

**The Troubling Resurgence of Coups d'état in West Africa:
Triggers & Actions required to Curb Them**

Media and Governance Series

November, 2022

Content

I.	Introduction.....	3
II.	Coups d'Etat in West Africa: Triggers	4
1.	Lack of credibility in electoral processes and leader legitimacy	5
1.1.	The Malian Case:	6
2.	Unconstitutional changes to extend term limit:	7
2.1.	The Guinean Case	8
3.	Spiralling Violence, Rising Terrorist Groups, and Socio-economic Distress	8
3.1.	The Burkina Faso Case.....	9
4.	Inaction of ECOWAS	10
4.1.	Case Study1: Constitutional change; Violation of Democratic Principles	10
4.2.	Case Study 2: A blind eye over electoral irregularities.	12
III.	Curbing coups d'état in West Africa:	13
-	Governments.....	13
-	The Media and CSOs:.....	14
-	ECOWAS.....	17

I. Introduction

Military-led coups d'état from 2020 to 2022 have dented democratic progress in West Africa. From the successful overthrows in Mali (2020; 2021); Guinea (2021); and Burkina Faso (January and September 2022); to failed ones in Niger (2021); and Guinea Bissau (2022); military forces are increasingly interfering in civilian-led politics.

The seemingly regional “coup d'état epidemic” spreading across West Africa occurs as the region witnesses a wave of undemocratic practices. Constitutional amendments by sitting presidents to secure third mandates amidst violent crackdowns on protesters, and the violation of freedom of expression and of the press have weakened the democratic consolidation recorded in the region.

Since the 90s, West Africa has established itself as a beacon for democratic transitions in Africa when countries returned to multiparty governance. This context ushered in an environment fertile for participatory governance, and the repeal of laws and decrees stifling freedom of expression and of the press. Countries in the region adopted constitutional norms safeguarding democratic principles including freedom of association, separation of powers, and regular free and fair elections won by universal suffrage.

The much-touted democratic surge in the region has however begun to roll back, giving way to a tumultuous political landscape marred by widespread electoral irregularities, arbitrary arrest of pro-democracy activists and journalists, violent and deadly demonstrations, expanding armed extremist groups, and an “epidemic of coups d'état”.

As the region records a downward democratic trend and a shrinking civic space¹, the sharp rise in coups d'état has raised fears of a return to the bad old days of plentiful putsches. Coups can be contagious among countries sharing similar socio-political challenges. This paper explores developing socio-political challenges in West Africa to analyse the governance and political issues fuelling the rise in coups d'état and posits ways in which they can be prevented.

¹ <https://www.mfwa.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Revised-Final-The-Shrinking-Civic-Space-in-West-Africa-final.pdf>

The paper is divided into two main parts. The first section examines the political and governance issues contributing to the recent spike in coups d'état in the region. The second section, posits recommendations drawing on the critical role of key stakeholders to curb coups d'état in West Africa.

II. Coups d'Etat in West Africa: Triggers

A coup d'état is the sudden and forceful overthrow of an existing government². West Africa experienced its first coup in January 1963, when soldiers in Togo took over the government and assassinated the country's first president Sylvanus Olympio.

The 1963 coup is remembered as the first successful military overthrow in sub-Saharan Africa, and the first time a country's leader had been assassinated during a military takeover³. The putsch in Togo sparked a tidal wave of coups d'état across West Africa. From 1960 to 2010, West Africa recorded 104 successful and attempted coups d'état⁴. As of 2012 West Africa consistently recorded the highest number of coups in Africa⁵

In recent years, as governments in West Africa consolidated democratic practices, military-led coups d'état were believed to belong to the tumultuous post-colonial political era⁶. However, the seven (07) successful and attempted coups d'état from 2020 to 2022 in West Africa suggest a democratic recession.

The rationale for staging a coup is often multifaceted. This section conducts an analysis of the reasons fuelling the rise in coups d'état in West Africa.

²https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/2776347.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Ac6a0df6345e279eef61a2b801b8a49ca&ab_segments=&origin=&initiator=&acceptTC=1

³ <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2013/08/19/remembering-sub-saharan-africas-first-military-coup-detat-fifty-years-on/>

⁴<https://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Publications/Economic%20Brief%20-%20Political%20Fragility%20in%20Africa%20Are%20Military%20Coups%20d%E2%80%99Etat%20a%20Never%20Ending%20Phenomenon.pdf>

⁵ https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Report_27.pdf

⁶ <https://theconversation.com/why-west-africa-has-had-so-many-coups-and-how-to-prevent-more-176577>

1. Lack of credibility in electoral processes and leader legitimacy

Elections are vital to democracy. They represent a formal mechanism for citizens to elect their leaders and participate in governance. Elections empower citizens to delegate powers to public officials who act on their behalf to improve their well-being. It is essential citizens are certain the process leading to an election is free, fair, and transparent.

In Africa, elections perform at least three important democratizing functions: They (1) help the continent build and sustain effective democratic institutions; (2) provide citizens with an effective legal tool to constrain and guard the government and minimize impunity; and (3) enhance the ability of the people to change their government and bring into public service new, more energetic and effective political leaders. Nevertheless, for elections to perform these three functions effectively, they must (i) be regular, not infrequent; and (ii) fair, free, competitive, inclusive, transparent, and credible⁷.

International observers are central to ensuring and building perceptions that elections are free, fair, and credible. Their presence can reduce fraud and increase domestic confidence in the process⁸. Adversely, their absence or reports pointing to electoral irregularities may affect perceptions of the fairness, transparency, and credibility of the result and lead to a rejection of the electoral outcome.

In recent years, several electoral issues have undermined the integrity and legitimacy of elected officials. One factor fuelling the rise in coup d'état across West Africa stems from a legitimacy crisis as Africans consider elections less free and fair compared to 10 years ago⁹.

Turnout rates during elections are also crucial for the legitimacy of elected officials. A high turnout rate suggests most citizens exercised their civic duty. Low turnout rates could however lead to the final results being contested. Citizens could perceive elected officials as imposed. This situation could lead to violence, and citizens could undermine elected officials' legitimacy, and demand their resignation.

⁷ <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2020/10/30/threats-to-democracy-in-africa-the-rise-of-the-constitutional-coup/>

⁸ [In the Shadow of Democracy Promotion: Strategic Manipulation, International Observers, and Election Boycotts - Emily Beaulieu, Susan D. Hyde, 2009 \(sagepub.com\)](#)

⁹ <https://mo.ibrahim.foundation/iiag/downloads>

1.1. The Malian Case:

In the last decade, Mali has been embroiled in a multi-dimensional crisis. Rising terrorist groups almost conquered the country in 2013, and fragile institutions, and limited state authority amidst chronic corruption plunged Mali into a profound turmoil. The critical factor that drove Malians to demand the resignation of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta stemmed from an electoral crisis and the perceived lack of transparency in the process.

In 2020, the Malian government organised parliamentary elections. However, three issues affected the credibility of the electoral results. First, the COVID-19 pandemic forced the government to close international borders. This meant international monitors could not travel to Mali for electoral observation. Secondly, amidst the pandemic, many citizens remained at home and chose not to vote. Thirdly, the security crisis in the country displaced at least 200,000 people who could not vote¹⁰.

ECOWAS, the West African regional bloc marked the election as free and fair, however, it was marred by acts of intimidation, allegations of vote buying, and an extremely low turnout rate estimated at 35.33%¹¹. The absence of international observers, accusations of widespread fraud, and low turnout affected the elections' credibility, transparency, and fairness. This led to a rejection of the results in some areas¹². Massive protests by angry citizens quickly spread in many cities amidst violent crackdowns by security forces.

The protesters demand slowly escalated. First, they demanded a rerun of the election, then the resignation of supreme court judges, and then the president's resignation. Amidst massive anti-government protests in Bamako with citizens chanting "*IBK must Go!*" a group of military officers, in August 2020, claiming to "build a new Mali" arrested the president, overthrew the government, and established a military transition.

Fast forward, in January 2021, the military-led government's Vice President deposed the military transition President in a second coup, for "violating the transition charter".

The Mali case highlights issues of electoral irregularity, a rejection of elected officials and public authorities, and massive protests.

¹⁰ <https://www.dw.com/en/mali-legislative-elections-hampered-by-low-voter-turnout/a-52958735>

¹¹ [Législatives au Mali : les résultats provisoires du second tour sont connus \(rfi.fr\)](https://www.rfi.fr/fr/actualites/20200820-legislatives-mali-resultats-provisoires)

¹² <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/940564/politique/mali-les-resultats-des-legislatives-contestes-par-la-rue/>

2. Unconstitutional changes to extend term limit:

The manipulation of constitutional norms by presidents to elongate maximum term limits continues to undermine democracy. Amending or revising the constitution to eliminate presidential term limits, and allow the incumbent to extend his mandate is referred to as a constitutional coup¹³.

Term limits and elections help citizens build effective democratic institutions by regularly and peacefully replacing poorly performing politicians. Africans strongly support term limits, and resist leaders' efforts to extend tenure¹⁴. Some presidents in West Africa have either attempted or successfully changed their constitutions to elongate their mandates. Such practices have often resulted in public protests met with lethal force by law enforcement officers.

In 2015, ECOWAS almost succeeded in adopting a regional norm limiting the maximum number of presidential terms to two. However, The Gambia and Togo opposed the proposal. Often, constitutional amendments trigger a reset of presidential mandates. This was observed in Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire where both countries saw their presidents running and securing third terms in office after having modified their respective constitutions. This undemocratic practice was a violation of citizens' will who preferred presidential mandates limited to two terms¹⁵. Constitutional coups weaken the role of elections as a democratizing tool.

Elections in which incumbents run for a third term often result in violence. During the 2020 presidential elections in Cote d'Ivoire, 55 people died whilst 282 were injured between 31st October and 10th November, following electoral violence¹⁶. Political turmoil as such provides breeding grounds for coups d'état.

¹³https://b868b4d7-784e-49b0-9e2b-ad12bf0e2aad.filesusr.com/ugd/bc0e09_4034f0dc67da49868cea6d52866eb6e4.pdf

¹⁴ https://afrobarometer.org/sites/default/files/publications/Dispatches/ab_r6_dispatchno30.pdf

¹⁵ <https://afrobarometer.org/press/ivoirians-want-presidential-mandates-limited-two-terms-age-limits-presidential-candidates>

¹⁶ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2020/11/cote-divoire-use-of-machetes-and-guns-reveals-horrors/>

2.1. The Guinean Case

In March 2020, Guineans went to the polls in a controversial and rejected referendum, to amend the Constitution thus allowing President Alpha Conde to run for a third term.

The Guinean Constitution stipulates a non-amendable clause on two presidential terms limits. Adopting a new Constitution is the only way to change the non-amendable clause, to allow President Alpha Conde two more terms. Meanwhile, Guineans strongly favour a two-term limit for presidents¹⁷.

Prior to the March 2020 referendum, opposition parties, civil society groups, and trade unions opposing the Constitutional reform, formed the National Front for the Defence of the Constitution (FNDC) to protest. Data by the Media Foundation for West Africa¹⁸ recorded at least 42 people were killed during clashes between protesters and security officers.

The referendum was boycotted by the opposition and marred with violence. Security forces killed eight (8) people and wounded 20 others¹⁹. Despite the violence, the Electoral management body announced most citizens voted for a Constitutional change allowing Alpha Conde to run for a third term.

In October 2020, Mr. Conde was re-elected for a third term. However, the opposition boycotted the polls, several national and international organisations withdrew from the election observation, and the opposition rejected the results citing widespread fraud.

The political turmoil fuelled further protests and violence denouncing an “illegitimate government”. Amidst this context, a group of military officers on September 5th, 2020, arrested Alpha Conde and dissolved his government.

The Guinean case highlights how undemocratic practices such as the violation of constitutionally set term limits could contribute to fomenting a coup d'état.

3. Spiralling Violence, Rising Terrorist Groups, and Socio-economic Distress

Wide-ranging threats are susceptible to imperil every nation. Such threats could be foreign aggressions from the infiltration and rise of terrorist groups, to global economic

¹⁷ <https://afrobarometer.org/press/guineans-voice-strong-support-two-term-limit-president>

¹⁸ <https://www.mfwa.org/country-highlights/42-protesters-killed-over-two-hundred-arrested-in-nine-months-the-sad-state-of-human-rights-in-guinea/>

¹⁹ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/10/guinea-violence-during-referendum>

trends that compromise citizen's welfare. Governments are responsible for protecting citizens, the economy, and state institutions against such threats. This is done through the national security apparatus charged to identify and thwart potential dangers to peace, security, and stability.

Countries with weak national security, and limited governments' ability in addressing security, economic and social issues affecting citizens are vulnerable to internal and external threats. Terrorist groups and the consequences of their violent actions are external threats likely to threaten an existing government. When citizens are confronted with hardship, and witness limited efforts by the government to alleviate their plight, they could take up to the streets, instead of waiting for elections, and demand the resignation of a sitting president.

The security apparatus, partly meant to protect the democratically elected government may stage a coup d'état²⁰ under claims of executing the will of the people.

3.1. The Burkina Faso Case

Burkina Faso has been caught up in an escalating wave of violence since 2015 following the infiltration and rise of terrorist groups (al-Qaeda and ISIL (ISIS) who have exacted deadly violence on the population. This has resulted in the killing of thousands of civilians and further displacing over two million. Analysts described the country as the new epicentre of conflict in the Sahel²¹. As of 2022, terrorist attacks increased by 23%, while armed groups controlled 40% of the country's territory²². The conflict sparked a food and humanitarian crisis. The violence made it difficult for communities to farm and this contributed to rising food inflation by 30 percent.

The two coups d'état, seventh (7th) and eighth (8th) in Burkina's history, which occurred just 8 months apart have marked the latest inflection point in the country's political instability. The first coup occurred amidst growing anger and frustration among citizens and the military as the country recorded one of its deadliest terrorist attacks.

²⁰ https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Report_27.pdf

²¹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/10/2/ousted-leader-damiba-agrees-to-resign-after-burkina-faso-coup>

²² [https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/6/18/state-controls-only-60-percent-of-burkina-faso-mediator#:~:text=Authorities%20in%20Burkina%20Faso%20control,States%20\(ECOWAS\)%20has%20said.](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/6/18/state-controls-only-60-percent-of-burkina-faso-mediator#:~:text=Authorities%20in%20Burkina%20Faso%20control,States%20(ECOWAS)%20has%20said.)

Unauthorized protests calling to “save Burkina” erupted to denounce sporadic policies, worsening economic conditions, deadly violence, poor logistics for an ill-equipped and starved military, and above all, the state’s incapacity to fight terrorist groups. January 22, 2022, recorded one of the most violent protests²³. Confronted with political isolation, fragile public institutions, and diminishing state authority in the face of angry citizens, the president was overthrown by lieutenant colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba. Fast forward, in September 30, 2022, President Damiba was overthrown by Captain Ibrahim Traore following disagreements over the best approach against terrorist groups.

The case in Burkina highlights how external threats and poor internal governance could weaken a government and lead to a coup d’état.

4. Inaction of ECOWAS

The democratic transition of 1990 was marked by a social agreement between the State and citizens to protect democratic norms. Elements of the agreement include zero tolerance for unconstitutional changes of government; abolition of tenure elongation beyond two terms in office for presidents; maintenance of a multi-party system; holding free, fair, and credible elections; and ensuring the power separation – Executive, legislative, and judiciary.

Such principles are enshrined in ECOWAS’ 2001 Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance Article 1 (b) which states *“Every ascension to power must be made through free, fair and transparent elections”*; and (c) *“Zero tolerance for power obtained or maintained by unconstitutional means.”* Such provisions and others on human rights are set to strengthen democratic practices. However, events leading to the coups in West Africa are in direct violation of these provisions.

4.1. Case Study 1: Constitutional change; Violation of Democratic Principles

Both Cote d’Ivoire and Guinea amended their constitutions. In Guinea, the constitutional amendment referendum was marred by violence, and blatant violations of human rights, with a low turnout of voters. Several stakeholders including leading opposition parties, the Union of Democratic Forces of Guinea, and the Union of

²³ <https://www.france24.com/fr/%C3%A9missions/le-d%C3%A9bat/20220124-coup-d-%C3%A9tat-au-burkina-faso>

Republican Forces (UFR) boycotted the poll, condemning a “constitutional coup”. Despite such negative developments and irregularities surrounding the polls, ECOWAS remained silent²⁴.

In West Africa, ECOWAS is considered to be the gatekeeper of democratic standards. Although every country is sovereign and has the responsibility of managing its internal affairs, the violation of democratic principles requires ECOWAS’ intervention. In 2017, when President Yahya Jammeh tried to extend his mandate, ECOWAS took concrete actions and sent troops to The Gambia²⁵. However, regarding developments in Guinea, ECOWAS’ inaction during human rights violations, and non-adherence to democratic norms might have generated a sense of hopelessness among citizens who saw no other institution towards which to express the violation of their democratic rights. Citizens might have harboured feelings that a coup would be best to get the country back to the rule of law. Such feelings were voiced during a protest against ECOWAS and in favour of the September 5th coup d’état in Guinea:

“

“Where was ECOWAS when Alpha Conde was changing the Constitution? Where was ECOWAS when Alpha Conde wanted to run for a third term? Where was ECOWAS when the people of Guinea were suffering injustice, inequality, where was ECOWAS?”

- Ibrahima Sory Mara, an activist .”

”

²⁴ <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20200327-guin%C3%A9-l-ambassadeur-france-convoqu%C3%A9-apr%C3%A8s-les-critiques-les-%C3%A9lections>

²⁵ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/1/1/yahya-jammeh-calls-ecowas-deployment-an-act-of-war>

Coup leaders often seek to restore public order²⁶ and reform a democracy, supposedly corrupted by ruling civilian elites/governments²⁷. The non-adherence to constitutional norms could trigger a political turmoil as observed in Guinea and create grounds for a military takeover. Ensuring governments abide by constitutional norms could prevent a coup. The silence of regional bodies during unconstitutional changes is likely to trigger the military to stage a coup as witnessed in Guinea.

4.2. Case Study 2: A blind eye over electoral irregularities.

Recent elections in West Africa recorded allegations of fraud and irregularities. In Benin, Guinea, Mali, and Cote d'Ivoire, opposition parties, civil society groups, and international organisations raised issues of electoral irregularities. In Guinea, following the presidential election which saw Alpha Conde elected for a third term, four electoral commissioners released a report detailing “serious abnormalities”²⁸. However, election observers from ECOWAS and the African Union reported Guinea’s presidential election was conducted properly²⁹.

In 2021, during Benin’s presidential election, several opposition candidates were jailed or barred from participating in the polls following the adoption of restrictive and discriminatory electoral laws³⁰. The country recorded violent clashes between citizens and security officers ahead of the election. These developments already violated the ECOWAS supplementary protocol on Democracy and Good Governance and the African Union Charter on Democracy, Election, and Governance. However, little was recorded of the regional and continental blocs condemning the government. Instead, ECOWAS election observers reported “an orderly, transparent, and professional” voting³¹

Limited actions from ECOWAS regarding electoral irregularities contributed to building frustrations among citizens in West Africa as they saw the institution as not representative of their aspirations. ECOWAS has consequently lost credibility in several

²⁶ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/coup-detat>

²⁷ <https://media.africaportal.org/documents/KAIPTC-Policy-Brief-3---Coups-detat-in-Africa.pdf>

²⁸ <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2020/10/29/a-disputed-election-leads-to-violence-in-guinea>

²⁹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/20/african-monitors-say-guinea-election-conducted-properly>

³⁰ <https://www.mfwa.org/top-3-issues-shaping-the-2021-presidential-election-in-benin/>

³¹ <https://www.ecowas.int/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/DECLARATION-PRELIMINAIRE-ANGLAIS.pdf>

countries in West Africa, particularly in Guinea and Mali where citizens took to the street to demonstrate against ECOWAS and its crisis management measures³².

Opaque and non-inclusive elections, organised amidst human rights violations are likely to result in the election of leaders considered by citizens as non-legitimate. If ECOWAS does not take swift action over electoral irregularities, the military is likely to foment a coup.

III. Curbing coups d'état in West Africa:

Peace, justice, and good governance remain critical to curbing coups in West Africa. Through coordinated multi-pronged approaches by relevant stakeholders, the democratic journey of the region could be safeguarded. Preventing a coup in itself could succeed only if prevention mechanisms focused on the causes rather than the coup itself. The following are key recommendations to achieve this objective:

- Governments

Citizens elect their leaders to represent them and act on their behalf to improve their livelihoods. Hence, governments draw their legitimacy from the people. For governments to be able to rule throughout their mandates and avoid being overthrown, they should:

- 1- Adhere to constitutional term limits:** Increasingly, governments across West Africa are changing their constitution to extend their mandates. The practice is counterproductive as most West Africans prefer two-term limits. The non-adherence to term limits eventually leads to political instability likely to foment a coup. To avoid a coup d'état, governments should first desist from making constitutional changes and attempting to extend their mandate. If more governments abide by constitutional term limits, it would lower the likelihood of a coup and would have a domino effect across the region as countries would learn from each other. This would strengthen and institutionalise regular transfer of power and contribute to curbing the growing trends of coups d'état as citizens

³² <https://www.africanews.com/2021/09/18/guinea-protest-against-ecowas-resolutions//>

would understand a non-performing government can be voted out through legitimate means when their mandates end.

- 2- **Ensure electoral transparency:** An election marred by irregularities has often led to the results being contested, creating a legitimacy crisis likely to lead to a coup d'état. It is in the best interest of governments to organise free and fair elections to ensure that governments are elected in a transparent process. This would ensure the credibility of governments, improve the democratic experience of a country and build citizens' trust in the process. When citizens trust the electoral process, they are likely to desist from resorting to coups and are susceptible to resisting coup attempts as they consider their leaders to be legitimate. Also, citizens would understand the existence of a legitimate process through which they can remove a nonperforming government.
- 3- **Abide by good governance principles:** Both civil society organisations and the media have called on governments to adopt good governance practices. A government abiding by such principles is likely to promote transparency in the management of public affairs, ensure quality service delivery, and abide by democratic norms. Citizens are hardly dissatisfied with such governments and are more likely to harbour coup-like feelings towards opaque and corrupt governments, violating human rights. The more governments in West Africa abide by good governance principles, the less likely they would be overthrown.

- **The Media and CSOs:**

The transition towards multi-party democracy in the 1990s birthed the current freedoms and rights that allowed both media and civil society organisations to flourish in West Africa. While a dynamic and burgeoning media is indispensable for the existence of an active democracy, CSOs that represent citizens' voices and defend their interests are the spirit of a thriving democracy. Most often, during a coup d'état the media is one of first casualty as it is among the first institutions captured by coup leaders. This shows the critical role of the media in educating, informing the citizenry, and setting the public agenda. The media and CSOs can also contribute to curbing the growing trend of coups d'état, through the following actions:

1. Avoid hyping and giving visibility to coup mongers and individuals in favour of a coup:

In politically unstable countries, marred by protests and citizen dissatisfaction towards their government, a group of politicians, and civil society actors often consider a coup d'état a panacea to political instability. In Mali for instance, the M5, a group made up of civil society actors, activists, opposition parties, and religious groups were in favour of a coup and had on several occasions called for the President's resignation. Such groups were often invited to partake in live shows on air. Through the media, these groups prey on the vulnerability of citizens by selling ideologies and beliefs, mostly rebellious and chaotic. Coupling such ideologies with intensive reportage on the government's challenges, can intensify fears in the population, and stimulate the army that considers its mandate to safeguard the country from chaos to stage a coup. Thus, the media should be moderate in its reportage, sensitize against coups d'état, and avoid individuals likely to make alarming statements susceptible to push people towards demanding a coup d'état.

2. Collaborate with CSOs to denounce constitutional changes: Ahead of the controversial referendum to change the Guinean constitution, civil society organisations (CSOs), and political parties formed the National Front for the Defence of the Constitution (FNDC) coalition and organised several demonstrations against the constitutional change. The group also called on international organisations to act against the third-term attempt of President Conde. Although several issues caused the coup in Guinea, it could have been avoided had Conde not changed the constitution to extend his mandate. Hence, constitutional changes must be prevented. In countries where there is an opportunistic constitutional change, the media, and CSOs should partner and form a coalition to conduct a sustained advocacy and defend the existing constitution. In 2013, when President Yayi Boni of Benin sought to change the constitution, the Media, CSOs, and political parties mounted a campaign against the change with the slogan "Do not touch my constitution"³³. Eventually, the president desisted and stepped down after his second term in office. Had the media not been involved in the advocacy, its impact could have been limited, and the president might have changed the Constitution. The Benin experience can be

³³ <https://www.cairn.info/revue-afrique-contemporaine-2014-1-page-99.htm>

emulated in other countries to prevent presidents from changing their constitutions and running for third terms, and subsequently avoiding coups d'état.

3. Monitor the elections; Wage Sustained campaigns against irregularities

Electoral results are almost always contested in West Africa. In Ghana for instance, the 2012, and 2020 election results were heavily contested by the opposition. In Benin, Guinea, Mali, etc electoral results were also contested. The low trust in the electoral management body is what led to the coup attempt in Niger in 2021 after President Mohamed Bazoum was elected. It is thus critical to improve electoral transparency.

Although there are local and international election observers and the media provides coverage, citizens often have limited to no access to election observation reports. Also, most often, conclusions of electoral observation reports vary. For instance, after the presidential elections in Guinea, while some electoral commissioners reported “serious anomalies”³⁴, ECOWAS election observers reported the election was conducted properly³⁵. The confusion generated conflicting reports on the elections. Such incidents constitute undercurrents that favour more coups d'état.

The media is the main source of information for citizens and can shape public perceptions. As watchdogs of society, it is encouraged that the media are more vigilant and monitor electoral activities in partnership with local CSOs before, during, and after elections to flag possible irregularities. This would contribute to better-informing citizens on the electoral process, issues arising, measures undertaken to address these issues, and how transparent the electoral process is. The transparency the media would bring to elections through its watchdog role could urge public officials to improve the freedom, transparency, and fairness of the process.

4. Avoid partisanship and foster editorial independence: In the political arena, media organisations are often partisan based on their interests. Ahead of the 2020

³⁴ <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2020/10/29/a-disputed-election-leads-to-violence-in-guinea>

³⁵ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/20/african-monitors-say-guinea-election-conducted-properly>


presidential elections in Benin, Cote d'Ivoire, Niger, Togo, Burkina Faso, and Ghana, the Media Foundation for West Africa observed a practice of partisanship among media organisations. Partisanship favours biased media coverage, often in favour of incumbent presidents, which contributed to tarnishing the credibility of some media organisations. Media outlets should desist from such practices, foster their editorial independence, and inform objectively regarding unconstitutional and undemocratic issues. This would educate and inform the population on democratic issues, denounce corruption, and bad governance, and contribute to keeping governments alert in ensuring good governance.

- ECOWAS

Although ECOWAS was established to promote economic cooperation among member states to raise living standards and promote economic development, its objective cannot be achieved in a politically unstable region. This explains ECOWAS's democratic interventions. A region prone to military takeovers is susceptible to undermining economic cooperation and development policies. To curb the growing trend of military takeovers, ECOWAS should:

1. **Take concrete actions by firmly condemning constitutional amendments and, third terms mandates:** Most Africans strongly support two-term limits for presidents. Attempts by leaders to extend term limits beyond two mandates often result in a coup. This was recorded in 2010 when President Mamadou Tanja in Niger extended by three years his mandate, and now Guinea. To curb the rising trend of coups d'état in West Africa, ECOWAS should prevent presidents from running for third terms. To achieve this, ECOWAS should first condemn and sanction attempts at constitutional changes or constitutional coups, human rights violations, and severe electoral irregularities. In 2017, when Yahya Jammeh tried to extend his mandate, ECOWAS acted by sending troops to The Gambia³⁶. Firm measures can be undertaken in other countries violating democratic values. This would strengthen the culture of one term mandate renewable once, and discourage coup d'état.
2. **Strengthen its early warning mechanism by picking up media reportage:** One of the basic functions of the media is to have oversight over governments and

³⁶ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/1/1/yahya-jammeh-calls-ecowas-deployment-an-act-of-war>



inform the citizenry. The media is able to perform this function by producing fact-based reports and investigations. Furthermore, media organisations are closer to the population and understand their daily issues, needs, and expectations. This is constantly reflected in their reports. In Mali for example the media issued several reports and recommendations over corruption scandals, bad governance, security issues, and electoral irregularities, and pointed to the high probability of a political turmoil. Despite such reportage, the ECOWAS mission arrived in Bamako after the crisis already erupted. Although ECOWAS tried addressing the issues, its proposals were rejected by the population and further fuelled demands for the president's resignation and subsequently the country recorded a coup.

To prevent the resurgence of such situations, ECOWAS should pick up Media reportage and associate them with its crisis management. Considering that the media provide essential information on national issues through their reports and understand national socio-political issues, picking up media reportage and engaging them in crisis management would help ECOWAS better understand the local context. This would help ECOWAS better understand issues on the ground and inform the adoption of tailored measures to address citizens' expectations and needs while solving an in-country socio-political crisis. This approach would help ECOWAS be more proactive in detecting a potential crisis through its early warning system, and adopt tailored measures to address issues and subsequently prevent a political turmoil susceptible to resulting in a coup.