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## **THE TRAVAILS OF DEMOCRATIC TRANSITIONS AND THE CHALLENGES OF DEVELOPMENT IN WEST AFRICA SINCE THE 1990s**

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## **Abstract**

*The 1990s marked a watershed in the transition to democracy in West Africa. However, after three decades, democracy is yet to be rooted in the region due to frequent military interventions (coup d'états) and the subsequent suspension of constitution and democratic structures that characterize military regime. While there are scholarly studies on the challenges of democratic transition and development in individual African states, much has not been written on West African sub region as a whole. This paper intends to fill that gap. It identifies some challenges of democracy in West Africa. It utilizes secondary source of data and employs the concept of 'Fragile State' as its framework for analysis. Fragile State refers to a situation whereby government cannot deliver its statutory core functions which include securing lives and property and ensuring political stability. It concludes that disregard for the rule of law and 'do or die' politics are some of the challenges creating impediments to the entrenchment of democracy in West Africa. To democratize and strengthen democracy in West Africa, it recommends that politics should be seen as selfless and patriotic endeavour guided by the rule of law.*

**Keywords:** *Democracy, Fragile State, Good Governance, Rule of Law, West Africa.*



## **Introduction**

West Africa, like other African regions, witnessed an ugly past and nothing is nostalgic about it. The region witnessed the reality of slave trade and colonialism; and suffered the consequences. These two historical facts derailed the region from its trajectory to greatness, economic development and political stability. Colonialism and its agents (the colonialists) distorted its history, disrupted its geography, exploited its resources, misappropriated its wealth and emasculated its people by pitching them against each other. However, due to the contradictions inherent in colonialism and its capitalist ideology, agitations for self-rule – independence – soon took over the political atmosphere. This is mainly credited to nationalist movements within the region.

West Africa is a sub-region within the African Continent. It has many features which are unique to it in terms of politics in both historical and contemporary senses. The sub-region has been the heartbeat of politics in Sub Saharan Africa for many years. Before the dawn of armed struggle against colonialism in Africa, West African intelligentsias had constituted themselves into enlightened opposition to foreign domination. In Anglophone West Africa where colonial policy relegated the educated elites in the day-to-day administration of the colonies, the Aborigines Rights Protection Society was formed in the then Gold Coast to articulate the interest of the indigenous people. The National Council of British West Africa also emerged in the early 19th Century to agitate for autonomy or indigenous participation in the administration of Anglophone West Africa.

Most states in the West African region got their independence beginning with Ghana in 1957 – with the exception of Liberia which got its independence since 1847 as the oldest independent state in Africa. After independence, none of these West African states was able to manage the weak political structures handed over to them by their previous colonial masters. This led to chaotic situations upon which the military in these states capitalized to justify their seizure of powers.

The first military coup occurred in West Africa when the Togolese army toppled and murdered Sylvanus Olympio, the state's Prime Minister, in January 1963. Since then, West Africa had become the hub of military incursions into politics or military adventurism. This is why Olukoshi (2001, p. 1) refers to West Africa as "the coup d'état belt of the African continent". In that sense, the region is unique. Military rule became the order of the day in the sub region. This went on for about three decades into the 1990s when incessant urge for transition to democracy became intensified.

Aside the introduction, this paper is divided into six sections. Section one discusses its methods and is followed by framework for analysis in section two under which it discusses the concept of Fragile State. Next to it is section three wherein relevant concepts like "democracy," "democratic transition," "civil society," etc. are clarified. Section four foregrounds the specificities of West African Sub Region. The fifth section identifies and discusses some of the major challenges to democratic transition and development in West Africa. The concluding section summarizes the work, concludes, and gives some recommendations.

## **Methods**

This study basically utilizes secondary data which was sourced from books, documents, and online materials. It surveys all the States in the West Africa sub-region with emphasis on their years of independence, number of elections held since 1990s, number of military take over, and next date of presidential elections. Data are analysed using percentage and table for presentation. This, in turn, helps to understand how far the region has gone on its trajectory to democratic transition. Though, the paper surveys West Africa as a whole, emphasis is laid on Nigeria, Ghana and Sierra Leone for the Anglophone Africa; Togo and Benin for Francophone Africa; while Cape Verde represents one of the two Lusophone countries.

## **The Fragile State Concept: A Framework for Analysis**

This paper utilizes the concept of Fragile States as its framework for analysis. This concept refers to a situation whereby "the government cannot or will not

deliver core functions to majority of its people, including the poor, where core functions include service entitlements, justice and security” (DFID 2005, p. 7). To USAID, “fragile states refer generally to a broad range of failed, failing and recovering states...the strategy distinguishes between fragile states that are vulnerable from those that are already in crisis.” It further defines vulnerable states as those which are:

unable or unwilling to adequately assure the provision of security and basic services to significant portions of their populations and where the legitimacy of the government is in question’; while states in ‘crisis’ are defined as ones where the ‘central government does not exert significant control over its own territory or is unable or unwilling to assure the provision of vital services to significant parts of its territory where legitimacy of the government is weak or non-existent, and where violent conflict is a reality or a great risk (USAID 2005, p. 1).

The World Bank identifies fragile states with ‘Low-Income Countries Under Stress’ (LICUS). What characterizes these states, according to World Bank (2006, p. 2) are “debilitating combination of weak governance, policies, and institutions, indicated by ranking among the lowest on the Country Policies and Institutional Performance Assessment (CPIA).” Such states have two particular fragilities in common: fragile state programs/policies and institutions which in turn undermine the countries’ capability to be responsive to citizens’ need services, checkmate corruption, ensure accountability; and they are also at risk of socio-political conflict and instability (World Bank, 2005).

Stewart and Brown (2009, p. 3) define fragile states as “states that are failing, or at risk of failing, with respect to authority, comprehensive service entitlements, or legitimacy.” Many states in the West African sub region fit into the category of fragile states. We can conclude from Stewart and Brown’s analysis that a fragile state would not be able to achieve the core objectives of MDGs, especially the first goal which is to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger. It would also not respect human rights in all ramifications; and would ultimately be exclusionary.

It is to be noted that the political independence granted to states in the West Africa sub region by colonialists did not include economic independence. As Ake (1981, p. 92) rightly argues

that the nationalist movement which arose from the contradictions of the colonial economy achieved political independence and not economic independence. The change in the locus of political power was of course bound to have consequences for the locus and the distribution of economic power.

This made the states fragile at independence and could not make any serious headway. These states either collapsed into authoritarian one party system or hijacked by military juntas. However, in the 1990s, states in the region started experiencing pressures from Civil Society Organizations and international organizations to democratize. This democratization process has been ongoing since the 1990s till present – a lengthy span of three decades. In the subsequent sections of this paper, travails of democratic transitions in the contemporary West Africa are reviewed and assessed.

Having discussed how West African states fit into the fragile state framework, what follows is the conceptualization of “democracy”, “third wave of democracy”, “democratic transition”, “civil society”, and “civil society organizations.” The Concept of Democracy According to Doorenspleet (2005, p. 92), democracy applies to a political system in which the most important political office holders (usually organized in political parties), are selected through regularly scheduled free and fair elections in which the adult population is eligible to vote. This practical definition underlines what Dahl (1971) refers to as the two most important features of democracy: *Public contestation*, and the *right to participate* in elections. Definitely, a political system that meets the prerequisites of fair competition and general inclusiveness is thought to guarantee the existence of an opposition “that has some chance of winning office as a consequence of elections” (Doorenspleet, 2005, p. 23).

According to Schumpeter (2003, p. 269), democracy is “that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote.”

To Boutros Ghali (2003, p. 7), democracy simply means “a political system whereby the whole of society can participate at every level in the decision-making process and keep control of it.” After discussing different definitions of democracy, Ochefu (2007) identifies some building blocks of democracy without which democracy remains an abstraction. These are: political equality, free and fair political competition, rule of law, public freedom, and responsiveness of government.

In view of these definitions, can we actually say West Africa has democratized or is democratizing? It is very glaring that West Africa has not democratized. It is true that there is public contestation during election but citizens are hardly allowed the right to freely participate in elections and vote for candidates of their choice. In some cases it is either they are coerced to vote for candidates not of their choice, or elections were literally militarized such that the electorate who would have voted for candidates in the opposition were scared of participating in elections. The building blocks of democracy are indeed missing; this will be discussed under the challenges of democratic transition in West Africa.

### **The Third Wave of Democracy**

Three international waves of democratic development, according to Huntington (1991) have occurred in the world in the last two centuries. The first wave, identified with the American and French revolutions, bloomed from 1828-1926. There was a second wave, though short, between 1943 and 1962. It was in the third wave that the world took notice of a dramatic and global resurgence of democracy. This occurred during the 1980s and 1990s. Since then, the number of democracies throughout the world has increased greatly (Patrick, 1996).

The resurgence of democracy in the 80s through the 90s which was tagged the third Wave of democratization by Huntington reached the African shores late. Between 1989 and 1994, as a result of external and internal yearnings for democratic system of government, 41 out of 47 countries in Africa embarked on major political reforms, including, in many cases, the first elections keenly contested in a generation (Bratton & van de Walle, 1994).

This is also true of West Africa. The sub region, in the years preceding the 1990s, was notorious for one party authoritarian system and military dictatorship (with the exemption of Cape Verde and Senegal). These two countries are said to be among the most stable democracies in Africa (World Bank, 2021; Kamer, 2022). Though they also briefly witnessed one party rule, they never witnessed military dictatorship or military coup. Rather, Senegalese army has contributed to restoring democracy in other member countries of the ECOWAS (Diagne, 2018). After its experience of one party rule immediately after independence in 1960, election became competitive since 1976 in Senegal. Though Cape Verde and Senegal have their own share of democratic shortcomings; they stand out as the only countries in West Africa which were coup-free – no military intervention. This shows how they are able to manage their politics and make it stable.

### **Democratic Transition.**

Transition to democracy should not be confused with consolidation of democracy. These are two concepts that are misleadingly used interchangeably. For clarity, transition and consolidation are stages in the democratization process. Transition comes before consolidation. Democratization can be understood as a process which is further divided into three stages: (i) the liberalization stage, when the previous dictatorial regimes is brought down; (ii) a transition stage, often occurs when the first competitive elections are held; and (iii) the consolidation phase, when democracy and its practices have become firmly established and accepted by most important stakeholders (O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986; Linz & Stepan, 1996).

The final stage is indispensable for establishing long-lasting democratic regimes; and it is the most taxing for emerging democracies in the developing world. In West African sub region, sadly, no state seems to have made a successful transition to democracy – except perhaps, Cape Verde. Hence, discourse on consolidation of democracy in relation to West Africa can only be made for academic sake with the prospect that it would be hopefully realized.

Having made the above clarification, we then turn our attention to transition to

democracy – a stage of democratization process into which many West African states are, and are struggling to exit. Donald (1987, p. 528) is of the opinion that “the transition to democracy may be viewed as completed when democratic procedures, rights, and rules of the game have been clearly delineated and widely accepted by a majority of elites and citizens”. Similarly, Przeworski, (1995) explains that transition to democracy has been completed the moment a new constitution is drafted and ratified. This explanation, or rather definition, is too simplistic. For how can a mere drafting and ratification of a new constitution illustrate a regime change toward democracy? The subtle difference between Przeworski’s and Donald’s positions on transition to democracy is that the latter went further to add ‘wider acceptability’ by elites and citizens of the drafted constitution.

Yet the point is that transition cannot be said to have been completed by a widely accepted drafted rules embodied in a constitution until the constitution is practically operationalized. There is no state in West Africa that does not have a drafted constitution—though with varied degree of acceptability. The challenge has always been implementation. It is this challenge that makes the region unripe for democratic consolidation. All that can be said is that the West African region is in the process of transition in its overall democratization process. In this process of transition, civil society (to which I shall now turn) played and is playing a very important role.

**Table 1 Presidential Elections in West African States (1990-2021)**

S/N	State	Year of Independence	Years of Elections Since 1990	Military Take Over	Next Presidential Election Date
	Benin	1960	1991, 1996, 2001, 2006, 2011, 2016, 2021.		2026
	Burkina Faso	1960	1991, 1998, 2005, 2010, 2015, 2020.	2022	2025
	Cape Verde	1975	1991, 1996, 2001, 2006, 2011, 2016, 2021.		2026
	Côte d’Ivoire	1960	1990, 1995, 2000, 2010, 2015, 2020.	1999	2025

	The Gambia	1965	1992, 1996, 2001, 2006, 2011, 2016, 2021.	1994.	2026
	Ghana	1957	1992, 1996, 2000, 2004, 2008, 2012, 2016, 2020.		2024
	Guinea	1958	1993, 1998, 2003, 2010, 2015, 2020.	2008, 2021	2025
	Guinea Bissau	1974	1994, 2000, 2005, 2009, 2014, 2019.	2003, 2008, 2012	2024
	Liberia	1847	1997, 2005, 2011, 2017.		2023
	Mali	1960	1992, 1997, 2002, 2007, 2013, 2018, 2022.	2012, 2020, 2021.	2026
	Mauritania	1960	1992, 1997, 2003, 2007, 2009, 2014, 2019.	2005, 2008	2024
	Niger	1960	1993, 1996, 1999, 2004, 2011, 2016, 2021.	1996, 1999, 2010	2026
	Nigeria	1960	1993, 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019.	1993	2023
	Senegal	1960	1993, 2000, 2007, 2012, 2019.		2024
	Sierra Leone	1961	1996, 2002, 2007, 2012, 2018.	1992, 1997	2023
	Togo	1960	1993, 1998, 2003, 2005, 2010, 2015, 2020.	*2005	2025

**Source:** *Compiled by authors*

\*Togo's army installed a civilian president, Faure Gnassingbe, into power (without election) after the death of his father, President Gnassingbe Eyadema, Africa's longest ruler who served for 38 years in power.

### **The Concept of Civil Society**

Civil society, in one way or the other, has been instrumental in the later phases of democracy's third wave, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, but also in Southern Europe, Latin America, and parts of Africa. Though a debatable



concept, it has been used variously by political theorists and practitioners during the past 300 years (Patrick, 1996). Patrick (1996, p.3) further asserts that civil society is the complex network of freely formed voluntary associations, distinct from the formal governmental institutions of the state, acting independently or in partnership with state agencies. Apart from the state, but subject to the rule of law, civil society is a public domain that private individuals create and operate.

In the words of Dryzek (1996, p. 481), civil society is that “social interaction not encompassed by the state or the economy.” Bratton, (1994, p. 2) defines it as “a sphere of social interaction between the household and the state which is manifest in norms of community cooperation, structures of voluntary association, and networks of public communication”. One primary and indispensable aspect of civil society is autonomy from the state (Schmitter, 1995). Civil society stands apart from the state. It can be said that the state is the realm of the politics of coercion by which the ruling elites exert their supremacy over society. In contradistinction, civil society is the realm of consent through which citizens may choose to accept or to reject the use of force by state officials. When citizens consent, they perform a hegemonic role, helping to reproduce the prevailing social order (Salamini, 1981).

Civil society which Patrick (1996) considered as public guardians, empower citizens to take responsibility for their rights and hold public officials accountable to their constituents. Through participation in organizational activities, members acquire knowledge, skills, and virtues of democratic citizenship. So they are public laboratories in which citizens learn democracy by doing it, which contributes greatly to democratic governance of both the state and the civil society that it serves. It should be noted that civil society is not invariably anti-government; it could, at times, be an ally of any state governed strictly by the rule of law or constitutional democracy. Such government would, of course, make the common goal of securing rights to life, liberty, and property its cardinal objectives. This is hardly the case in West Africa where elected leaders abuse power.

In addition, there is the assumption that Africa (more specifically the Western

region) cannot build or consolidate democracy because it lacks a strong and active civil society that can engage the state to demand transparency and accountability. As a corollary to the above, Tar (2009) narrates, is the fact that civil society, democracy, the state, are considered 'Western' in origin and therefore new to Africa. Tar vehemently disagrees, as he mentions elsewhere (2009, p. 89), with the tendency to credit 'civil society' to Nigeria's (and by extension, Africa's) externalities. Hence, he puts *Western* in the inverted comma. The fact is that civil society could be instrumental in bringing down or strengthening a democratic government.

### **Civil Society Organizations and Democratic Transition in West Africa**

The renewal of interest in democracy in the 1990s has thrown the concept of civil society into a prominent position in both theory and practice. The end of Cold War has contributed, in no small way, to the pressures for political reform. In the international sphere of politics, the superpowers gradually withdrew or decreased support to client states, thereby posing a serious threat to dictatorial regimes. Client state is a state that is economically, politically, and militarily subordinate to another more powerful state in international relations (Fry, Goldstein & Langhorne 2002).

Also at the domestic level, citizens mobilized themselves to get rid of the military and one-party structures that had buttressed illegitimate power; and demanded for political change (Bratton, 1994). This went to the extent that the activities of civil society led to the formation of several civil society organizations (CSOs) with popular voices that were so echoed that political elites were compelled to acknowledge their importance.

CSOs, otherwise called non-governmental organizations (NGOs), that constitute civil society are free labor unions, professional groups, religious associations, human-rights advocacy groups, environmental advocates, support groups providing social welfare services to needy people, independent newspapers, among others.

It should be noted that trade unions, student movements and other forms of

civil society have been waging struggles in Africa for over half a century. The Aba women riot in 1929 during colonial rule in Nigeria and the activities of other CSOs such as Nigeria Civil Service Union (NCSU), founded in 1912; the Nigeria Union of Teachers (NTC), formed in 1931; and the Railway Workers' Union (RWU), founded in 1931, justified the existence of civil society in Africa before the third wave of democracy. In fact "Civil society cannot be said to be a new phenomenon in Nigeria or indeed any other part of Africa" (International IDEA1 2000, p. 199–201).

Three major elements were identified by Bratton (1994) in the discourse of civil society. These are: a critique of state domination of public life, a preference for reform over revolution, and a strategy for political change based upon negotiations and elections. These elements distinguish CSOs from militant, secessionist, and revolutionary groups whose objective is to crumble the state. CSOs only call for socio-political reforms, free and fair elections, transparency, accountability, justice, and good governance. In West Africa, their activities had helped to bring an end to one party autocratic rule and military regimes.

In postcolonial Nigeria, Nigerian Labor Congress (NLC) emerged as the key labor organization. There exist some other affiliate trade unions, but the NLC's ability to sensitize the citizens to some government policies that were ill conceived and to engender their reversals is outstanding. Though recently there are misgivings about the activities of NLC vis-a-vis checkmating government excesses.

In the early 1990s, given Nigeria's mono-cultural economy which relies on oil, oil sector unions were more assertive and stronger than non-oil sector unions. This became apparent in the aftermath of the annulment of the 12 June 1993 presidential elections, when the Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association of Nigeria (PENGASSAN) and the National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG) championed anti-military and pro-democratic struggles. Then, the NLC national executive was alleged to have been infiltrated by state influence. These oil-sector unions coordinated a series of industrial actions which successively brought the Nigerian economy to a standstill, demanding that the military withdraw from power and restore a

democratic system (Ihonvbere, 1997 & Tar, 2009).

Opong, Oduro & Awal (2013) highlighted four major activities of CSOs in West Africa to include service delivery, advocating for and representing the interests of their constituencies, partnering with government in development planning, and monitoring the activities of governments. They further explained that in the area of empowering citizens, CSOs have played an impressive role in promoting what they called 'vertical accountability'. They have helped to amplify the voice of the public in demanding for accountability in government decision-making.

Opong, Oduro & Awal (2013, p.13) further said "convinced that effective checks on government would prevent the re-emergence of authoritarian rule, CSOs have built grassroots capacity to scrutinize the exercise of power by local office holders, and have monitored the performance of individual government bodies as well as the executive and legislature."

Ghana, for instance, owes its democratic success in the West African region partly because of progressive civil society activities. Since its transition to democracy in 1992, CSOs have emerged in Ghana as important actors participating in the democratic and development processes. As evident from Table 1, Ghana has never witnessed military coup since its transition to democracy in 1992. In the last three decades, Ghana has organized six relatively successful competitive elections, and has twice (2001 and 2009) transferred power peacefully from one party to another. Hence, it is widely regarded as an example of democratic success in the West African region. It is estimated that there are over 50,000 registered CSOs playing diverse and important roles in the areas of advocacy, service delivery, policy and government oversight, although not all of them are active (Opong, Oduro & Awal, 2013).

Sierra Leone, though not as successful as Ghana in its democratic gains, has also made significant steps in the development of a stable political system. It has organized successful democratic elections and put in place structures that have enabled a shift from tit-for-tat politics to political reconciliation after its emergence from a protracted civil war which lasted for 11 years (1991-2002).

Since the end of Sierra Leone civil war in 2002 and the election that followed, there had been no military intervention in its democratic experience. Military take over as shown in Table 1 above occurred in the 1990s during the civil war. To a great extent, democracy has come to stay in the state. This has spurred the activities of civil society organizations in important areas of the economy like the service sector, education, health, and human rights (CIVICUS, 2007).

Togo's transition to democracy is both thorny and misguided. The state, explains Kohnert (2011, p. 1), "became a test case for indigenous democratization efforts of African states when the longest-serving African dictator, Gnassingbé Eyadéma, died unexpectedly in February 2005 after 38 years of autocratic rule." It is stipulated in Togo's Constitution that the speaker of parliament should manage the state in such a case until elections are held with 60 days.

However, and to the amazement of onlookers, an extraordinary session of the 81-member national assembly which has in dominance members of Eyadema's ruling party, RPT (*Rassemblement du Peuple Togolais*; Rally of the Togolese People), met and overwhelmingly voted in support of Mr. Gnassingbe to be speaker of the parliament with the help of the army. Prior to his father's death, he had served as the Minister of Mines. This unconstitutional transfer of power was widely condemned as a 'military coup d'etat' by the African Union (AU), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), other international organizations, and civil society organizations (Meldrum, 2005).

Consequently, the state witnessed widespread political conflicts which degenerated into chaos. Domestic violent protests along with diplomatic pressure, withdrawal of aid from major donors, and African peers forced Gnassingbé to hold presidential elections in April 2005. The elections were glaringly rigged right in order to ensure the continuity of the Gnassingbé-clan in power. It did not come as a surprise to many when Gnassingbe was declared winner of the election – as if he was an heir to the throne of his father (Kohnert, 2011).

Cape Verde is often commended as a model of African state for its stability and development despite its lack of natural resources. Obama called it "a real success

story". At a time when most West African states were contending with orgies of violence due to sit tight syndrome and winner-takes-all mentality, Cape Verde was erecting a strong democratic edifice which drew global attention to it. Since independence in 1975, its respect for democratic values had enabled it to have smooth transfer of power through free and fair election. The state is famous for its clean sheet of military foray into its politics. It has neither experienced military takeover nor any attempted coup (Koigi, 2017).

Freedom in the World 2020 index gave the state a 92 per cent for its track record in political rights and civil liberties. This placed it ahead of all other countries in the continent. Its strong democratic foundation is indeed worthy of emulation by other political crises-ridden states on the continent and even across the globe. In Cape Verde, also known as Cabo Verde, civil liberties are generally protected, elections are invariably free and fair, the electoral laws and framework are fair and impartially implemented; and every citizen freely expresses their political rights (during elections) and other rights. However, Cabo Verde is still not a perfect democracy, the state has its own share of corruption and graft; this is relatively low as it does not affect the overall performances of the state in discharging its primary responsibilities (Freedom House, 2020). What follow is the specificities of West African sub region.

### **Specificities of West African Sub Region**

West Africa is one of the five regions on the African Continent. It has 16 countries (excluding Saint Helena). There are nine Francophone (French speaking countries): Benin, Burkina Faso, Cote D'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal, and Togo; five Anglophone (English speaking countries): Gambia, Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone; and two Lusophone – Portuguese speaking countries: Cape Verde and Guinea Bissau.

West Africa has been more turbulent in its democratization process than any other region in Africa. There is no contesting the fact that over the last three decades, this region has witnessed "the longest and bloodiest conflicts" (Bathily, 2005, p. 25). In countries like Guinea Bissau, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire, and Liberia, the democratization process has been unfolding but not

without civil wars. This has had a serious debilitating effect on all aspects of peoples' lives. Since 1982 in a state like Senegal, there is an ongoing conflict between Casamance and the Government of Senegal which the latter has had to handle cautiously to this day. While Niger and Mali might have successfully put an end to the Tuareg insurgencies, the whole of the Sahel belt, from Niger to Mauritania, to quote Bathily (2005, p. 25) remains "a circle of fire around the sub-region."

Côte d'Ivoire is a very bad example of democratic transition in West Africa. The state is always enmeshed in political crisis. Liberia and Sierra Leone are unrelenting in their effort to create stable political atmospheres following the landmark elections in 2002 and 2005, respectively. These landmark elections marked the end of years of rolling over of civil wars. It is true that Liberia was also submerged in a civil war which began in 1989 and lasted for almost a decade. However, the state in 1997 had a likelihood of an election which was won by Charles Taylor; that election ended the civil war. Yet, the instability in Libya which was engineered by Charles Taylor himself continued until he was exiled forcefully into Nigeria in 2003 (Boafo-Arthur, 2008). He was later put on trial at The Hague and now imprisoned for 50 years in May 2012 at HM Prison Frankland for crimes against humanity (CNN, 2012). In a nutshell, West Africa is a region in chaos.

Nigeria's longest transition to democracy programme of General Ibrahim Babangida's regime only landed the state into a serious political turmoil, assassination, and bloodshed. The June 12 election which was apparently won by the SDP's candidate, Chief M.K.O. Abiola, was annulled in what was thought to be a self-succession bid of General Babangida through a deliberate process of transformation from military to civilian president (Akinboye & Anifowose, 2000).

It is crystal clear that the renaissance of democracy in West Africa was a reaction to authoritarian military regimes and single party rule. Renaissance, in this context, signifies the transition of a state from an authoritarian to democratic rule. "That the sub-region had become a hotbed of authoritarianism before the early 1990s," in the words of Boafo-Arthur (2008, p. 10), "is an understatement".

Coups and counter-coups (successful and aborted) became the defining features of politics in the sub-region. The statistics are very conspicuous.

From 1960 to 1990, West Africa was extremely unstable and combustible; it had a higher percentage of military coup d'état on the continent. Leaving out unsuccessful coups, Nigeria, the giant of Africa, topped the military coups with six successful interferences, followed by Ghana with five successful interventions. The contiguous states to Ghana by the north, Burkina Faso, and Nigeria's neighbor from its west, Benin, have had four successful coups each.

From early 1990s, with the beginning of the third wave of democracy, many observers of the political scene in West Africa were imbued with optimism that it is now the time for the countries in the region to strengthen their democracies and ensure a stable political atmosphere. However, as Boafo-Arthur (2008, p.9) explains "the expectations for dividend of democracy in the form of a stable political atmosphere in the region are yet to materialize."

### **Challenges of Development in West Africa**

One of the demons that have contributed in holding development at bay is political instability. No part of the West African region can be said to be stable – stability is the scarcest commodity. As Boafo-Arthur (2008, p. 8) rightly puts it; "stability being a scarce commodity for decades, it is not surprising that most states in the West African sub-region are always at the lower rungs of the international pecking order, even within Africa, with regard to low levels of economic development." It should be noted that even those countries in the region that could be said not to have experienced any civil war recently, none can guarantee or lay claim to have had absolute and enduring political stability over any reasonable period of time.

However, an enduring political stability is a pre-requisite to building of various institutions and structures that would lead to an overall development. Put differently, all the countries in West Africa have had unpleasant experiences vis-à-vis national stability. It is true that a state like Nigeria does not belong to the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) which Boafo-Arthur (2008, p.



8) refers to as “exclusive regional poor man’s HIPC club,” yet it is still battling with the challenge of political instability.

In a World Bank report (2004) cited in Boafo-Arthur (2008), the West African HIPC countries are Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo. Since then nothing has changed even after 15 years. As at December 2018, the number of Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) is 36 out of which 30 are in Africa and 13 are in the West Africa sub region. This is unfortunate; the 13 states listed above out of 16 (81 percent) states in West Africa still maintain their status quo as HIPC (IMF Policy Paper, 2019).

The third wave of democracy which overwhelmingly caught up with West African sub region amplified the echo of democracy such that some avowed autocrats started shedding off their togas of autocracy and replacing them with the garbs of democracy. This is a situation where military heads of state attempted transforming themselves to democratically elected presidents. Many were successful in their attempts while few others were not.

It should be noted, though sadly, that transition to democracy since the 1990s had been very herculean. Some of the states in West Africa still relapsed to military after transition as shown in Table 1 above. Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, the Gambia, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Togo have all had, at least, one military incursion since 1990 (the scope of this study). Though that of Togo is not a very clear case of military takeover, it has been so called by many international organizations and opinion leaders across the globe. Also, Togo is notorious for being the first state to witness military coup in West Africa in 1963 and was ruled autocratically by President Gnassingbe Eyadema for 38 years.

Benin, Cape Verde, Ghana, Liberia, Senegal, which represent 31.3% are the few countries that have not experienced successful military coup since their transition to democracy in the 1990s. This does not imply there had been no attempts. In fact, there had been attempted but failed coups. The failed coup of 2014 in Gambia is a good example. Cape Verde seems to be the only state with

stable democracy as there was no coup (failed or successful). States in the West African sub region encountered—and continue to encounter—these challenges due to the fragile structure handed over to them by their former colonizers.

It is thus argued that “several West African States are still under the enormous influence of former colonial powers, whose global strategic agendas are foisted on member States, and who, at times, obstruct the democratic process by supporting undemocratic leaders against the choice of the populations” (Gbeho, 2011, p. 9). This plunged them into a situation whereby they cannot (even if they desired) deliver core functions to majority of their people, including the poor; these core functions include service entitlements, justice, and security.

Money politics as well as its corrupting influences often stimulated and instigated by external partners, are worrisome. The stagnant economies in the region and the high level of unemployment have created a large group of the discontented. Some unpatriotic and corrupt leaders who habitually commit various forms of atrocities against the masses are always willing and ready to use violence and intimidation to retain themselves in power. It has also been observed that the hopeless and hapless poverty stricken electorate is susceptible to vote-buying (Gbeho, 2011).

Thus, ECOWAS itself admits that the security situation in the region continues to be characterized by fragility and unpredictability, and susceptible to reversals. Governance institutions also remain weak and greater efforts need to be applied, in collaboration with civil society and other partners, to deal with the structural factors of instability. Bathily (2005, p. 27) further explains that “the ruling elite has developed exclusionary policies that have pushed several groups and communities to the periphery of the national arena, thereby excluding them from any significant participation in managing their country’s affairs.”

However, the recent turn of events in which incumbent presidents were boxed out of power in some West African countries [Nigeria (2015), Gambia (2016), Ghana (2016)] through the ballot box gives a glimmer of hope that democracy has come to stay in the region. In particular reference to the 2015 Presidential

election in Nigeria where the incumbent president was defeated and accepted defeat, Jega (2017) thinks that democracy has come to stay in Nigeria—the giant of Africa. It is right to think it has also come to stay in the West African sub region considering the regional role Nigeria has been playing. In addition, electoral management bodies which saw the ouster of these incumbents in the three countries were generally adjudged to be impartial, truly independent and respected by electorates, the media and civil societies.

Yet, in another sad turn of event, military coup is beginning to rear its ugly head in the sub region. Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso seem to have reverted or return to the verge of reversing the recorded success of democratization with the coups experienced in them in the last two years. Burkina Faso, which had escaped military takeover since the 1990s, joined the ugly league of states with such experience. It is the latest state in West Africa which recorded successful military take-over due to political instability. Aina and Nyei (2022, para. 2) opined that military intervention came as no surprise in all the three states and was welcomed by the civilians because of “long-ignored systemic failures and growing societal discontent.”

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This paper reviews and assesses the travails of democratic transitions in West Africa in the contemporary era (i.e. since the 1990s). What can be gleaned from the discourse is that transition to democracy in West Africa has been a thorny path and the trajectory is laced with unpredictability. In most cases, leaders do not come to power through free and fair elections. Elections are often rigged and the court is traditionally becoming the real determiners of who wins election, not electoral management bodies. Though military takeover has reduced considerably compared to the pre-1990s’ era, it is unfortunate that out of the 16 countries in West Africa 11 (68.8 percent) still experienced military intervention since 1990.

However, one great success is a recent development whereby opposition candidates were able to dislodge incumbents from power through the ballot box. This is commendable; and it heralds good news for democracy in the

region. It happened in Nigeria in 2015 when an incumbent president, Goodluck Jonathan, was voted out; it was repeated in Ghana in 2016 where President John Dramani Mahama was denied second term by Ghanaians, and in The Gambia when voters unthinkably brought to an end the two decades rule of President Yahya Jammeh.

But is the region still at the stage of transition or consolidation in its democratization process? It is safer to say it is at the stage of transition due to its fragile democratic structure and the volatility of its politics. The recent coup in those three states, especially Burkina Faso which has never witnessed military ouster of democratically elected government since the 1990s, informs our conclusion that West Africa is yet to consolidate its democracy. Nevertheless, with Cape Verde becoming a specimen for the feasibility of democracy in the region, hopes are not lost.

This paper recommends, among others, that leaders and the citizens should eschew all practices that may jeopardize the entrenchment of democracy and thus reverse the few gains that have been made. Rule of law should be strictly adhered to by those in the position of leadership; by doing so, they would be setting good examples. Leaders should be patriotic and desirous to provide basic necessities to the majority of their citizens. These basic necessities include creation of jobs through massive investment in agricultural and manufacturing sectors; provision of social amenities and infrastructures to ensure sustained levels of economic development and prosperity.

They should ensure credible elections and smooth periodic transfer of powers. Politics in West Africa should be patriotically seen as a call to selfless service; not as an opportunity to amass wealth. There should be equal educational and economic opportunities for all citizens regardless of their ethnicity, social class, gender, religion, or region. The electorate should be better informed. As Paswan (2019) rightly explained, if the electorate is better informed, that can improve the sensitivity of elected representatives in public service delivery. This will stabilize the polity and makes the levers of power unattractive to the men in uniform (the military). Also attention should be paid to social justice, security of life and property. These recommendations, if implemented, will

hopefully transit the region from the stage of transition to democracy to that of consolidation.

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