



**Coalition for Dialogue  
on Africa (CoDA)**

## **REPORT AND MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS**

**of the CoDA High-Level Dialogue Held on  
28 & 29 March, 2022 at the OOPL, Abeokuta**

# Introduction

1. In the context of recent adverse politico-security developments across West Africa that have manifested as and/or culminated in a spate of military coups d'état in the sub-region, a high-level policy dialogue was convened by the Coalition for Dialogue on Africa (CoDA) with a view to encouraging a focused and solution-oriented reflection on the challenges to and opportunities of democratic sustainability and advancement among ECOWAS member states. The umbrella theme under which the dialogue was convened was: West Africa: Rising to the Challenge of Consolidating Democratic Governance. It took place on 28 and 29 March 2022 at the Olusegun Obasanjo Presidential Library (OOPL) in Abeokuta, Nigeria, and attracted the participation of 40 invitees, mostly all drawn from across West Africa.
2. The dialogue was formally opened with a welcome statement by the former President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, HE Chief Olusegun Obasanjo. The incumbent Vice-President of the Federal of Nigeria, HE Professor Yemi Osinbajo, delivered the keynote address that set the broad tone for the dialogue. Among the 40 high-level West Africans at the dialogue were the former presidents of Nigeria (HE Dr. Goodluck Jonathan), Sierra Leone (HE Dr. Ernest Koroma), and Niger (HE Mahamadou Issoufou, represented by two emissaries).
3. Other participants in the dialogue included the former Vice President of The Gambia, HE Mrs. Fatoumatta Tambajang, a former Deputy Chairperson of the African Union Commission, HE Amb Thomas Quartey Kwesi, former United Nations Under-Secretaries General Abdoulaye Bathily and Abdoulie Janneh, senior officials of the AU Commission and the ECOWAS Commission, former and serving ambassadors, members of parliament, senior academics, heads of think tanks, and business, civil society, women, and youth leaders. Altogether, the participants represented a good mix of practitioners, scholars, diplomats, inter-governmental officials, public intellectuals, representatives of the private sector, legislators, and activists.
4. The invitation-only dialogue was organised around seven substantive sessions. Each session was animated by a panel of lead speakers who, with the support of a facilitator, outlined issues of critical importance pertaining to the sub-theme allocated to them as a prelude to a general discussion by all the invitees. The sessions were structured to allow for an open and frank conversation about the promise and travails of the West African quest to decisively transcend its authoritarian political past and consolidate a stable system of democratic governance that is responsive to the yearnings of its citizens, including the teeming population of young people, the women and girls who comprise half of its population, and minorities of various categories. Strict rules of non-attribution were observed during the dialogue to ensure the openness of the exchanges that took place.

5. Among the sub-themes covered by the dialogue are: Gains and Discontents of Democratisation in West Africa, 1990 - 2022: Practioners' Experiences of What Has Worked, What Hasn't Worked, What Has Really Mattered, and Why?; Unpacking the Crises Buffeting Democratisation in West Africa: Causes, Drivers, and Dimensions; Managing West Africa's Crises of Democratisation (I): Rethinking Design and Practice;(II) Re-Centring Citizen Welfare and Security; (III) Rebuilding State Legitimacy and Capacity; and (IV) Options for Recalibrating ECOWAS Action. The dialogue ended with a wrap-up session during which key messages emanating from the two days of deliberations were collated for follow-up action.
6. Based on the proceedings of the dialogue, the following were the key observations and recommendations that participants adopted for the attention particularly of ECOWAS as the sole West Africa-wide regional economic community and, more generally, other key stakeholders interested in the advancement of a system of democratic governance in the sub-region:
7. West Africa is confronted with a multi-dimensional and inter-connected crisis of democracy, governance, citizenship, security, institutions, and values which demands a concerted and generalised leadership reset and, importantly, the deployment of the requisite political will for achieving the wholesale redress that is called for. Although the crisis has been manifest for a while, recent military coups d'état have combined with worsening extremist violence and a precipitous decline in the living conditions of the populace to both underscore the urgency for action and the need for a radically different approach to managing our affairs.
8. Of immediate importance is for governments across West Africa urgently to invest themselves in an uncompromising manner in delivering the dividends of democracy to the citizenry. These dividends cover a range of concerns, not least among them the socio-economic benefits that are essential for securing a dignified life for the populace. Citizens must see and enjoy the benefits of democracy if they are expected to serve as a bulwark of support for elected government. The enjoyment of democratic dividends by the generality of the people will also ensure that elections do not simply become reduced to very expensive formalistic rituals that are, moreover, increasingly flawed, and which, for all intents and purposes, enrich career politicians whilst impoverishing and marginalising the rest of the populace.
9. Citizen disaffection with elected government in West Africa is exacerbated by unprecedented levels of corruption, abuse of power, the retrenchment of civil liberties and human rights, and an increasing loss of electoral integrity. The resultant loss of confidence in the political process that is underway needs to be reversed urgently and this can be done through a resolve among leaders to honestly interrogate and peer review one another on a continuing basis using all formal and informal mechanisms and instruments at their disposal. The right and capacity of citizens, directly and through autonomous civil society organisations, and an investigative media, to hold leaders at all levels accountable must be upheld and defended at all times in order to save and advance democracy in West Africa.

10. Leadership development and succession planning remain a big gap in the West African effort at democratisation. In redressing this lacuna, ruling and opposition parties have a big responsibility to exercise leadership with self-respect, a sense of public service, and an unflinching commitment to the greater good. Leadership at whatever level that is bereft of values, ethics, and integrity represents as much a source of threat to democratic governance and national stability as any of the other challenges buffeting West African countries at this time.
11. It is equally critical and urgent for leaders to support every necessary step to strengthen and defend the independence, integrity and professionalism of the judiciary and election management bodies. Tendencies to politicise, weaken, and undermine these critical institutions of governance must be condemned for what they represent or portend, as threats to democracy and stable governance. Judicial officials and election managers themselves have a duty to uphold the high standards of impartiality and honesty that their calling demands, doing so with consistency and without fear or favour.
12. Furthermore, across West Africa, parliaments have mostly failed to rise to their oversight duties, caught as they are in a web of complicity with the executive, negligence of their core responsibilities to the populace, and self-gratification on a grand scale. It is imperative to nurture and/or restore the autonomy and credibility of parliaments as the true embodiment of the sovereignty of the people. To this end, necessary steps should be taken to capacitate them for a more robust performance of their oversight role, it being understood that effective and functioning parliaments reassure citizens that their voices and concerns will be heard and taken seriously. Where institutionalised systems of checks and balances function well, citizens are unlikely to be tempted to crave or welcome the takeover of government by the military.
13. While there is no doubt about the undesirability of a return to military rule in West Africa, and indeed anywhere else in Africa, it is equally critical that quick and robust measures are pursued early enough to prevent the conditions that facilitate military interventions from festering to a point of leading to the breakdown of constitutional order. Unacceptable governance practices, including the partisan and self-serving amendment of constitutions to favour the prolongation of incumbents in office, the wanton rigging of elections, the suppression of opposition parties, the muscling of the media, etc, deserve to be tackled and condemned with the same vigour as the military coups that result from serial and egregious bad governance. Much better use can and should be made of ECOWAS early warning mechanisms for taking timely preventive and reactive action.
14. “Constitutional coups” against democracy by elected incumbents must be rejected as much as military coups by disaffected officers in order for the democratic process to progress and consolidate, and for ECOWAS as an inter-governmental organisation not to lose its credibility with the general populace. Silence, indifference, and even tacit support to elected governments that go astray under whatever guise or in whatever form are often treated by disgruntled citizens in the countries concerned as complicity by ECOWAS with misrule. The disconnect that is growing between citizens of West Africa and their regional economic community needs urgently to be nipped in the bud and this can only be done by ensuring that citizen concerns are taken seriously as and when they emerge. This can be done even whilst respecting the boundaries set by the inter-governmental nature of the Community.

15. The ongoing review of the ECOWAS protocol on democracy and governance should be undertaken to ensure that preventive action can be more effectively mobilised against acts and actions, whether by omission and/or commission, that could lead to the breakdown of democratic governance and constitutional rule. To this end, clear benchmarks should be established for triggering early preventive action. The imperative for this resides in the urgent need to stem the unfortunate but growing perception that ECOWAS, on account of deficits in its preventive capacity and will to act proactively, has been reduced to a partisan club of leaders whose actions are informed primarily by self-preservation. All of the diplomatic acumen required to ensure that the revised protocol meets the acceptance of all ECOWAS member states should be invested as a sure guarantee that it is uniformly and equally owned by them.
16. Amidst the ongoing security challenges in West Africa, and in order to avoid a situation where the sub-region will be turned into a playground for big and medium powers competing for geo-political advantage, ECOWAS should urgently rediscover its role and place as the frontline inter-state driver of security and stability among the member states. The fight against violent extremism is one in which the Community should be more involved, doing so through the kinds of collective action that saw the emergence and successes of ECOMOG. Violent extremism in different forms and shapes represents a primary threat to democracy and the rejection of unconstitutional changes of government triggered wholly or partially by the security crisis bedeviling West Africa should not becloud that. To win the battle against insecurity is to win the struggle to secure democracy. To defend democracy meaningfully, investments must be made in securing the citizenry and, in so doing, upholding the legitimacy of the state.
17. To live up to the promise of ECOWAS as a Community of the people, and not a club of leaders, measures aimed at accelerating the pace of social and economic integration need to be pursued as a priority. The Community's presence and benefits should not only or mainly be felt in periods of crisis or when sanctions are imposed but on an ongoing basis. In this regard, special attention should be paid to the concerns of women and the youth, and the imperative of ensuring their participation and representation in the governance processes and institutions of the countries of the sub-region.
18. Every effort required to safeguard the autonomy, integrity, and focus of ECOWAS as Africa's leading and most advanced regional economic community should be invested at a time when extra-continental powers, including erstwhile colonial actors, are tempted to seek either to "weaponise" the organisation for their own narrow geo-political ends and/or subvert it altogether. Taking full cognisance of the renewed tensions in the international system, it is important that ECOWAS pays close attention to the importance of preserving solidarity among its members, doing so with self-reminders about the founding ideals of the organisation as an inter-governmental body designed to promote collective socio-economic progress and security for the peoples of the sub-region.

**Done in Abeokuta, Nigeria.**

**29 March 2022**