Obasanjo Presidential Library (OOPL) in Abeokuta, Ogun State, Nigeria. It will be opened by **H.E. Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, former President of Nigeria and Chair of the Board of Directors, CoDA.** A keynote address will be presented by **H.E. Professor Yemi Osinbajo, Vice-President of Nigeria.** The two-day dialogue is organised by CoDA under strict Chatham House rules and will bring together a total of 40 participants comprising senior political leaders, policy officials, civil society actors, and academics in a joint endeavour to find ways of redressing the discontents of West African democratisation and achieving a democratic reset in the sub-region. These High-level participants will be invited from each West African country in their individual/personal capacity.

For further information, please contact Ms. Souad Aden-Osman, Executive Director, CoDA Secretariat (Email: Aden-Osmans@africa-union.org) or visit www.codafrica.org