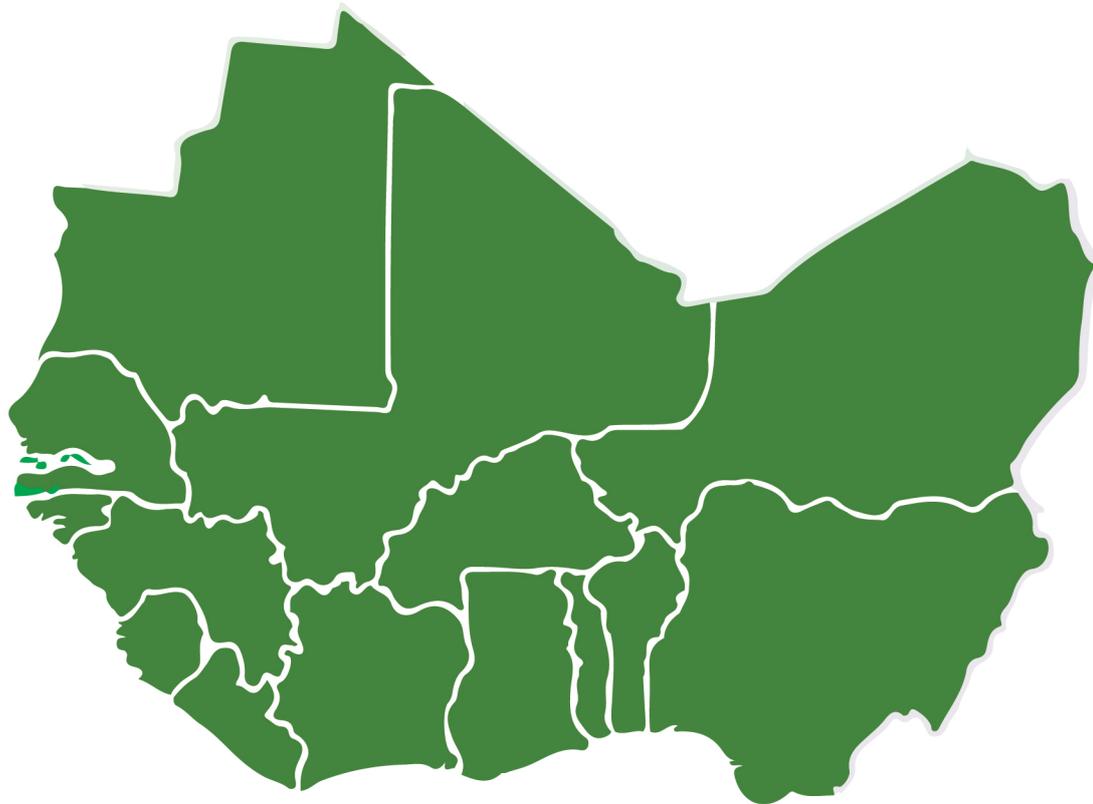


The Media, Press Freedom and the Democratic Recession in West Africa - Trends, Challenges and Recommendations



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Recession in West Africa: Trends, Challenges and
Recommendations**

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1.0 Introduction

In spite of all its shortcomings, democracy remains the most acceptable form of governance that guarantees open society, human rights, rule of law, transparency and accountability, press freedom and inclusion of citizens in policy choices.

Until recently, West Africa was regarded as a bastion of democracy in Africa. Starting from 1991 when Benin set the pace by electing its government through the ballot box, all 16 countries in the subregion were to various degrees, functioning democracies by 2015. However, from the 2020s, democratic challenges that countries in the subregion experienced degenerated, shaping the 2020s into the era of serious democratic recession for the region. The rollback has been characterised by incumbency adventurism in which sitting presidents tweak laws to prolong their stay in power beyond constitutional term limits, clampdown on dissenting voices resulting in shrink civic spaces and recorded cases of coup d'états and military takeovers.

The media and media practitioners in the subregion, including countries that are traditionally hospitable icons of press freedom, have come under serious attacks. For example, in April 2022, Ghana fell 30 places in the world and 10 places in Africa in the [World Press Freedom index by Reporters Without Borders \(RSF\)](#). Ghana also outpaced Nigeria in the Media Foundation for West Africa's (MFWA's) [Freedom of Expression \(FOE\) Monitor](#) for the second quarter of 2022. Similarly, Senegal plummeted on the Global Press Freedom ranking from the 7th to 13th position in Africa, and from 49th to 73rd position at the global level. Ghana and Senegal have traditionally been leading democratic models and citadels of press

freedom in West Africa, making their slips very important punctuations of the current democratic rollback.

The recession has been aggravated by the activities of Violent Extremism Organisations (VEOs), terrorism and insurgents from the Sahel towards the littoral states and the Gulf of Guinea where governments find themselves in long-drawn turf wars with the extremists and terror groups. All of these anti-democracy factors are affecting journalists and journalism negatively in West Africa.

This policy brief discusses *The Media, Press Freedom and the Democratic Recession in West Africa: Trends, Challenges and Recommendations*.

2.0 The democratic recession in West Africa

Even with coup d'états in Burkina Faso, Mali and Guinea resulting in the toppling of democratically elected governments, and one coup attempt failing in Guinea Bissau, West Africa is still supposedly democratic. However, democratic governance in the subregion is largely a ruse, even without military juntas. Prof. Kwame Karikari, a media scholar and advocate of free expression, reiterated that, under a disguise of popular support, cliques of elites maintain strangleholds on institutions and resources through administrations that systematically undermine proper democratic culture, weaken institutions and turn governments into personality cults. He articulated this perspective as the keynote speaker during a conference organised by Media Foundation for West

Africa in 2022, in Accra, Ghana. Speaking on the topic: **The Democratic Rollback and its Impact on Press Freedom**, Prof. Karikari advanced cronyism and nepotism that characterise democratic governance in the subregion. Political regimes marginalise citizens with sub-par governance that yields insignificant improvements in their lives. Democracy, in essence, becomes a relay of one election to another as the people suffer.

Such apologies of democratic governance are also characterised by rubber-stamp legislature, pliant judiciaries and hijacked election management bodies. A renting of section of the press which are available for rent and the bastardization of those that do not sell out usually complete the picture.

Often, people who lead such set ups do not set out with the intent to perpetuate themselves in power. However, it becomes only a matter of time before the seduction of power proves too strong for them; when they begin to tweak constitutions to change term limits. Suchlike constitutional tweaks have happened in [Togo](#), [Cote d'Ivoire](#) and Guinea, for instance with the attempt in Guinea provoking a coup d'état.

The knock-on effect of these anti-democracy factors is that civic spaces in many countries in the sub-region have shrunk while journalists have come under serious attacks.

2.1 Key indicators of the democratic rollback in West Africa

2.1.1 A new wave of coup d'états

The immediate post-colonial era in West Africa was characterised by coups and counter coups, starting with the 1966 overthrow of president Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana; the country which was the first

in sub-Saharan Africa to gain independence from colonial rule. However, by the early 90s, there was tangible yearning for democracy and Benin set the pace in 1991 with an election. Ghana followed a year later with elections in 1992. By 2015, all countries in the subregion were functioning democracies, albeit with election legitimacy challenges in some countries including Togo, where Faure Gnassingbe, controversially became president after his father, Eyadema, had died in office as president in 2005.

However, in May 2021, Mali experienced its second military coup in less than a year, after the transitional president and prime minister attempted to form a new government that excluded key military officers. Again, in September 2021, Guinean soldiers staged a successful coup that deposed president Alpha Conde' after he had tweaked the constitution in 2000 to run for a third term which he won. Even though Conde's attempt was deplorable, his removal left the country in the clutches of unelected leaders. The knock-on effect is that political rights declined while press freedom was in tatters.

Additionally, on 23rd January, 2022, gunfire erupted in front of the presidential residence in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso; and several military barracks around the capital as soldiers, led by Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba, overthrew president Roch Marc Christian Kaboré. Eight months later in October 2022, a group of disgruntled junior officers led by Captain Ibrahim Traore, staged another coup and toppled Damiba's short-lived junta. Captain Traore has since been named interim President until elections expected to be organised in July 2024.

On February 1, 2022, a coup d'état was attempted in Guinea-Bissau. However, few hours later, president Umaro Sissoco

Embaló declared that the coup had been foiled, but that, "many" members of the security forces had been killed in a "failed attack against democracy."

2.1.2 Constitutional tweaks

After several decades of introducing democracy in West Africa, it ought to be truly archaic for any leader to tweak constitution in order to remove term limit. However, this has been happening in some countries in West Africa. In Togo, president Faure Gnassingbe was elected to a fourth term in office even though originally, the constitutional term limit is two, with his controversial re-election; characterised by accusations of electoral fraud by the opposition.

In 2020, president Alassane Ouattara promised not to run again and hand over power after a second term. However, his chosen successor, prime minister Amadou Gon Coulibaly, died suddenly of a heart attack and that act of God was what launched Mr. Ouattara into the grand epiphany that Cote d'Ivoire needs saving and that he is the only messiah. He announced that to save his country, he would change the constitution and run for a third term. That decision provoked months of protest and deadly unrest, with the opposition boycotting the 31 October election and accusing Ouattara of being a "dictator" who was carrying out an "electoral coup". Mr. Ouattara would go on to win the election with more than 94 per cent of the votes.

In Guinea, deposed president Alpha Conde' carried out a similar tweak to the constitution in 2020, running and winning a third term amidst accusations of fraud. But this became his undoing because a year later, the military removed him in a coup.

In Senegal, president Mackie Sall's advertised intent to revise the two-term limit and run for a third term in 2024 has stoked anger and disbelief with the opposition vowing to resist.

2.1.3 Terrorism

West Africa continues to face the risk of terrorism overrun as a result of spill over from the Sahel region which comprises Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. Within the central Sahel, terror groups, including Islamist fundamentalists and separatists have been fighting for various causes for decades with over 2.4million people estimated to have been displaced. The crisis originated in Mali, where Tuareg separatists and armed Islamist groups seized territory in the north, a decade ago following a military coup. Since then, there have been numerous security initiatives but the conflict has also mutated into inter-communal violence with armed Islamist groups increasing footholds. The violence is exacerbated by porous borders and the absence of state authority, with armed Islamist groups targeting young Fulani men for recruitment.

For over a decade, attacks by terror groups, including groups affiliated with al-Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State Sahel Province, have spread, multiplied and intensified throughout Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. Consequently, civilians and journalists have been caught in the crossfire. Since the start of 2022, citizens in Burkina Faso and Mali have faced recurrent and escalating attacks by armed Islamist groups. At least 2,050 civilians were killed in the central Sahel as of 2022.

In response, states have deployed counter terrorism operations. However, these scaled-up operations have largely not been able to bring terrorist attacks and communal-violence under control. The spread of

terrorism and violent extremism towards the coastal states of West Africa continues. On 8th and 10th February, 2021, Benin recorded its deadliest [attack](#). At least nine people died when patrols in its W National Park struck improvised explosive devices. Twelve others were wounded. The Islamist State terror group has claimed [responsibility](#) for the attack. Before this, a string of assaults in northern Benin between late November 2021 and January 2022 led to several deaths.

On 9th November, 2021, neighbouring Togo suffered its first-ever attack when militants raided a security post in the northern border village of Sanloaga. In February 2022, militants ordered residents of Lalabiga village in the Savanes region to leave within 72 hours. Togo has since been shaping up to be [West Africa's new frontier of violent extremism](#).

In the case of Côte d'Ivoire, at least 11 soldiers were killed and others injured in multiple attacks in the first half of 2021.

As a preventive measure, Ghana has since launched military operations on its borders with Burkina Faso and Togo in readiness of possible attacks. Ghana has also passed the [Anti-Terrorism Act of 2008 \(Act 762\)](#) and subsequently amended it in 2014. It has also developed a [National Framework for Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism and Terrorism \(NAFPCVET\)](#). In 2017, Ghana, Burkina Faso, Togo, Benin and Cote D'Ivoire (with Mali and Niger as observers) launched the [Accra Initiative](#) to prevent the spill over of terrorism from the Sahel and to address transnational organised crime and violent extremism in the border areas across these countries.

Meanwhile, the spate of terrorism has had direct impact on media freedom with many journalists in Mali and Burkina Faso, for

instance, forced to abandon their vocation. Again, in Nigeria, Boko Haram continue to be a bane on press freedom; so is its offshoot, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). Though killing of journalists have not occurred in a long while, the terror groups continue to be a threat especially in view of the fact that the Buhari-led government has not truly had a handle on terrorism in the country.

]In 2016, a journalist, Adeola Akinremi of the Independent daily, ThisDay, received a mail from Boko Haram after an investigative piece, "Why Boko Haram don't deserve our amnesty". The mail contained threats in the words: "you will die like other infidels that we captured. You're now a walking dead and a prey to the Lions of Islam from the bullet of a passing car or a nearby rooftop."

Adeola is not the first to receive suchlike threats. Boko Haram militants have also killed TV journalist Eneche Akogwu and cameraman Alhaji Zakariyya Isa in the past. In 2012, the group bombed ThisDay's offices, apparently because it did not approve of the way the paper covered its activities. Boko Haram continue to be a threat to the lives of journalists whom they perceive do not publish favourable reports about their activities, especially those in Northern Nigeria.

2.1.4 The shrinking civic space

The civic space in West Africa shrunk throughout 2021. This state of affairs continued in 2022. Per the MFWA's Freedom of Expression ([FOE](#)) [report in last quarter of 2021](#), there was more than 100% increase in violations. Countries such as Ghana which used to be celebrated as a freedom of expression model recorded high incidence of violations in the FOE report.

Mr. Dengiyefa Angalapu of the West Africa Center for Democratic Development (CDD-West Africa) who was a panelist at the conference noted that at the peak of West Africa's democratisation in 2015, six countries from the sub-region were in the "Free" zone of the Freedom in the World rankings by US based, Freedom House. However, by 2021, only four were in the "Free" while two had slipped into the "Not Free" zone. Per the [2022 Freedom in the World Report](#), only Ghana remained in the "Free" zone while Guinea and Mali slipped into the "Not Free" zone. The rest of the countries fell in the "Partly Free" zone ranking.

Additionally, the 2022 report by Civicus, a global alliance dedicated to strengthening citizen action and [civil society](#) around the world, on the state of the civic spaces in the world ([Civicus Monitor](#)) cited Cape Verde as the only country in West Africa with open civic space. Ghana's civic space is narrowed while the civic spaces in Senegal, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea Bissau, The Gambia and Burkina Faso are obstructed. The civic spaces in Benin, Cote d'Ivoire, Mali, Nigeria, Togo, Niger, Mauritania, Guinea and Cameroon are repressed according to the Civicus Monitor.

2.1.5 Citizens' growing disappointment with democracy

There is a general growing disenchantment with democracy among citizens of the ECOWAS. Many citizens in the sub-region feel that the dividends from democracy, especially in terms of improvement in their economic well-being, have been dismal. As a result, many citizens in the region are almost nonchalant about the military toppling democratically elected governments. A panellist at the conference, Ramata Diaure, a journalist with CNT in Mali, cited the case

of Mali, where elections have been sponsored by foreign interests since 1992, asserting that the practice cast a perpetual shadow of doubt on the "trueness" of democracy in Mali.

In spite of the disappointment however, research shows that the majority of Africans still prefer democracy to other forms of government. According to a September 2022 [dispatch](#) by Afrobarometer, on average across 34 countries, fewer than half (44%) of Africans say that elections work well to enable voters to remove leaders who do not do what the people want. About the same proportion (42%) believe that elections work well to ensure that representatives to parliament reflect the views of voters. Still, on average, three-quarters (75%) of Africans say they want to choose their leaders through regular, open, and honest elections, including 51% who feel "very strongly" about the issue. More than six out of 10 Africans (63%) endorse multiparty competition as necessary to give voters real choices.

3.0 Democratic recession and attacks on press freedom in West Africa

The media has been a natural victim of the democratic recession in West Africa. Many journalists have come under different forms of attacks including intimidations, threats, arrests, assaults and detentions. The Freedom of [Expression Monitor of the MFWA released in the second quarter of 2022](#) recorded 42 incidents of violations of freedom of expression. The figure was 23 per cent higher than incidents recorded in the first quarter of 2022 which stood at 32. Victims of the violations, which ranged from physical assaults, verbal attacks, arrests, and sentences are overwhelmingly journalists.

In Mali, for example, many journalists have been displaced by the protracted conflict and the coups. In Burkina Faso and Guinea, many print media organisations have been forced to shift to publishing online because of the economic effects of coups in the country. A panellist at the conference, Maurice Thantant from Benin, lamented that authorities often resort to digital code to [jail journalists](#). This has led to self-censorship by journalists in Benin.

In Burkina Faso, the military junta sometimes [prevent foreign correspondents from reporting in the country](#). In Cote d'Ivoire, journalists are still jailed for [defamation](#) even though defamation, per the law, is not supposed to be a jailable offense for journalists. And in The Gambia, journalists are sometimes still [arbitrarily arrested](#).

4.0 Weak state compliance with ECOWAS protocol on democracy and good governance

Article 19 of the 2001 ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (A/SP1/12/O1) of 2001, as Supplementary to the Protocol relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security enjoins member states to ensure that the armed forces and the police are not partisan, and shall remain loyal and defend the independence and territorial integrity of the states including democratic institutions.

However, the protocol faces a challenge with rising incidents of coup d'états in the last three years in some of the member states. Between August 2020 and September 2022,

five coup d'états were staged while one failed. Two of the coup d'états occurred in Mali, another two in Burkina Faso, and one in Guinea, while the failed coup d'état happened in Guinea Bissau. The coup d'états speak to the continuing democratic recession in West Africa. The rollback of democratic gains in these countries has affected civic governance, political participation, press freedom and access to information.

Again, article 22 of the ECOWAS Protocol entrusts the police and other security agencies to be responsible in law maintenance. The article also forbids the police in the usage of deadly force in law maintenance, including inhumane and degrading treatment of citizens. Increasingly, the police have become heavy-handed in using excessive force to maintain law and order in many West Africa states. For example, a report by The Fourth Estate, a not-for-profit media organisation of the MFWA, on 29 June, 2021, indicated extra-judicial killing of six persons at [Ntoaso](#) in the Eastern Region of Ghana. Also, use of [deadly force and violence](#) by the police in Nigeria continue to impact negatively on public confidence and accountability in policing.

In Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea and Guinea Bissau the police are repressive and act with impunity. For example, in Mali, on 10 and 11 July, 2020, the [police](#) applied deadly force against demonstrators which resulted in [11 deaths, 140 persons injured](#) and several others arrested and abused. The inactions of the police were accompanied by disruption of internet usage, preventing citizens access to social media, and violations of their rights to access information and freedom of expression. Likewise, the [2021 Africa Regional Overview](#) report by the Amnesty International documented disruption of the internet, shutdowns and suspension of social media in Niger, Nigeria and Senegal. In June,

2021, the [Guardian](#) reported that, Nigeria authorities suspended Twitter after the site deleted a controversial tweet from president Buhari for violating its community rule.

Repression of press freedom in West Africa beginning 1950s to redemption in the late 2000s has taken a nosedive with violations in recent times. In Burkina Faso, Senegal and Togo newspapers, radio and television were suspended, according to the Amnesty International's 2021 Africa Regional Overview report. Also, countries such Ghana where attempts is being made to consolidate democratic gains, in recent times, have recorded incidence of harassments against journalists. The police and the Ministry of National Security on some occasions have stormed media houses to disrupt live broadcast of programmes and destroyed media equipment. Again, in 2021 in Nigeria, the campaign: "[Information Black Out](#)" was launched by media organisations to protest against two bills that aimed at tightening media regulation and undermine access to information. Statesmen such as former [Vice President Atiku Abubakar](#) supported the campaign against the "anti-free press" bill which was laid before the Nigerian National Assembly.

Along with this is inadequate professionalism on the part of some journalists and media houses which militate against the independence and effectiveness of the media and press freedom. In a related issue, journalists are poorly paid, while media organisations owned by politicians contribute to lop-sided discussions, biases, hate speech, other forms of indecent political expressions affecting effective policy influence, national cohesion and developmental journalism. This posturing speaks to the relevance of article 37 of the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance which directs member state to

institute mechanisms such as independent national body or body freely instituted by the journalists themselves to give financial assistance to privately-owned media as a measure of addressing media ownership, business sustainable and professionalism.

Additionally, the rights of human rights defenders and freedom of association remain an act of courage in many West Africa countries. According to Amnesty International, in 2021, state authorities silenced defenders or criminalised them in several countries across Africa including Benin, Senegal and Niger.

Additionally, principle (c) of the protocol charges member states to ensure that accession to power is done through free, fair and transparent elections. The conduct of elections in many West Africa since return to democratic rule in 1991 has largely been free, fair and transparent. However, these elections have been characterised by sporadic violence and other factors that somewhat undermine the integrity of the elections. For example, reports from the [ECOWAS Observer Mission](#), Africa Union Election Observation Mission, and European Union Election Observer Mission in many ECOWAS countries outlined challenges such as political crisis, violence, unequal access to the media, unaccountable campaign financing, abuse of state resources and political polarisation as factors that undercut the conduct of elections in the sub-region. These factors threaten electoral reforms and peacebuilding.

Further, the protocol on strongly articulates the enjoyment of inalienable rights of citizens in member states regardless of race, colour, religion, sex, language, sexual orientation, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Largely, the status of human

rights and fulfilment of obligations by member states remain ongoing process. Progress have been made across many West Africa states in ratification of international human rights instruments and conventions, implementing some of the recommendations of the UN Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Reviews (UPR) and other treaty bodies, as well as legislations of domestic laws and frameworks to safeguarding the rights of citizens.

However, there remain other grey areas of human rights violations which require redress. These include interventions that would aim at promoting inclusion and empowerment of women and youth in governance and policymaking; addressing inequalities and pervasive poverty in many communities, discrimination, corruption, promoting greater respect and accommodation of persons with disabilities, passage of affirmative action laws, among others. The [2021 report](#) of the Amnesty International recognised violations of international humanitarian and human rights laws, unlawful attacks and killings, impunity, and use of excessive force by the security agencies which amounted to crime against humanity in countries such as Nigeria, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Benin, Guinea and Sierra Leone.

Largely, these act of repressions, violations of press freedom, brute violence, and human rights abuses across West Africa run counterproductive to compliance with the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance and protection of lives and properties.

5.0 Key recommendations

There is an urgent need to stem democratic recession in West Africa, and to do so, with every citizen is required to play his or her part. However, the media, civil society, governments and ECOWAS, have to play leading roles in this endeavour. As such, the following recommendations made are as follows:

5.1 Media

5.1.1 Uphold professionalism

The resurgence of new laws restricting freedom of expression and of the press both online and offline have often been blamed on unprofessionalism and growing phenomenon of mis/ disinformation and fake news. As such, the media in the sub-region must uphold a high level of professionalism and avoid the culture sensational journalism.

5.1.2 Improve fact-check reporting and countering mis-disinformation

The phenomenon of mis/disinformation and fake news is creating havoc for social cohesion as well as contributing to the violent extremism in the region. The media are therefore encouraged to produce fact-based reports to counter misinformation, and work towards advancing the national cohesion and national interest. This could contribute in the long term to improving media credibility, and subsequently repeal the laws restricting freedom of expression and of the press.

It is also recognised that citizen journalism has become an important part of media and news practice everywhere in the world

including West Africa. However, citizen journalists tend to practice without regard for professional standards and ethics. Professional journalists and the media must go the extra mile to be guided by the virtues of truth-telling and verification in their reportage and resist the temptation to rush to put out sensational news reporting.

5.1.3 Form strategic collaborations to fight off press freedom attacks

As the democratic recession brings in its wake attacks on journalism and a toll on the economic viability and survival of journalists in the region, the media are encouraged to build strong and strategic cross-border collaborations in order to call out and fend off such attacks as a collective. This will send a signal to the governments in the region to live up to their obligations of protecting journalists, and dealing with impunity that characterises abuse of journalists in the region.

5.2 Civil Society Organisations

5.2.1 Form strategic collaborations to improve the civic space

Civil society organisations (CSOs) in West Africa, must endeavour to come together in the form of subregional coalition so that they can do more effective activism for democracy and to facilitate a stronger civic space in the subregion.

5.2.2 Condemn and call out actions of undemocratic governments that stifle political and civil liberties

The civic space in the region continues to witness a decline. CSOs should continuously advocate and condemn human rights

violations. They should be independent as a collective and call out perpetrators of such human rights violations in the region. Governments who also look on should be named and shamed to desist from the pursuit of democratically unpopular attitudes and actions.

5.3. Governments

5.3.1 Respect the tenets of democratic governance

Governments in the region must re-commit to the true meaning of democracy which is clearly defined by constitutional term limits and should be strictly adhered to. They must also prioritise human security over the desire to win elections at-all-cost, so that democracy can serve as a proper mechanism for development, rather than a relay of one election to another.

5.3.2 Abide by the regional treaties and protocols as signatories

Most West African governments have signed on several regional and international treaties, conventions, and protocols that promote and protect democracy, political rights and civil liberties. For instance, the 2001 ECOWAS protocol on Democracy and Good Governance has been signed and ratified by all 15 countries of the organisation. The protocol in essence seeks to promote *accession to power by free, fair elections (Article 1(b)); popular participation in governance (Article 1(d)); freedom of association and demonstration (Article 1(j)); freedom of the press (Article 1(k)); and the freedom of association and the rights to meet and organise peaceful demonstrations shall be guaranteed (Article 1(j)).*

5.4 ECOWAS

5.4.1 Live up to the mantra of ECOWAS of the people

Citizens of the regional bloc sometimes have an unimpressive view of ECOWAS as an “elite club of heads of States”, rather than a community for the citizens of West African States. ECOWAS must therefore put in more efforts to step up their communication and citizens engagement on their work in order to change that perception. Again, ECOWAS is enjoined to be more proactive with their interventions than reactionary.

5.4.2 ECOWAS must enforce their protocols

ECOWAS has currently put together a policy on norms and standards for promoting peace and security. This document, is purposed to guide the reporting of journalists on ECOWAS issues in a way that puts the peace and development of countries ahead of the news rush and sensationalism. While this is a welcoming effort, ECOWAS is encouraged to invest in trainings for journalists in the region to be apprised of the content of such a policy as well as other key protocols such as protocol on free movement of persons, conflict prevention and the democracy and good governance.

5.4.3 Form strategic partnerships with civil society to protect the civic space

Development is delivered through a collective effort and an interface between government and civil society. To improve the political and civil liberties of citizens in West Africa, ECOWAS should look beyond itself to consider strategic alliances with key civil society actors and coalitions in the region and work with them to balance accountability and transparency in the civic space in the region.

5.4.4 Institute a Media Development Fund

The ECOWAS Commission is encouraged to consider setting up a Media Development Fund for the purpose of improving the capacity of media practitioners in the subregion. The Commission is also enjoined to work closely with the media to rollout a response to curtail democratic recession in the subregion.



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